

THE HOUSE OF THE PANDRAGON



THE
STONE
AND THE
MAIDEN

D E N N I S J O N E S



THE STONE AND THE MAIDEN

BOOK ONE OF THE HOUSE OF THE PANDRAGORE

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Dennis Jones

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✱ 1

MANDINE CROUCHED IN THE DIM UNDERGROWTH AT the forest's edge, and peered nervously at the thatched cottage in the clearing. The dwelling had plainly been looted; its door hung askew from one leather hinge, and broken pottery and the splintered remains of an ark-chest littered the yard. The plunderers had trampled down all the young crops in the vegetable patch, and from the ruins of a burned stable rose a tendril of pale smoke. To Mandine it looked unpleasantly like a resentful ghost.

Hunger suddenly squeezed at her midriff, and she winced. Evening was drawing on, and she desperately needed to eat. Her knees had been weak all day, and since midafternoon she had been suffering from fits of dizziness. A woodsman's daughter would know how to live from the forest, she imagined, but she was no woodsman's daughter. And if she had been, she likely wouldn't have gotten herself so hopelessly lost.

Mandine scrutinized the cottage again and bit her lip in indecision. The raiders seemed to be gone, and they might have left a few scraps of food she could scavenge. Still, if they were not too far away, they might decide to return and take shelter for the night at the pillaged farm.

She held her breath and listened intently. A bellbird sang its resonant *doum, doum* from a hilltop, and the feather-pines

whispered over her head. But she heard no hoofbeats, no jingle of harness or clank of weapons, no shrill voices calling in the harsh tongue of the Tathars.

Hunger clutched again at her belly, and she made up her mind. Brushing her long black hair away from her face, she straightened her slender shoulders; then, keeping low, she eased back through the undergrowth. When she could no longer see the cottage or the stable's smoking remains, she stood up and set off through the gloom toward the shallow ravine where she had left her gelding. It was there she had first smelled the stink of burning; unwilling to risk the noise the horse might make, she had dismounted to reconnoiter on foot.

The gray lifted his head at her approach and whickered softly. "Hush, Siro," Mandine whispered, and touched his soft nose. She took his bridle, and led him through the deepening shadows beneath the feather-pines and ancient sagbark oaks. The waning of day was unnerving, and she watched her surroundings carefully. In the dusky aisles of the forest this afternoon, she'd seen a flash of movement that might have been a person in green and brown, but when she looked again there was nothing. Had it been a trick of light, or could it have been a hemander?

She wasn't sure. Raised in the city, she'd never seen one of the Near Folk. The hemandri were denizens of the deep woods, and elusive; they were found only when they wanted to be found. Even so, there was some small trade between the two races, the hemandri exchanging rare herbs and aromatic gums for metals and ceramics, and though they were a little eerie, she had never heard of them harming someone of her race. There were even stories that told of how they would sometimes help lost or disabled travelers. Mandine found herself wishing, with suddenly stinging eyes, that one might materialize to help her.

She rasped the back of her free hand across her moist eyelids. Enough of such self-pity, she told herself harshly. She might be lost and half-starved, but she was Mandine Dascaris

of the House of the Dascarids, and if she could survive the viper pit of the court, she could survive this. She was a grown woman of twenty-two, and she had her wits and a horse. If she kept the rising sun on her right, and the setting sun on her left, she must strike the Great West Road eventually. It couldn't be much farther, and with luck there might be enough scraps of food left at the ransacked farmhouse to sustain her for a day or two.

When she could see the building through the trees, she paused and studied it warily. Nothing appeared to have changed. Mandine pondered, then took the cavalry helmet from her saddlebag, put it on, and tucked her hair into hiding. She tried closing the visor, but the mesh restricted her vision, so she pushed it up. Then she drew a deep breath and moved into the open. Siro followed placidly, flicking his tail.

In the wreckage strewn about the dooryard there were many footprints of men and horses. An earthenware pot, miraculously intact, lay by the threshold, and a hitching post stood a few yards from the door. Mandine looped Siro's reins through the post's iron ring and walked slowly toward the cottage's dark entrance. Her heart thumped against her ribs, and her breath came short. Would there be bodies, or had everyone escaped into the forest before the Tathars could butcher them?

She stood on the threshold and peered inside. The cottage had only one room, and there were no bodies in it. A table with three broken legs slumped against a wall, and an iron kettle was upside-down in the fireplace. Near the fireplace lay a wooden bread trough that someone had hacked almost in two. There was also an overturned keg by the hearth, and spilling from it a small drift of dirty brownish powder. Hardly daring to hope, Mandine hurried to the keg and found some four double handfuls of roughly ground barley flour.

She let her breath out in a long sigh of relief. Suppressing her urge to stuff the flour into her mouth, she searched the cottage for anything else edible, but found nothing. The flour would sustain her for a day or two, though. She could mix it

with stream water in the intact pot she'd noticed outside, and if she had a fire, she could make flat bread on a hot stone. She knew that the poorer sort of common people baked that way, though she had never seen it done. But she had no way to make a fire.

Then she remembered the burned stable. There had been smoke, and smoke meant embers. She could take one away with her, find a hiding place in the forest, and try her hand at baking. Her stomach growled at the prospect. She hurried out to the yard, brought the earthenware pot inside, and scooped the flour into it.

As she finished, it occurred to her that she was taking things that belonged to someone else. She ought to leave money, but how much? It was a mystery; she had no idea of the worth of a pot or a few measures of flour.

But just now, she thought, they're worth a great deal, at least to me. She searched in the sabretache at her belt, found a copper dandyprat, and put it on the hearth. After a moment's consideration, she took the coin back, and replaced it with a silver minim. Outside, her gray stamped and whickered.

"Coming, Siro," Mandine called softly. She settled the helmet more firmly over her tucked-up hair and walked through the doorway.

There was a blur of motion over her left shoulder. Mandine dropped the pot and opened her mouth to scream, but a thick arm clamped around her neck and cut the sound off before it reached her throat. She smelled sweat, heard harsh grunts behind her, and the arm tightened. She struggled, her fingernails scrabbling at hard muscles, but the arm simply yanked her off her feet. And then, to her horror, she saw a grimy fist and a long knife in it, and the blade swinging up and back for a deathblow to her heart.

"Quill, no, Quill, she's us'n!"

The woman's shout came from Mandine's right. "What?" said a rough male voice at her ear. The knife paused, wavered.

"She's not a silverhair! Look at her!"

The clamp around her neck let go. Mandine fell to her

knees, gasping for air, and dragged the helmet off. She saw a woman in ragged green at the corner of the cottage. In the woman's hand was a heavy cudgel.

"Up," said the man. He hauled Mandine to her feet and turned her roughly around. He wore a stained gray tunic and tan leggings of coarse hemp cloth. He wasn't old, but weather had browned and furrowed his skin, and his chin and cheeks were darkly stubbled. "What're you, then?" he demanded, and shook her. "What're you wanting here?"

Mandine swayed. She could not believe what had just happened. No one had ever laid violent hands on her. He could be flogged for this.

"I'm a traveler," she croaked. "I'm trying to get to Essardene."

The woman approached, holding the cudgel warily at her side. She looked older than Mandine, though not by many years, with large features crowded into a small face. "Why are you thieving us?" she asked angrily. "We been thieved enough. The silverhairs burned our barn, took our cattle."

"I wasn't stealing," Mandine said. "I *wasn't*. I was hungry. I didn't know you were still here. I left money on your hearth. Go and look, if you don't believe me."

"She's quality, Ardis," said the man abruptly. "Look there, at her horse."

Ardis did. A frightened look came over her golden brown face, and her eyes went to Mandine. "Oh, my lady," she said in a suddenly tremulous voice, "my Quill didn't mean hurting you. My lady, please believe me. He didn't see your hair being black, for the helmet, or your color. We thought you was one of the White Death, come back alone, and Quill wanted the horse and gear."

Uneasily, Mandine looked around. "Might they come back?"

"They might," Quill said. "We have to see if they left us aught, and go. We're safer in the wood." He picked up the pot. It hadn't broken, and only a little of the flour was spilt.

He went into the cottage, and Mandine heard him muttering curses.

"Will you come along with us, my lady?" his wife said. "We can give you hearth-bread at least, and good water. Better not to bide out of doors, after the sun goes down. My name's Ardis, by the by. That there's my husband, Quill."

Human company. She would not have to face a third night alone in the deep woods. "I would be in your debt," she said, and looked around at the wreckage in the dooryard. "When did they come?"

Ardis's voice trembled. "This morning. They near took us, but we got into the trees ahead of 'em, and they got busy with our stock. Good thing we were at our weeding, and not inside, or they'd have had us."

Quill reappeared, grinning shamefacedly. "She left silver on the hearth, Ardis." He turned to Mandine. "My lady, you're free-handed. We can give you a roof and bread, if you'll take 'em, soon's we find whatever the Tathars didn't thieve."

Mandine felt light-headed with hunger and relief. "Use my horse to carry for you," she said.

Their hiding place lay a half mile from the farm. To the casual glance it seemed only a cleft in a steep, thickly wooded hillside, but it opened out within and bent sharply left, to end at a low cavern with a sandy floor. The entrance passage was just large enough to admit Siro. In the cavern lingered an earthy smell of animals and dung, and an odor of smoke. A faint light glimmered from above, where a natural chimney slanted up through the rock.

"Mind out for cow flops," Ardis warned. "We keep the herd here, off and on. There's hay in the corner there, for your horse."

Quill and Mandine unloaded Siro, while Ardis lit a small cooking fire in a circle of stones. They had little enough to unload: the iron kettle, the remnants of the flour, the earthenware pot, and a sack of dried medlars a Tathar had dropped

or discarded behind the stable. Quill took the kettle outside for stream water, and Mandine unsaddled the gray.

"You use this for your cattle?" she asked as she laid the gear on the cave floor. She was wondering why.

"Sometimes," Ardis said, "when we've had a bad year, and the Dynast's taxmen come." She looked up at Mandine in sudden alarm, and her hand flew to her mouth. "My lady, oh, please. You won't be telling the collectors, will you?"

"No, no. I won't."

"Don't tell Quill I said aught. Please."

"Of course not, Ardis. I promise."

Ardis nodded, a small, uncertain smile on her mouth. "Isn't it dangerous to have a fire?" Mandine asked, to draw the woman's thoughts elsewhere. "Someone might see it, or see the smoke."

"Bend in the tunnel hides the light, my lady. You use good dry wood, and it don't smoke."

"Oh," Mandine said. Why hadn't she worked this out for herself instead of asking such a stupid question? *Until a few days ago, she thought, I believed I knew all the important things: history, governance, our literature, our traditions. But there's so much I'm ignorant about, and until the last few days I didn't even realize it.*

She finished unbridling Siro and turned him loose on the hay just as Quill returned with the water. She was walking to the fire when a fit of dizziness struck at her, and she put her hand to her forehead and wobbled. Quill seized her arm and helped her sit down on her saddle.

"Quick with the food, Ardis. She's near perished of hunger."

"It's coming, my lady," Ardis said. "You rest now, you're safe here."

While Mandine watched in a dull stupor, Ardis briskly made bread on a flat stone heated in the fire, and boiled half the medlars in the kettle. The tart smell of the cooking fruit made Mandine's mouth water. When the medlars were piled steaming on the flat round sheets of bread, they ate with their

fingers, too hungry to talk. Then, as energy trickled back into her blood, Mandine realized what Quill had done.

"Quill," she said, "you've given me half yours. Please, take it back."

Quill shook his head. "No, my lady, you've a long trod ahead of you, if you're going to Essardene, as you said you were. As for Ardis and me, I can always snare game."

He was looking sidelong at her with suppressed but obvious curiosity. *My manners*, Mandine thought. *What have I been thinking of? They don't know what to call me. But I don't want them to know who I really am.*

"I'm sorry," she said. "My head's been full of wool. I am"—she hesitated, and plucked a name from the air—"Palla. My family has property in Essardene." That much was true, anyway.

"We're Quill and Ardis," Quill said, bowing awkwardly as he sat. He paused, and added hesitantly, "You're a tad lost, my lady Palla, aren't you?"

Mandine's shoulders slumped. In her relief at warmth and safety, she had for a while put aside her dread of tomorrow. "Quill," she said, "I'm more than a tad lost. I have to go to Essardene, and I'm not sure of the way."

"I've been there," said Quill. "It's where the Dynasts have that great palace of theirs, that they go to in the hot months. I know a peddlers' track that will bring you citywards fair prompt. I'll show it to you come daylight. Essardene would be a day's ride on a beast like yours, maybe a whit more, I'm not sure. The Tathars may have found the trail by now, though, so you'd best go careful."

"Thank you," said Mandine. "Thank you very much."

"At least you'll have good weather, my lady," Ardis said. "The rain crows have been quiet of late, and they always know when there's a wet coming."

They had not asked why she was wandering the hills. They wouldn't, of course; no hill-farmer or hill-farmer's wife would dare ask a noblewoman to account for herself. For a moment she saw herself through their eyes: her smooth golden skin,

not browned like theirs by the sun, her high cheekbones, fine straight nose, slender hands unroughened by toil. Her eyes were indigo-blue, like theirs, but she was almost as tall as Quill, and a full head taller than Ardis.

She glanced at Quill. If she told her father how the hill-farmer had offered her violence, even mistakenly, the man would be whipped, or worse, even if Mandine tried to intercede for him. It was better for his peace of mind if he did not know who she was. Once she was safe, she could have him rewarded, with a new herd of the best cattle, a new stable, and a better cottage. It was the least she could do.

"Will you yourselves stay here?" she asked. "The Tathars might come back."

"We were talking 'bout heading coastwards," Ardis said. "Maybe to Bartaxa. It's a big city, with militiamen. We'd stay there till the White Death are gone away."

"You shouldn't go to the coast," said Mandine. "I left Bartaxa three days ago. The silverhair horsemen are all over the lowlands now. A raiding party ambushed and killed my escort the evening of the day I left. Bartaxa itself may have fallen—its walls would hardly keep a child out. That's why I'm trying to reach Essardene."

Quill's eyebrows shot up. "The White Death's as far as Bartaxa? The Allfather and Lady help us, they've never raided so deep."

"Maybe they *won't* go away," Ardis said in a tremulous voice. "Ever."

Mandine shivered at the thought. The morning after she escaped the Tathar ambush, she had found a vantage point on a cliff overlooking the coastal plain. Below her, stretching to the distant glint of the sea, drifted a haze of smoke from burning farms and villages, and the dark hurrying smudges of Tathar cavalry squadrons. Even now, she could hardly believe the catastrophe. The Hegemon of the Tathars lay six hundred miles to the northwest, yet the silverhairs were in the plain between her and the Inner Sea, deeper into the lands of the Ascendancy than they had ever come. She had realized then

that this was not raid, but invasion. So she had turned back into the hills, in what she thought was the direction of Essardene, and gotten lost for two days.

"Our army will run them out," Quill said, looking into the fire. "Soon's we get a proper battle."

"But there's *been* a battle!" Mandine said wretchedly. "You mean you didn't know about it? We heard in Bartaxa, three days ago. That was why I left."

They stared at her. "No," Ardis said. "Never a peep of a battle. Up here we don't see many folk, for news. All we knew was that the silverhairs were over the border. We heard they took Mallia, way northwest, but all on a sudden they were right here, right this morning."

"The battle," Quill said, looking anxiously at Mandine. "We won, to be sure?"

"We lost," Mandine answered in a shaking voice. "We lost. The army's destroyed. All of it. Eighty thousand soldiers, wiped out."

Ardis's hand went to her mouth, and Quill gave a harsh, startled grunt. "The Lord Allfather save us! My lady, you're sure it's true?"

"Yes, it's true. It happened at Thorn River, up between Mallia and Essardene. The rider who brought the news to Bartaxa was one of the few who got away." Mandine wrapped her arms around herself. "The army's gone. All our soldiers are scattered, or dead. Mostly dead. The Tathars don't take prisoners."

There was a long silence. Mandine stared into the fire, hardly seeing the embers. She had never really feared the Tathars until these last few days, though she had known all her life of the threat beyond the western mountains. It was not a new peril, for the Tathars had burst into the Ascendancy's awareness for the first time a hundred and fifty years ago: a vast horde of white-faced, silver-locked horsemen from the back of the west wind, their women and children with them, a nation on the move.

Until then the lands beyond Great West Wall, the mountain

range that marked the Ascendancy's western border, had been inhabited by the barbarian Scaths. These violent tribal warriors had bitterly troubled the Ascendancy more than once, but the Tathars burned them up like grass in an oven and swept onward and over the West Wall itself. They had been driven back over the Wall in three savage battles, but had then settled in the ancient lands of the Scaths, whose remnants they enslaved. There they prospered and grew to greater multitudes, but their hostility to the Ascendancy had never faded, and for the past two generations they had grown bolder and bolder in their raids across the Wall. For their ferocity and their pallid faces, the common folk, and not a few others, called them the White Death.

Quill at last broke the stillness. He looked down at Mandine's helmet, and said, "My lady, you've got a bit of armor. You weren't fighting Tathars your own self, were you?"

"No, I wasn't," Mandine said. "I was running." She gazed at the helmet's steel dome, remembering Erappis, the commander of her escort, who had made her wear it when they left Bartaxa. He feared for her even then, all too rightly. In the ambush she saw him fall with a Tathar lance in his side, and only the confusion and the poor light of dusk had saved her from a similar fate. Tathars had been everywhere. One, his saber high and his bone white face drawn into a demon's snarl, had ridden straight past her as she spurred Siro into the trees beside the road. The Tathar had slashed at her head, and the blow barely missed as she ducked. Others chased her, but Siro was too fast for their shaggy horses. Then darkness fell, and silence. She did not think that any of her escort had lived, and she dared not return to the road to find out. When dawn came, she had headed north.

Poor Erappis, she thought. *My poor guards*. She wondered, again, what it had been like for the men at Thorn River. So many, many dead. Her father had gotten away, though, with a fragment of the rear guard. She knew that much, from the survivors' news. Where her father might be now, she had no idea. She hoped it might be Essardene, and that the Tathars