

# Prologue

They came under cover of darkness, twelve men dressed in leather. They looked like warriors but moved like shadows. It was the middle of the night and it was pouring down with rain.

There was no obvious track but they knew the route, this was rough country with trees, shrubs and brambles everywhere. They did not intend to meet anyone this night, no one must know where they were going or what they were doing.

Their thoughts were on one objective, to deliver the chest they were carrying. It was strapped to a stretcher, a large box wrapped in sacking. Four men carried the stretcher; there was also a group leader and, ahead of him, a leading scout. Two men brought up the rear, listening and checking that they were not being followed. The other four were close to the stretcher, ready to take over the carrying at any time.

They all had sworn to give their lives to deliver the box and nothing was going to get in their way. They knew that their task was vital, that they would rather die than fail to complete their mission.

Everything so far had gone to plan; they went over the last bound and they could see their final destination. It was a large round wooden hut with a thatched roof and double doors with no other apertures.

They stopped short and crouched in the shadows, waiting for a moment. Then the leader advanced towards the entrance and on reaching the doors, they opened without a word being spoken. He then turned and gestured to his men and they moved forward and without hesitating they went straight inside.

Waiting for them in the middle of the room were two wooden trestles, illuminated by a single lamp. They placed the stretcher on the trestles and left the room immediately to take up positions outside, surrounding the hut like twelve pillars of strength. They stood there in the darkness in the pouring rain, unflinching with eyes like steel guarding the master, obeying his instructions without question.

Inside the hut was a gathering of men and women all obscured by the shadows; a lone man stepped forward into the light. He was wearing a long robe with a hood covering his head; only his hands could be seen as he started to undo the sacking. It was obvious that he had fastened it together by the way he pulled at the sacking and it fell away to reveal a most beautiful casket.

This was made of wood with no carvings; it was purely functional and very well made. It was bound with strong cord and someone had even taken the trouble to cut grooves for the cord to fit into. He knew which rope to pull and he quickly unfastened the tightly fitting twine.

There was absolute silence as the lid was slowly removed. Inside was something swaddled in fine linen, something valuable, priceless and awesome, but the existence of which no-one must know. There had been years of preparation, but now the key to everything was here at last.

## **Chapter One**

In an age long ago, a man named Whittle was preparing to set out on a journey. A messenger had come from Bracken, his tribal Chieftain, calling on him as his village's spokesman to attend an important meeting.

Such meetings were held to debate and discuss local affairs, and also to hear any messages or commands issued by the High Council, the country's governing body.

The place where meetings were held was many miles away, and Whittle had to make his way there on foot, horses being then rare and precious animals only used by the nobility. Tall and strong, Whittle was fortunately able to cover long distances with relative ease.

His village lay on the High Plain, just a short distance from the edge of an escarpment. Anyone standing between the trees beside the village and looking west could see right across the lowlands or

levels. Much of the ground here was waterlogged as far as the eye could see, taking the form of a series of marshes and ponds interspersed with areas of higher ground. The latter were linked by a series of footpaths and strongly constructed wooden walkways.

Once in open countryside, Whittle would break into a steady, loping run that was not fast enough to tire him easily, but enabled him to cover the ground remarkably quickly.

Before leaving that morning his wife Jenny had prepared some food for him to eat on the journey, gutting a small piglet and plucking and dressing two quail which could be roasted on a makeshift spit when the time came. Along the way he would help himself to nuts, berries and fresh, ice-cold water from springs and rivers.

Summer was just reluctantly turning to autumn when the call came to Whittle. He would travel across miles and miles of open rolling countryside; there were no fences, walls or hedges to hinder his progress. Much of the land was also covered with forest, and well stocked with animals and birds; life, in fact, was bursting out of every wood and thicket. As Whittle strode along he was constantly seeing deer, rabbits, partridge, pheasant, ducks and all kinds of wildlife.

It was indeed a golden landscape, full of sunshine, birdsong and flowers. The promise of autumn abundance showed in the many apples, plums and blackberries; even acorns could be used for pig feed; there was certainly plenty of food at this time of year.

'Winter will be here soon,' murmured Whittle to himself, 'bringing more difficult times with it, but there's always food to be found for those who know where to look. People have worked out that the only way for us to survive is to work together and help each other.

'Neighbours are like brothers; all families are glad that there are others nearby when accidents or illnesses strike. That's why we've all come together to live in groups of huts which we call "villages".'

'I wonder how many there are,' he mused, 'we're told they're scattered all over the country, so there must be a lot. One thing I do know, the idea of families living close together makes good sense.'

Whittle was highly regarded by his neighbours, and had been a popular choice as village spokesman. People always knew where they stood with Whittle.

‘By my deeds you shall know me’ he used to say, and he had a reputation as a good, hard worker, honest and true to his word. He had a natural affinity with animals, and had spent his working life tending the village’s herds of cattle and pigs, as well as the flocks of fowl, some of which had their wings clipped, others were kept in coops; they provided the villagers with both meat and eggs.

What others particularly liked about him was that he was not only a ‘doer’, but he was also a good listener, always ready to appreciate the advice of those who specialised in useful skills such as timber splitting, building huts, growing crops or hunting and trapping. Those who particularly impressed him were people who used their brains to puzzle things out, or were able to reason why certain things worked as they did, so that improvements could be made to make them more efficient when necessary. It was the thinkers, Whittle had found, who usually reaped the benefits of their ideas.

All this time, Whittle had been making his way automatically along the tracks towards the tribal meeting-place. When he stopped and looked about him he realised that he had come further than he thought, and that his legs, strong as they were, felt weary.

Deciding to rest for a while in the shade of an old sacred oak tree, which stood a short way ahead, he approached it with due reverence, bowing low before sitting down with his back against the trunk. Tree spirits were like old human folk, he thought, slow and kindly but capable of being roused to anger if they were not treated with due respect. There was an indefinable bond between men and trees; the forests were very ancient and the home of strange powers, yet the tree-spirits were prepared to sacrifice themselves to provide humankind with wood for shelter and many other uses.

Whittle felt comfortable with trees, ‘But water-spirits living in rivers and streams,’ he thought, ‘are another matter entirely.’ Capricious, moody and charming by turns, they could be very dangerous, luring

men and women to drink or bathe and then either putting them under a spell or carrying them down through the water.

Anyone feeling thirsty and in need of a drink, as Whittle was now, needed to approach the little stream with great caution. He walked towards the bank slowly, saying the words he had been taught long ago by a wise woman, and then dropping into the open mouth of the spring an offering in the shape of a flint axe-head which he had been carrying in the big leather pouch at his belt. As it disappeared into the darkness of the small opening from where the spring emerged, Whittle could not repress a shudder at the thought of the many people who, all unsuspecting, had been taken there against their will.

He was glad of the warm setting sun on his back, and the reassuring evening light which it threw all around him, as he filled his wooden cup from the spring and returned thankfully to the shelter of the sacred tree. He quickly made a fire, roasted his piglet and enjoyed a satisfying, filling meal, following up with the nuts and fruits he had collected along the way, all washed down with the clear, cold spring water.

Then he carefully extinguished the fire, wrapped himself in his cloak and lay down under the tree to sleep, first surrounding himself with a circle of dry twigs which would alert him at once if any person or animal approached during the night.

Next morning he woke early, washed and ate again briefly, then set off again on the remainder of his journey. The path he took was one he had found many years ago, which took him on his way without passing any sign of human activity. Whittle liked to travel alone and keep his own counsel when going to a tribal meeting; it enabled him to marshal his thoughts and prepare the things he wanted to say there without any distractions along the way. As it was, he would arrive at the meeting early in the morning, refreshed and ready for a long day's discussions.

After a few more miles he saw smoke rising through the clear air in the distance and knew he would soon be approaching the meeting-

place. When he arrived he found about twenty people already present, some busy cooking an appetising-smelling breakfast over the fires they had lit.

Whittle greeted the other village representatives as he met them; he already knew them all by name. The site had a

relaxed, comfortable feel to it; there were no jealousies or bitter feuds among any of those present, whose numbers soon began to swell as more and more joined the gathering. There was an air of expectation as people were wondering what topics would be discussed this time, but while there were many waves and nods of greeting there was no deep conversation; no one wanted to pre-empt what would be said at the meeting.

Whittle knew he could always rely on his fellow-representatives to be as truthful and open as he would be himself, and he trusted the time-honoured process and methods by which they reached their decisions.

Apart from one or two minor village matters, he had nothing else to raise at the meeting. His main priority would be to listen well and absorb what he heard, so that when he returned to his village he would be able to give the others a clear, accurate account of the day's proceedings.

As soon as all those taking part had assembled, a horn was blown and everyone moved forward to take their places in the large round hut where, by tradition, the meeting was always held. They sat on wooden benches, placed in circles so that all present were facing into the middle of the room.

There was a hush, then into the centre strode the imposing, bearded figure of their tribal Chieftain. His name was Bracken, a tall, strong, broad-shouldered man who, in his day, had been a great warrior hero but was now coming up to fifty years of age. Although still far fitter than many younger men, age and the fact that he had held the Chieftainship for many years now had begun to take their toll, and the strain was starting to show.

Bracken had no interest in power for its own sake, but he did his

duty and no one would have dreamed of challenging his authority. Everyone looked up to him; he was loved and revered by all, and made sure that every suggestion, problem or grievance raised and discussed would be personally referred by him to the High Council. At this particular meeting he had a matter of great importance to raise, but as he stood there, he showed no sign that anything special was afoot. Under Bracken's leadership everything was always dealt with calmly and in the correct order.

'Greetings!' he began, 'thanks to you all for coming, and welcome. The first thing I have to tell you is that two village representatives have been replaced since the last meeting, so we have two new members here today in their places. I will ask each in turn to stand up so that you can all see who they are. First is Gelp, from the village where the river joins; second is Mort, her village is at the edge of the bog swamp on this side of the level. I formally welcome them into this meeting on your behalf as representatives of their villages.

'Next, I am pleased to announce that there will be a festival held on the upland field, on the next full moon. I have appointed Mohen to take charge and organise the proceedings, and to answer all your questions. Will you please stand, Mohen, so all can recognise and remember you? Thank you!'

A large, capable-looking woman, Mohen was already known to many and popular for her efficient organisation which had helped to make other festivals a success, so she rose to a round of applause, smiling broadly and waving in acknowledgement before resuming her seat.

After these introductions the meeting was thrown open to all, with every man and woman having the opportunity to speak on behalf of his or her village, voicing news, problems and suggestions which were discussed at length. Some of the decisions they came to were voted on and approved by the majority by means of a show of hands. Major decisions would then be taken by Bracken to the High Council for further discussions.

It took several hours to debate all the topics raised, after which Bracken announced there would be a short adjournment before he raised a particularly important subject. Glad of a break, those present filed out to avail themselves of the ample supplies of food and drink that had been prepared earlier.

After sufficient time had passed the horn sounded again and the village representatives returned to their places, wondering what this important matter of which Bracken had spoken might be?

When they were all seated Bracken returned, and stood in the centre as before. This time he was carrying the tribal Stone of Office, his symbol of authority presented to him personally by the King when he was elected tribal Chieftain many years ago. It was a large black stone, cut and tooled into a thick ring. Many years ago it had been placed over the trunk of a specially selected sapling, and when this had grown sufficiently to fill out the space within the ring and hold it firmly in place, the tree was cut down, prepared to the right length and carved into a staff.

Everyone knew that the appearance of this meant something very special was afoot, and they listened eagerly as Bracken began to speak.

‘Once again,’ he began, ‘I have important things to say to you. There will be changes coming in the next few years that will affect us all. They will concern not just our tribe, but everyone throughout the land. I have been informed of this by the High Council; we must all make ready for the biggest undertaking that our people have ever achieved. What exactly it is, we do not yet know, but we must be prepared to take part in a great project which will last for a period of years.

‘Given the length of time involved, and the fact that I, your Chieftain, am not getting any younger, I feel it would be unwise for you to have a change in leadership during such a critical period. I therefore recommend that a new Chieftain be chosen!’

There was an immediate reaction to this startling turn of events, and people began talking excitedly to each other about it.

Bracken held up his Stone of Office for silence, and within seconds everyone fell quiet.

‘We have until the festival to choose and elect the new Chieftain,’ he said firmly, ‘no mistakes must be made, and he – or she – will be named at the festival in front of the whole tribe!’

After this startling revelation the meeting broke up swiftly; most people, Whittle among them, were eager to get back to their villages and spread the news as quickly and as widely as possible.

Whittle returned along the same tracks he had so recently followed, but more swiftly this time as he had so much to tell. When he reached home, his wife Jenny was nowhere to be seen, but his little girl Rosy, fair-haired like her mother and bright-eyed, came running to greet him overjoyed to see him again.

Whittle picked her up in his arms, smiled at her and asked ‘Where are your mother and the others?’

‘Down at the bottom there, collecting herbs,’ she answered eagerly, jabbing the air with a podgy finger, ‘someone in the village is sick, and Mummy has gone with old Ruen to help her look for a doctor plant.’

Tired after all his travelling, Whittle decided that they could come and find him, so he sat down on a wooden bench outside his main door and relaxed in the sunshine while he waited for them to return.

First to arrive was his son Boy. A tall fifteen-year-old, the lad was dark-haired and good-looking, spirited and sturdily built like Whittle himself. Somehow he had grown up without a name, and was always just known as ‘Boy’; maybe, thought Whittle, he will choose one himself one day and surprise us all.

‘Well, Boy’ he said out loud in greeting, ‘is everything to your liking?’

Boy smiled and, without answering, sat down next to his father in silence. It was the same when Jenny and the others returned. They knew that Whittle would say nothing more until the entire village was present.

News of his return spread rapidly, and with it the idea that he had brought important tidings. More and more began to gather around him, until soon everyone was waiting expectantly for him to begin.

First of all, he related how the King and his ministers were planning a very big change that would involve everyone in the country, and would continue for several years. This was exciting, but a bit much for ordinary folk to take in, particularly as it was still in the future and Whittle could not say what exactly was involved. The news about Bracken, however, was something everybody could understand, and indeed many present were too young to remember what life was like before he took office. The choosing of a new Chieftain would be a very big occasion, one of the most important moments in their lives.

Once the news had sunk in, people began eagerly discussing who might be chosen as the new Chieftain, and the expectation and excitement leading up to the festival grew as the weeks went by. Everyone was relieved when the time of the full moon finally arrived.

On the morning of the festival, all those capable of carrying items to the sacred site did so. Food and drink were the main items, along with cups, plates and tables on which to place them, together with wooden benches for those wanting to rest. Additionally, warm cloaks and blankets were also taken for use if required. Everyone lent a hand, even the village's oldest inhabitant, Old Moff, who was so frail he slowed everyone down to such an extent that it would have been easier to carry him, but he insisted on bringing things and making his own way unaided.

People from other villages were also arriving at the sacred site, bringing their own contributions to the festival. Boy was in his element; he was so excited that he would run up along the line and back again time after time, not wanting to miss a thing. So many people were on the move that everything was happening at once; people were chatting, laughing and calling to each other while the little children were running about under everybody's feet.

All present were enjoying themselves including Whittle himself, who was happy feeling the pleasure and wonder of such an occasion. This was a spiritual time, when feelings were heightened by the sheer volume of people. The closer Whittle and his family got to the festival field the more people came into view, until they finally arrived to find themselves in the middle of a great throng. There were hundreds of people, all mingling together and happy to see each other.

Overlooking the crowd which filled the field was a large platform on which they could see Mohen, with Bracken standing beside her. As she raised her arms a sudden silence fell across the gathering, apart from a few babies crying.

Bracken opened the proceedings by calling out ‘Welcome to you all! Before we start the celebrations, let us remember who we are and what the Gods have made us. We give thanks to them on this day, as we celebrate with our families and friends. We rejoice in the fact that we are alive and present here today.’

Mohen then gestured at a man stationed at the top of a tall tower beside the platform; he immediately responded by blowing the Tribal Horn to proclaim the festival open. Drums began to beat, and the people started to clap and sing with the rhythm. There was dancing and merrymaking, with everyone having a wonderful time. In the midst of this, three weddings were celebrated and eight new babies were announced.

Everyone knew that the finale of the whole festival would be the naming of their new Chieftain, so they were waiting expectantly when at exactly noon on the second day the Horn was blown again and a procession of all the villages’ leaders began. They walked right around the outside of the main crowd and finished in front of the platform. From this vantage-point, Bracken addressed the whole tribe.

‘The day has arrived,’ he announced, ‘when we proclaim a new Chieftain, a man or woman who will speak on our behalf to the High Council. Someone who will help us make decisions and lead

us into the new era we are promised. There have been many meetings and discussions, and our wise men have finally agreed. There is one who has been chosen above all others. He is a man of great honour, wisdom and strength, but above all else he is a man of humility and spirituality. His name is – Whittle!’

Whittle was utterly dumbfounded! He could not believe he had heard his name announced; how could they have come to such a decision? But now everyone was cheering, and Whittle was hoisted onto the platform by many willing hands. Here, Bracken assured him he would still be on hand to give him help and advice whenever he needed it.

‘All will be well!’ he cried triumphantly.

Still overwhelmed by the suddenness of it all, Whittle bowed and waved to the cheering sea of faces below him, then was led away by Bracken to a quiet place where they could talk undisturbed.

Later that afternoon he was led onto the platform again, this time holding the imposing Stone of Office as proof of his new authority. As he raised it high in the air, there was a mighty roar of approval. The new Chieftain was accepted by all.

But this was only the first of many great events that would affect the tribe as, unknown to them, momentous changes were taking place all over the country.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

While others were busy with their efforts to bring the Sarsen Stones to the Place of the Solstice, Efflan the High Priest was preparing the site in readiness for their arrival. All had to be done according to ancient custom before construction work on the great building could begin. At the very centre of the Sacred Circle a number of smaller standing stones were already in place; they had been there for a thousand years or even more. Now they had to be removed; Efflan had arranged for this task to be carried out by a special group of Priests, who knew the proper rituals and ceremonies to be used, and where to keep them secure until the great building had been

completed.

However, as King Arthur related to Merlin, these were not the only sacred stones to be found on the Isle of Breton.

‘Far out to sea in the West,’ he explained, ‘there is a small island, which is the most mystical place in the Kingdom. It is mainly rock, with sheer cliffs all around, but is covered with a layer of fertile soil and this beautiful place is known as tableland. On this island is another more important stone circle, created over a thousand years ago.’

‘I have heard tales of this island,’ murmured Merlin, ‘it has great power. It is a place where this world and the Otherworld are connected.’

‘That has been true until now,’ replied the King, ‘our project is surely blessed by the Gods; they know these Blue Stones must be brought to the mainland to become part of the great building. Efflan and you, Merlin, will accompany me, for this is a time of great change and your power and Efflan’s wisdom will be needed.’

‘We will stand together before the Gods,’ said Merlin, ‘come, we must speak with Efflan; a rider will be sent out to prepare for our arrival at the coast and our journey will begin at once!’

Everyone in the Royal Palace was used to making arrangements for King Arthur’s travels, so it did not take long for everything to be made ready for their visit to the island. Durrel and his fellow Elders would as usual see to the governing of the country in his absence, together with the High Council and when necessary the Chieftains. Fortunately the work on preparations for the great building could continue, so no time would be lost overall.

They rode westwards along age-old trackways; they did not waste any time and travelled through most of the night. When the royal party eventually reached the coast, it was on a fine, warm morning with a clear sky and a sparkling, choppy sea.

As they gazed out across the water at the island, all three felt they were looking at a heaven on earth, a very special place set apart from the rest of the world. A blessed calm filled their minds, and they felt a great sense of pride that they were chosen with honour to set foot on sacred soil.

A large boat crewed by oarsmen was moored ready and waiting for them; as they stepped on board and settled themselves the leading oarsman cast off and the crew began to row steadily towards the island. As they approached, tossed about somewhat by the choppy waves, King Arthur remembered his two previous visits, the only times he had ever been there; both had been national emergencies when he had sought the Gods' aid to avert seemingly inevitable disaster.

Once had been when he was a very young and inexperienced ruler and a brutal foreign Warlord had attacked the country with a view to becoming Emperor. The other, years later, was when a great plague had killed thousands of his subjects and the entire population was in danger of being wiped out. On each occasion the Gods heard his call for help. The foreign invader was killed in battle, and the plague had suddenly vanished from the land.

When they reached the island, the crew beached the boat and held it steady for them to alight, then pushed it out to sea again and rowed a short distance away, where they shipped oars and waited for King Arthur and the others to return. From the rocky foreshore there was only one route up to the tableland above, byway of a steep stone stairway cut into the towering cliff-face.

Up they went, with large numbers of seabirds wheeling and calling about them, King Arthur first, followed more slowly by Eflaen and then Merlin bringing up the rear, watching out for the old High Priest in case he stumbled during his ascent. Eventually the top of the stairway was reached, and they climbed gratefully onto the level surface of the tableland. Up here the air was fresh and cool; they lifted their faces to the pure, strong breeze which felt so refreshing after their efforts. Already the strange power of the island was beginning to work on them; they felt somehow younger, stronger, and empowered by this mystical land.

They walked together to the centre of the island where the age-old stone circle had been built so long ago. Here they stood apart, still and silent, each man looking out in different directions as they felt the waves of power round them increase. Then, when they knew the time to be right, they came together, entered the stone circle and

stood at an equal distance apart facing each other. They made an imposing and striking trio. King Arthur, tall and upright in his robes of red, gold, and royal purple; Efflan, a trifle stooped with age, but still an imposing and venerable figure in his gleaming white vestments edged with green and gold sacred oak leaves; and Merlin, soberly clad in silken robes of a greyish hue which swayed around him like smoke when they were caught by the wind.

Now Efflan the High Priest called upon the Gods. All three raised their arms to the heavens and looked up into the clouds, which had gathered at their approach. The wind was stronger now, too, and their robes billowed and flapped so much it almost looked as if they were flying.

The King spoke first, saying ‘The time has come for a new beginning.’

Efflan followed, chanting ‘For a Golden Age of wisdom and knowledge.’

Finally Merlin added ‘To be fixed in time by the almighty power of the Gods.’

Then they prayed in unison: ‘Let all power of the Gods be directed to our Centre of Excellence, where time revolves and the seasons connect.’ There was silence for a moment, then from the sky came a loud rumble of thunder. The wind increased suddenly to gale force, with a mighty rushing sound. Then the clouds dispersed, the sun shone again, and all was serene and peaceful once more.

‘The Gods have spoken,’ said Efflan, ‘they have blessed our task, and approve that the power of these ancient stones should be transported into our new Centre of Excellence.’

The religious order of Priests who lived on the island were told what had occurred, and before their departure King Arthur, Efflan and Merlin made arrangements for the stones to be moved. Following their return to the mainland, this time being rowed across a calm sea, the Priests began their important task. Various rituals and ceremonies would need to be carried out before the stones could even be touched.

Once these had been successfully completed, the Blue Stones were carefully dug up. Each one was placed inside the two split halves of

a tree trunk, which were lashed together with strong rope. They were then lowered down the cliffs to the water, where extra ballast was added in the form of large logs strapped onto the outside. The precious cargo was then buoyant enough to be floated to the mainland, where the stones in their wooden casing were rolled up the beach ready to go to their final destination.

Meanwhile, other events connected with the great project were taking place at the same time all over the country. In the territory of the woodland folk, Brad and Hoel continued their work on Merlin's gigantic Stoneroller. They had eventually mastered the plans, and understood how the various wooden pieces fitted together. They started to cut the wood into pieces so that it would fit around a stone, but lengthways; as these pieces would span the full length, they needed to be even longer than the stone itself so they could be fastened together at each end. Then came four sections that would wrap around the stone on either end, and finally another four pieces, which would lock the whole thing together. This meant that the stone would be literally parcelled up inside a wooden casement, all bound together with thick rope.

What was so ingenious about Merlin's design was the fact that the rope only held the wood in position. It was the wood that took all the weight, so in fact the heavier the stone, the tighter it locked together. Self-locking and amazingly strong, the Stoneroller felt "right" to Brad and Hoel, and they believed absolutely that it would work. Once assembled, it would be nearly twice as high as a man and three times as long – it was gigantic in size and it had to be, to carry such massive stones.

Brad and Hoel also knew that at this early stage they could delegate most of the work because the wood was still green and unseasoned, so that all the shaped pieces for the Stoneroller only needed to be roughed out initially. To undertake this task, there was no shortage of volunteers; everyone wanted to take part in the King and Merlin's great project. The tools they used were adzes and axes made of bronze, the strongest and sharpest available. Brad and Hoel allowed them to take plenty of time over this work, as the wood needed to season properly. Once roughed out correctly, the pieces would have

to be placed on sleds and hauled back across the country, to be finished off closer to the stones.

His task in finding and accurately splitting the great oak tree successfully completed, Ardel had gone further north to select the best timbers for the great building's roof beams. To the north lay the High Mountains, the only area where the tallest and straightest trees could be found in sufficient quantities. Other people were looking for trees with ample girths, which could be used for the huge buttresses that would support the outside of the great building. Other tasks were spread throughout different districts, as most tribes and settlements were eager to contribute. Some had agreed to provide strong ropes and similar essential items of equipment. Others, skilled in basket weaving, were making extra-large ones to be used for transporting huge amounts of soil. In fact these baskets were so big that once filled they could not be lifted, only rolled. They were important because there would be more excavations carried out on this project than anything ever before.

Nearer to home, Whittle and Boy had double-checked the route the Sarsen Stones would have to take, and Whittle had marked it out personally. All the settlements in his tribe were busily engaged in removing hundreds of trees, levelling the ground and draining waterlogged areas. He insisted that the path should be very wide, to make the moving of the great stones absolutely obstacle-free, and to allow the men to move about freely and to have all the space they needed to steer the massive roller. This was a major task and it would take many months for the route to be prepared and completed, even though they had a team of strong horses to help pull out all the trees.

Behind the scenes, in a secret location, Merlin was working with Old Sniffy, devising new and more efficient ways to make furnace fires.

'We must achieve temperatures hotter than anything else reached before,' urged Merlin, 'let us experiment with longer tunnels to draw the air, and taller, broader chimneys to vent the smoke.' He went on to talk of mixing things called compounds and heating them together to create new and more powerful substances.

Old Sniffy did not understand most of the theory behind what they were doing, but he was happy because to his mind the bigger and hotter the fire, the better.

As they worked, Merlin warned him to keep silent. ‘No one must know of these things,’ he emphasised strongly, ‘you must retain this secret for the rest of your life. What we are achieving here will play a vital part in all our plans; only King Arthur himself is privy to what we are doing.’

The old man was an expert in keeping things to himself. ‘Yes, Master Merlin,’ he replied. Old Sniffy then smiled to himself; he had spent years keeping things secret, and had no intention of changing the habit of a lifetime.

Little by little, everything was literally starting to come together, with materials being brought in from all over the Kingdom. While all this was going on, however, King Arthur still had to attend to his affairs of state. His Ministers kept him informed daily of progress and this allowed him to keep in regular touch with Merlin. Whenever they could, they spent time together sharing their knowledge and their memories. Merlin would tell the King of the Esoteric, the secrets of alchemy and the sacred arts of geometry and mathematics. For his part, King Arthur would relate events that had happened during his lifetime, involving some of the greatest events in history, and he would also tell Merlin stories from the past of great battles fought and won in times long ago.

Everything seemed to be going well with the great project. Those working on it were happy and inspired; new and progressive ideas were the order of the day.

But in his dark, shuttered room with only his toad for company, Modred was busy with his own diabolical plans. He continued plotting to achieve his ultimate objective, to be lord and master over all and by now had wormed his way into the senior ranks of the High Council. Because other members were distracted by the construction of the great building, his evil influence was being allowed to grow all the time by default.

Sensing the weakness of others, he would slyly discredit any who spoke against him while arranging promotions for his own bribed

followers. So, quietly and unopposed, Modred was slowly taking over more and more without anyone realising. His tentacles of evil were spreading all over the country through a network of lies and deceit, aided by fear and intimidation, better known as Potter and Bullpin with their bands of cut-throats and criminals. It would be only a matter of time before Modred's scheming would result in his having a stranglehold on the country, which in turn would lead to disaster or even death.