

“It is the Year of our Lord, 1296, and I, Bedwyr, scribe, and historian of this monastery make testament here to the strange and unbelievable things I have heard. I set down this record now so that those men who come after me, those who must put the world straight, and make the bad good, will have guidance and direction. After some six years at the monastery, I found that once I had performed my tasks and my daily devotions I still had some time on my hands. This I did not wish to pass in idleness, lest my thoughts should lead me astray; and so I decided to use it for the study and investigation of those natural secrets of the universe. After another four years I was in charge of several brothers, all delegated to copying an ever-increasing number of valuable books. Every day I examined the ancient writings, reveling in the glory of past cultures, and regretting that so little remained of a fabulous wealth of ancient knowledge. My hunger for information earned me the label ‘Bedwyr the Curious.’ I did not object. In fact, it told me how others saw me—as a curious and eager seeker of truth and learning. Many times, I was released from my duties to attend upon a visitor, one who would usually come with precious scrolls for us to copy.

One night, I was called to attend upon a traveler, offering him company, refreshment, and the use of my cell for his rest. We spoke for many hours. Proudly I demonstrated the size of our library and he admired our books, promising me some worthy additions to the collection. Time fled, the candles were lit, and when the bell sounded for matins at midnight, I did not budge from my seat, even though I shivered in my thin woolen robe as the sky darkened outside and the warmth of the day faded. I forgot the coldness seeping into my feet from the stone floor, chilly even in summer. I drank in his words, listening with rapt attention as his eloquence painted a glorious picture of the past. He spoke of the island of Atlantis that once was in the olden days; an island of beauty and splendor destroyed in a single day and a night by catastrophe. Something stirred in my brain ... had not Plato the Greek philosopher himself spoken of this wondrous land? Surely, it was just a myth. I dismissed the thought and listened again as the visitor described the magical arts and skills that had enabled ancient builders to raise great blocks of stone like feathers, and to lay them so close, without mortar, that not even a knife blade could slip between the blocks. He spoke of expertise that made it possible for brave men to sail to the farthest reaches of the earth long before the Romans were a great nation, and for learned men to plot the movement of the stars, as the great constellations swung across the sky, by placing enormous stones in circles to create stellar observatories. He spoke of the sages, those wise men of old, and the Persian magi, of the Egyptians, the Chaldeans, and the people called Sumerians who invented writing. He spoke of the prophecies of the ancient Sibyls, old women who predicted the destruction of Troy, the conquests of the great Persian King Xerxes and his son Darius, of the murder of Julius Caesar, and the fall of Rome to the barbarian hordes. He spoke of times and places, of great leaders and conquerors as if he had walked and talked with them, shared their food and drink, and been at their side in their greatest triumphs. His words enchanted me, sowing seeds in my imagination that blossomed into splendid visions. I saw the magnificence of Greece; I saw Alexander the Great conquer Egypt; I saw Julius Caesar enter Rome in victory and heard the cheering crowds; I saw ... I saw so many things I believe I was hypnotized by his eloquence. Wondering how he knew so much, I asked his age. He laughed, telling me he was older than time itself. I took this to be a jest, and remarked upon his brown and wrinkled appearance, hinting that he could have passed for a piece of parchment.

Now, dear reader, before I continue, let me say that even in the joy of this brother's intelligent and educated company, my doubts still lurked. Why should he come to our monastery? What was his purpose in spending these hours with me, a young brother, who had no worldly experience or wisdom to offer in return? When his answer came, I fell to my knees and covered my ears. I begged for this burden to be removed from me, let him grant it to some other person, more worthy and brave. The visitor reached into his robe and took out a leather pouch, from which he drew a tattered manuscript. He said it contained the greatest and most dangerous secret of all time. My curiosity—that weakness of mine—flared immediately. I longed to know what the manuscript contained. It was older than aught I had seen before, and looked to be made of some kind of animal skin, but not so fine as the parchment and vellum produced here. I reached out to touch it, my fingers hovering over this precious specimen of antiquity, no doubt containing marvels and secrets of the past. My fingertips tingled and burned as if seared by flames. Astonished, I withdrew my hand instantly. The old man smiled, as if he had expected this. He unrolled the document—he called it the Scroll of the Ancients—on a table and we both bent over the mysterious writing displayed to our eager eyes. Straight away, I sat back in disappointment. Some letters I recognized as an archaic form of Greek, some as Classical Latin, but the main part of the document comprised strange writing, lettering that must have been far older. Painted all around the edges of the manuscript were unusual symbols, as if from a book of magic. I frowned to see them, fearing their meaning. He told me he would translate the entire manuscript for my better understanding.

Long ago, he said, the gods indeed walked on earth with men, teaching them and bringing the gift of civilization. Ten gods came from the ancient island of Atlantis, a civilization that was destroyed by fire. They imparted secrets to the children of men in the hope that such wisdom would be well used. However, as I had discovered at a young age, the wickedness of men far outweighs the good in them. He told me the ultimate teachings of the Aegyptian god of wisdom—called Thoth—comprise the *Book of Thoth*, a book of such terrible potency that even the greatest kings and emperors should tremble to read it. If all this is true, then it is good to fear such power. Before long, it was clear that the ancient secrets given to the race of men were unappreciated, then lost in the mists of time. I was not surprised to hear this.

My guest said, ‘Thoth wrote the Book with his own hand, and in it is all the magic in the world. If thou readest the first page, thou wilt enchant the sky, the earth, the abyss, the mountains, and the sea; thou wilt understand the language of the birds of the air, and thou wilt know what the creeping things of earth are saying, and thou wilt see the fishes from the darkest depths of the sea. And if thou readest the other page, even though thou wert dead and in the world of ghosts, thou couldst come back to earth in the form thou once hadst. And besides this, thou wilt see the sun shining in the sky with the full moon and the stars, and thou wilt behold the great shapes of the gods.’

I was stunned. Impossible! How could the dead be restored to life? I began to see how this magical book was a source of destruction for humankind. What would happen if it fell into the wrong hands? My friend spoke again, quoting the words of this so-called god himself, and against all my better judgment ... I believed!

His voice boomed in the library, echoing around the walls, and for a brief moment, it was as if Thoth himself had spoken. ‘Oh sacred books, which have been made by my immortal hands, by incorruption’s magic spell, remain free from decay throughout eternity and unblemished by time. Become unseeable, unfindable from everyone whose foot shall tread the plains of this land, until old heaven shall bring instruments for you, whom the creator shall call his souls. Thus spoke Thoth, and laying the spells on them by means of his works, he shut them safely away, and long has been the time since they were hidden away.’

When he spoke of these magic spells, I shook my head. I believe in history, not old wives’ tales. In my understanding, the ultimate teachings of Thoth, a personage of intelligence and learning, were preserved in a single stone, a stone not of this earth, a stone that fell from heaven, called the Stone of Fire. Then Thoth hid this stone deep in the bowels of the earth, in an ancient tomb. The old man pressed on and revealed to me that seven fragments were broken off and given to seven wise men, the Seven Sages, to scour the earth and seek out good and wise kings. They, and only they, could use these magical fragments to rule wisely and well, and bequeath them to worthy successors. Then came the worst news: the seven stones must never be united because he that finds and brings together all seven fragments will be able to read the *Book of Thoth* and use the power hidden in the Stone of Fire. At the same time, he told me that one day the whole of the human race will be threatened by a terrible evil and will have need of a great and wondrous truth. I was confused. How could a book be preserved in a stone? I wondered if perhaps it was not a real book, such as those I am used to reading, but a merely a collection of writing, perhaps on stone tablets like the ones carried down from the mountain by Moses.

The old man instructed me all through the long night, and my blood runs cold now when I think of the dreadful secret with which he has burdened me. Ah, if only I could pluck this knowledge from my brain, cast out all memory of his words, would it not be a good thing. How strange that I who have hungered after knowledge as a starving man after food, now consider this information a curse. He spoke again of the seven stones that can unlock the Secret of the Stone of Fire and open the *Book of Thoth*. Without them, the Stone of Fire remains dumb, the book remains shut.

He pointed to the old animal skin, covered in strange and arcane writing, and told me that the clues to the Seven Stones, those precious and vital fragments, were written there. Poetic his words might be, but I wanted nothing of it. Why should I, an insignificant scribe, be saddled with this horrible responsibility, for knowledge is a heavy burden indeed. My task was to preserve this information, this manuscript, in such a way only a good and righteous man, or boy, for that matter would find it in time to come. How and when he would find it was not my problem. How he would understand and translate it was also not for me to know. I was to conceal it and then lay the clues in cryptic language, using my knowledge of ciphers and my skills as a writer. Thus, I came to write ‘The Chronicles of the Stone.’ Follow if you will, dear reader, the path of the Seven Sacred Stones, and discover the Secret of the Stone of Fire....