



An excerpt from Pendragon, Book Six:
The Rivers of Zadaa
By D.J. MacHale

Chapter One: Journal #20

Zadaa

It began with a battle.

A nasty one. Then again, is there such a thing as a nice battle? I guess this one seemed especially vicious because it was over something so trivial. At least that's what I thought at the time. At stake was a couple gallons of water. I'm serious. Regular old everyday water. Not exactly the kind of thing you'd expect a group of professional warriors to fight to the death over, but that's not the way it works here on the territory of Zadaa. Water here is more valuable than food, more valuable than treasure. It's even more valuable than life. I know. I've seen people risk theirs to get a few precious drops.

How messed up is that?

Mark, Courtney, it's been a while since I've written a journal to you guys, and for that I apologize. I think after I tell you all that's happened since my last journal, you'll understand why. From the time I arrived here on Zadaa, I haven't had much time to think, let alone kick back and write. I'm doing it now because I'm about to set out on an adventure that was long in coming. I've tried to avoid it, but now I have no choice. Starting tomorrow, life is going to be very different for me. I feel as if I'm closing the first chapter on my life as a Traveler and beginning a new and more dangerous one. I know, that doesn't seem possible, but it's the truth. Before I tell you about it, I need to let you know what happened since I landed back on

Zadaa. You'll need to hear it all to understand why I've chosen the path I'm about to take. Maybe writing it down will help me understand it a little better myself.

You won't be surprised to hear that Saint Dane is here. I've already run into him. It wasn't pretty. But more about that later. I also have a good idea of what the turning point is here on Zadaa. I think it has something to do with water...or the lack of it. I've no doubt that Saint Dane's evil plan for this territory is somehow tied in to the water trouble they're having. Bottom line is, our quest to stop Saint Dane's plan to crush all of Halla has come to Zadaa. This is our next challenge. And so we go.

I first want to tell you about the battle that happened soon after I arrived. It's important to hear because in many ways it's a small example of the bigger trouble I found on this territory. That, and because one of the warriors involved in the fight was my friend. Loor. The Traveler from Zadaa.

"Keep to yourself, Pendragon," Loor ordered as we strode along the dusty street of Xhaxhu. "Stay in the shadows. Do not look anyone in the eye. It is dangerous for a Rokador to be seen in the city."

"But I'm not a Rokador," I complained.

"Do not argue," Loor said sharply. "Do as I say."

I didn't argue. I knew what she meant. There were two tribes living in this area of Zadaa. The Batu lived above ground in the cities. They were a dark-skinned race, made so because they lived for generations under the hot, desert sun. Loor was a Batu. The other tribe was the Rokador. They lived underground in a labyrinth of tunnels that spread throughout Zadaa. They weren't moles or anything; they were definitely civilized. But as you might guess, living underground didn't do much for their tans. The Rokador were a light-skinned race. So with my white skin and light brown hair, I pretty much looked like a Rokador. And since there was some serious bad blood between the Batu and the Rokador, making myself invisible up here on the surface was a smart idea. To that end, Loor had me wearing heavy, dark clothing that covered my head and arms. It was great for a disguise, not so great for keeping cool. I'm guesstimating that the temperature in Xhaxhu averages about ninety degrees. On a cool day. So I was sweating like a fiend. Or at least a fiend in a sauna wearing a winter coat.

"Can't somebody take your place?" I asked. "I mean, we have more important things to worry about."

Loor looked straight ahead as she strode along. Her jaw set. I'd seen this look before. She had her game face on. I know you guys can picture her. She's hard to forget. I'd grown a few inches since I first met her on Denduron, but she still had me by a solid two inches. Her once almost-waist-length black hair was a bit shorter now, falling to her shoulders. I guess the long hair got in the way when she did her training. As you know, Loor is a warrior. Here on Zadaa they call the warrior class "Ghee." When I first met Loor, she was a warrior-in-training. Since then, she has been elevated to full-fledged warrior status. I'm guessing she was at the head of

her class. She's that good. She even looks the part. This girl is totally cut. I'm talking stupid-low body fat. It isn't hard to see this since her lightweight leather armor reveals a lot of skin. Wearing heavy metal armor like the knights of the Round Table wouldn't fly here on searing-hot Zadaa. You'd end up cooking like Spam in the can. Assuming Spam is actually cooked, which I'm not so sure about. But whatever. You get the idea. The warriors here had to be protected, but cool. Unlike me, who had to be wearing a wool-freakin'-blanket.

The muscles in her long arms and legs flexed as she moved down the street, making her look even more formidable. I guess when you're a professional warrior, having an awesome athletic body goes with the territory. So to speak.

"I have no choice but to fight today," Loor finally answered. "I am next in the rotation."

"Rotation?" I snapped. "What are you, a baseball pitcher? Have them change the schedule. Find a relief pitcher. If something happens to you then -- "

"If I do not fight," Loor interrupted, "the Ghee commanders will mark me as a coward and banish me to a labor colony in the desert. Or I could get lucky and they would execute me."

"Oh," I said soberly. "Not a whole lot of great choices here."

"Do not worry, Pendragon," she said, finally looking at me. "Our destiny is to stop Saint Dane. I will not let anything stand in our way."

I believed her, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to worry.

"Loor!" came a voice from behind us. Running to catch up was Saangi. I'm not exactly sure what her official title is, but I guess on Second Earth you would call her Loor's squire. You know, one of those young servants who are assigned to knights to take care of their every need. The Ghee warriors of Zadaa operated pretty much like the knights of old, without the Spam-can suits.

"You forgot this!" Saangi said, out of breath. She handed Loor a small, leather container that was about the size of a canteen. In fact that's exactly what it was, a canteen full of water.

"No," Loor said sternly. "I cannot use this."

"But you will need water if the battle is difficult -- ," Saangi protested.

"Take it back to my home," Loor said firmly. "And do not let anyone see you with it."

When Loor spoke in that serious tone, you didn't mess with her. At least I didn't. I figured Saangi knew better too. The girl's shoulders fell in disappointment. I'm guessing she was around fourteen, only a few years younger than me. She had the dark skin of the Batu, but unlike Loor, her hair was cut tight to her head, like a guy. She wore simple, dark clothes that looked sort of like Loor's, but they were made of cloth rather than leather. Someday she would wear the armor of a Ghee warrior, but until then, her job was to take care of Loor.

Oh yeah, one other thing. Saangi had another job. She was Loor's acolyte. She knew all about the Travelers and our mission to stop Saint Dane. I thought Saangi was kind of young to have that kind of responsibility, but then again, I was only fourteen when I became a Traveler. Still, Saangi seemed more like an eager kid than a future warrior who could help us defeat a world-crushing demon. But that's just me.

"Do not be upset, Saangi," Loor said, taking the edge off her voice. "You were concerned about me and for that I am grateful. But it would not look right for me to be quenching my thirst during a fight over water."

Saangi nodded. "I understand," she said. "But do not begin the battle until I get there!" She turned and ran back the way she had come.

"She is so young," Loor said as we watched her run away. "I wish she did not have to know of the danger we are all in."

"Hey, you and I aren't exactly ancient," I said. "I'd just as soon not know so much either."

Loor gave me a quick look, and continued walking.

"So what exactly is the point of this fight?" I asked, hurrying to keep up.

"It is a contest," Loor answered. "You have seen how precious water is in the city. The situation has become so desperate, it has turned us against one another."

"You mean the Batu against the Rokador?"

"It is worse than that," she answered. "Since the underground rivers have gone dry, the Batu are fighting among themselves in their quest for water. Families guard their small supplies fiercely. It is not uncommon for neighbors to battle one another over a small puddle after a rain shower."

One look around confirmed what Loor was saying. When I first saw Xhaxhu, the city was an amazing, fertile oasis in the middle of the desert. Troughs of fresh, clean water ran along the streets. There were rich palm trees, colorful hanging gardens and even fountains that sprayed water in intricate patterns around the massive statues of stone. But now, the city was dry. Bone dry. The troughs were empty, except for dust. The gardens were gone. The palm trees were dying. Sand from the desert blew through the streets and collected in every corner. Walking through Xhaxhu, I couldn't help but imagine that this is what the cities of ancient Egypt must have looked like when the desert began taking over. Unless something changed, I could imagine the city of Xhaxhu one day being buried in sand, waiting for some future civilization to uncover it.

Loor continued, "It has caused a divide among the Ghee warriors. Half of us remain loyal to our mission. We protect Xhaxhu and the royal family of Zinj."

"And the other half?" I asked.

"They have the same goal, but differ in their methods. The royal family has made it known that they wish to work through this catastrophe peacefully. But there is a growing number of Ghee warriors who feel our only hope of survival is to wage war

on the Rokador below and claim whatever water they may be holding. With each passing day, the numbers of this rebellious group grow larger. If this drought continues, I fear there will be war."

"Smells like Saint Dane's kind of party," I said.

"I agree," Loor answered. "He has found a time in our history where we are the most vulnerable. The question is, what is he doing to make it worse?"

"That's always the question," I added. "Tell me about this fight we're going to."

"A well was discovered," Loor answered. "It is not known how much water it contains. It may hold a few feet, or lead to a spring. The dispute is over who will control it. The rebel Ghee warriors want it for themselves, to fortify their strength in preparation for their assault on the Rokador. The Ghee loyal to the royal family wish to have the water distributed to all the people of Xhaxhu."

"So this is a battle between Ghee warriors?"

"It is," Loor answered somberly.

"Which side are you on?" I asked.

"I would like to believe I am on the side of Zadaa," Loor answered. "But in this case I am loyal to the royal family. I do not wish to see a war...for many reasons."

"I hear you," I said.

We traveled the rest of the way in silence. Loor needed to get her game on, and I needed to keep a low profile in case a thirsty Ghee warrior saw me and felt like beating up on a Rokador. Loor led me to a city square that was nothing more than a sandy patch of ground surrounded on all sides by towering, sandstone buildings. They reminded me of pictures I'd seen of ancient Mayan temples in Central America. The buildings rose up like multi-tiered pyramids, finished off with flat tops. Some were taller than others, reaching maybe ten stories high. On all levels were carved statues that I can only guess were famous Batu from the past. Most of them looked like fierce warriors, clutching spears or arrows. It wasn't a real happy-looking bunch.

In the dead center of the square was an ornate fountain. Dry, of course. The fountain had a statue that was a larger-than-life depiction of a Ghee warrior battling a huge beast that looked like a fierce cat...with two heads. The beast stood on its hind legs, towering over the warrior with its claws out and ready to slice.

"That monster looks familiar," I said. "But that's impossible."

"It is not impossible because you have seen one before," Loor answered. "It is a zhou beast. That machine on Veelox took the image of the zhou from my memory and -- "

"The Reality Bug!" I exclaimed. "I remember! When it burst out of Lifelight, it looked like that thing. You're saying those bad boys are real?"

Before Loor could answer, a trumpet sounded a fanfare. I looked up to see that people were gathering on the tiers of the pyramidlike buildings.

"How come nobody's on the ground?" I asked.

"Because that is the battleground," Loor answered.

"Oh," I said. "I guess I don't want to be here either."

"I would prefer you were nowhere near here," Loor said.

"But I want to see what happens," I said. "I'll be careful."

If she was scared, she didn't show it. After all we'd been through, I can't remember once when Loor was actually afraid. She was incredible. Or incredibly oblivious.

"So..., uh, win. Okay?" I said.

"I always do," she said with absolute confidence.

I didn't want to wish her luck because I felt like that would be bad luck. I know, that's dumb, but what can I say? I left Loor and found some stairs up to the first-balcony tier. Climbing the stairs wasn't fun. I had to make sure the dark cloak covered my head and arms. Sweat ran into my eyes, making them sting, but I had to keep it on. Man, it was hot. Did I mention that?

I found a secluded spot in the shade of a towering statue and took up my position to watch events unfold below. Looking down on the square, I got the feeling that we were in an arena. The tiers of the buildings around the square were filling up with spectators to complete the illusion. Either the people of Xhaxhu really cared about how this fight was going to play out, or they had nothing better to do with their time. Either way, there was a pretty decent turnout.

As I looked around at the gathering masses, trying to be invisible, I saw something strange. The more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became. All the people around me were dressed for the hot weather, wearing short, lightweight clothes. I saw several Ghee warriors who stood out in the crowd only because they were wearing black, light armor like Loor's. Everyone else was dressed for hanging out in a blast furnace except for me...and one other person.

One tier above me, keeping to the shadow of a statue, was someone else wearing a cloak over his head. I didn't think many people saw him because they were all looking down into the square. I may have been one of the few who actually was in a position to see him. Or her. I couldn't tell which, so I'll refer to him as "he." His cloak was dark, but not black. It looked more like a deep, deep purple. Whoever this mysterious guy was, there were two things I knew about him: One, he didn't want to be seen any more than I did; and two, he was very interested in the battle about to take place. Actually there was one other thing I knew. Unless he was some kind of freak, he had to be as hot as I was. But that only made his being there all the more interesting.

A trumpet fanfare sounded again, and the crowd grew quiet. From two different sides of the square, the contestants entered. Each group had three Ghee warriors who marched in together, their heads held high. Loor was one of them. She was also the only girl. It made me incredibly proud, and more than a little scared. More scary was the fact that they all carried weapons. I had seen war games here on

Zadaa a while back. In that battle the contestants used short wooden sticks as weapons to knock colored pegs off their opponents. It was more like a brutal game of capture the flag than real war. Not this time. Here in the dry, dusty square, each warrior had a small shield in one hand, and a short, sharp sword in the other.

Sharp swords meant blood. My heart raced. This was no game.

The two groups of warriors met near the fountain in the center of the square, saluted each other with their swords and stepped back. The crowd cheered its approval. Another Ghee warrior entered the square. He strode to the center and stood between the two trios of warriors. He saluted Loor's group, then the other. He looked up at the crowd and announced: "The challenge has been set. The stakes are clear."

I half expected the guy to shout: "Leeeeet's get ready to rummmble!" He didn't.

He continued, "To the victor goes the right to control the newly discovered well. The match will follow in the long tradition of the Ghee. Victory shall go to the warrior who cleanly severs two heads."

The crowd cheered. My knees went weak. Did I hear right? Were these guys going to go after one another's heads? I wanted to scream. I wanted to jump down, grab Loor, and pull her out of there. This was insane! I felt totally, absolutely helpless. As impossible as this sounds, I started to sweat some more.

The Ghee announcer shouted, "To the brave, we salute you!"

He saluted the first trio, then Loor and her team. The crowd cheered again. My stomach twisted. There was every possibility that in a few minutes, Loor would be dead. And for what? A drink of water? The announcer walked quickly out of the killing box. Once he was clear, the two groups of warriors faced each other, and saluted again with their swords.

I wanted to shout out, "Stop!" but that would have been about as stupid as this whole spectacle. The two trios of warriors backed off from each other, while keeping their eyes on their opponents. The crowd quieted. It was eerie. There must have been a thousand people lining the balconies of that square, but for that one moment, all I could hear was the wind from the desert blowing through the arid streets of Xhaxhu.

The trumpet sounded again. The battle was on.

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