

“Does it matter? The wall has probably been weakening for years,” the prior said.

“I am sure it has, but it doesn’t look as if the wall is sinking,” Brother Snail said slowly. “It looks more like something is pushing it up from *under* the ground.”

An uneasy silence fell as William and the monks stared down at the base of the wall. Brother Snail was right, William realized. There was a definite upward tilt to the courses of stone.

“But what could possibly be doing that?” Brother Gabriel asked, a quiver of panic in his voice.

“What indeed?” Brother Snail murmured.

“An underground spring?” William suggested.

“Quite possibly,” the prior said. “But what matters now is that if the crack continues to grow, it could bring the wall down. We should move whatever we can out of the church, just in case. You, boy, go and fetch Shadlok. He can start taking the statues to safety. And then I want you to take a message to Sir Robert at Weforde.”

“Sir Robert?” William asked, mystified.

“He has stonemasons working on alterations to his manor house,” Brother Snail said. “He might be kind enough to spare one to come and look at the crack and tell us if there is anything we can do to prevent it from getting worse.”

The prior’s frown deepened. He didn’t look

pleased that one of his monks was taking the time to explain such important matters to a servant boy. “Don’t just stand there!” he snapped. “Do as you’re told.”

William sprinted back around the end of the church, through the monks’ graveyard, and on past the hazel coppice. Shadlok had spent the last week clearing a patch of rough ground between the coppice and the sheep pasture, where the monks intended to plant a new orchard. The old trees were giving less fruit with each passing year, and the prior had decided it was time to start again on new ground.

Shadlok looked surprised to see him. He straightened up and rested his hands on the handle of his shovel. Rainwater dripped from the ends of his long silver-white hair and soaked the shoulders and back of his dark green tunic. “You are going the wrong way,” he said, and nodded to the abbey buildings. “The kitchen is over there. Isn’t that where you are supposed to be?”

“The prior sent me to fetch you. He has work for you in the church.”

Shadlok went very still. There was a strange look in his pale blue eyes as he stared at William. “In the church?”

William nodded. “He thinks the chancel wall is in danger of falling down, and he wants you to move whatever you can out of harm’s way.”