



THE STRIKE AT SHAYOL GHUL

THE WHEEL OF TIME PREQUEL

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Prequel to The Wheel of Time

Robert Jordan

Foreword by Robert Jordan

Sometimes fans ask me whether I mean to write prequels to The Wheel of Time.

While some requests are for books about The Trolloc Wars or the rise and fall of the High King, Artur Hawking, or the life histories of various characters, the most frequent are for books about the AOL and its end in the War of the Power, and the most often asked question is, I believe, "Why, when the greatest feats of the Age of Legends were done by men and women working together with the One Power, was the final attack on Shayol Ghul carried out by men alone?" At present I do not intend to write any of those books, but I won't say that a story or two might not creep out eventually. I do not normally do short fiction. My editor claims that for me, a short story means fifty thousand words. As for the question, though . . . I hope that those fans (and the rest of you) will be satisfied for the time with what follows, a fictional bit of "non-fiction," a piece from an Age called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past . . .

The Strike at Shayol Ghul

(A Preliminary Introduction)

by Jorille Mondevin,

Royal Historian to the Court of

Her Most Illuminated Majesty, Ethenielle Kirukon Materasu,

By the Blessing of the Light,

Queen of Kandor,

Protector of the Land,

Shield of the North,

High Seat of House Materasu.

One of the most important finds of recent years, perhaps since the Breaking, is a partial copy of no less than a history of the world from the drilling of the Bore into the Dark One's Prison to the End of the Breaking of the world. The original apparently dated from early in the First Century A.B. Despite the extreme paucity of material from the entire first millennium after the Breaking, we can only be thankful that the art of printing survived the Breaking of the World when so much else did not, and was indeed practiced to some extent during the Breaking itself, though under severe and restricted conditions. Considering the widespread destruction of The Trolloc Wars and the War of the Hundred Years, which although far less than the near totality of the Breaking still saw cities, nations, and far worse, knowledge, go to the fires, we must marvel at any writing that has survived more than three thousand years. What we know is based on fragments, copied and recopied a thousand times, but at least we know something from them. Even a little knowledge is better than ignorance.

Discovered in a dusty storage room in Chachin, the pages were in a chest full of old bills and receipts, students' copy books and private diaries, some so foxed by age and with ink so faded as to be unreadable where the pages themselves had not crumbled. The fragmentary manuscript was readable, barely, but presented the usual problems, quite aside from the difficulties of translation and dealing with centuries of copyists' errors; such a history would no doubt be a vast, multi-volume work (please see the author's Note at the end), yet of the two hundred and twelve surviving pages, the largest number of consecutive pages number six, and nowhere else more than two. Such dates as are given are totally incomprehensible, as no calendar dating from the Age of Legends has ever been found. Many references to cataclysmic events (dire battles and cities destroyed by balefire during the War of the Shadow, whole regions covered by the sea and mountain ranges raised overnight during the Breaking) and to such minutiae as the appearance of a certain person are but curiosities. The pages which might reveal exactly where these things happened, what their special significance was, the resolution or end result, are usually missing. Why then is this collection so important? First because, sundered as it is, it contains more information of the War of the Shadow than any other known single source, perhaps as much as all other sources combined in some ways. But even more importantly, it gives a great deal of information available nowhere else. And most importantly of all, the six consecutive pages and others which must be placed close to them contain the only known account of events surrounding what surely must be the most far-reaching single event in the history of the world, in any Age: the sealing of the Bore by Lews Therin Telamon and the Hundred Companions.

We still cannot be certain how long passed between the creation of the Bore and

the actual beginning of what would come to be called the War of the Shadow, yet plainly at least fifty years and possibly more than one hundred were marked by a rapid decline in the social order and an equally rapid increase in a thousand ills that previously had been either rare or entirely unknown. War itself was a "new" discovery, it seems, though one quickly learned, some might even say perfected. The War of the Shadow tilted one way, then another, in fire and blood, over its course. During the first three years, the Shadow made great gains, and large parts of the world fell beneath the horror of the Dark One's dominion, however indirectly through human representatives. And surely, the presence of Myrddraal and Trollocs cannot be called indirect. Under the leadership of Lews Therin Telamon, the legendary Dragon of the Prophecies, much of what had been lost was retaken over the next four years, though not without reverses. At that point, a stalemate developed, and for nearly a year neither side was able to effect any gain despite fierce fighting, but when the stalemate broke, the Shadow began to advance again, slowly at first but with ever increasing speed. According to the writer of that fragmentary history, "It was as if every step forward by the Shadow scattered the spores of chaos before it, and feeding on what grew, the Shadow gained strength, so that its next stride was longer, and the next step would be longer still."

Huge areas had been devastated to varying degrees by this time as the war surged back and forth around the world, and it was obvious that while the Shadow was willing to starve or murder a great percentage of the population in the conquered territories, the forces of the Light could no longer sustain a protracted war. They were losing, being pushed toward inevitable defeat with increasing speed, and if they were to win at all, it must be done quickly.

One of the plans for ending the war quickly, proposed by Lews Therin, centered around a direct attack on the Bore itself. Seven "focus points" (there seems no better translation from the old tongue, although they are obviously the Seals of Legend) were constructed of cuendillar. A raiding force — so they called it, though even in the light of recent past events it must still seem a large army to most people of this day — a raiding force consisting of some twenty thousand soldiers to provide security and a circle of seven female Aes Sedai and six male (the minimum number believed necessary, and all the strongest who could be found) would Travel to Shayol Ghul, the one place on earth where what has been called "a thinness in the Pattern" makes the Bore detectable, and there to implant seals held by the focus points which would close up the Bore and shut the Dark One from the world once more.

This plan was considered risky for a number of reasons. Even today it is known that the Dark One has a certain degree of effect on the world close around Shayol Ghul, and it was probable that any attempt to channel there would be instantly detected and the raiding party destroyed. Lews Therin himself, who intended to personally lead this huge raid, admitted that even with success, he expected few of the attackers to survive, perhaps none. Worse, several experts claimed that if the seals were not placed with exact precision, the resulting strain would, instead of sealing up the Bore, rip it open, freeing the Dark One completely.

Another plan at the time centered around two huge sa'angreal, one attuned to saidin and one to saidar, both so powerful that using them required special ter'angreal, like miniature versions of the great sa'angreal, constructed especially for the purpose of accessing the sa'angreal. This project had its

detractors, too, for the sa'angreal were planned to be so powerful that either one might well provide enough of the One Power to destroy the world, while both together certainly would. Some doubted that so much of the One Power could be handled safely under the circumstances. Against that was the certainty, according to the plan's supporters, that used together they would provide sufficient Power to drive the Shadow's forces back, to defeat them completely and erect a barrier around Shayol Ghul until a safe method of dealing with the Bore was assured.

Detractors pointed out that the Bore had enlarged since it was first drilled, and behind the barricade erected by the sa'angreal it would continue to grow, so that eventually the Dark One might free himself within the barrier. The barrier might well contain the Dark One when all he could do was reach through the relatively small Bore, but could it hold back the Dark One let loose?

The hall of the Servants quickly divided into two camps, and those who favored one plan derided the other.

Support for the use of the great sa'angreal and opposition to attempting to implant the seals centered around a woman named Latra Posae Decume. Apparently a speaker of considerable force and persuasion, she gathered a large bloc around her, but what assured her victory was an agreement she reached with every female Aes Sedai of significant strength on the side of the Light. (In the manuscript, this agreement is called "the Fateful Concord," though it was doubtful that this was the name it was generally known.) Lews Therin's plan was too rash, too dangerous, and no woman who agreed to the Concord would take part in it. As precise placement of the seals was widely thought to require a circle, that apparently killed the plan, since men cannot create a circle, but can only be

brought into one created by women. Work on the sa'angreal, in the form of two huge statues, was rushed forward. (1)

Just as the paired sa'angreal were completed, disaster struck. The access ter'angreal were being made at a place far removed from the sa'angreal (apparently because of a danger of "uncontrolled resonances during the final stages," whatever that means), and that region was overrun by forces under Sammael. The only good point in it was that the ter'angreal themselves had been hidden and the place where they were made destroyed (its very existence had been a secret at the highest levels all along) so that neither Sammael nor anyone else for the Shadow knew that any of these things were now within their grasp. The side of the Light still had the sa'angreal, but no safe way to access them; without the ter'angreal it was certain that even the strongest Aes Sedai would be burned out instantly by the huge flow of the One Power.

Lews Therin argued again for his plan, acknowledging the risks but saying that was now the only chance, yet Posae maintained her opposition. Belief in the danger of misplacing the seals had spread, and many more female Aes Sedai had pledged to the "Fateful Concord," including a great number who were nowhere near strong enough to qualify for the raiding party circle. Tempers and passions rose, and an apparently unprecedented division along male-female lines began to develop among the Aes Sedai in general, if not within the Hall itself. Finally the Hall decided to continue with Latra Posae's plan, and her people began working to smuggle the access ter'angreal out of Shadow-controlled territory.

(2)

Almost immediately on the heels of Sammael's advance, armies commanded by Demandred and Bel'al struck heavily. At this point in the war, halting an

advance by the Shadow was the best that could be hoped for; no conquered territory had been regained in the past two years. In intense and bloody fighting, these two drives were barely contained, but Demandred and Bel'al kept the pressure on. Sammael began a new offensive, also scarcely held, and there is mention of heavy military activity elsewhere. Apparently both of the great sa'angreal were threatened by these offensives; in fact, it was possible that they were the target. Massive riots swept a number of cities still held by the Light and the "re-emergence of the peace faction" is mentioned, apparently a group demanding negotiations with the Forsaken. (3) The final defeat was at hand; the will of the people to resist was fading, and should any one of the three major offensives commanded by Forsaken break through the end would be only a matter of time, perhaps as little as months. With Latra Posae's opposition continuing in the face of these events (4), and the female Aes Sedai holding to their pledge and thus making use of a circle impossible (the lines of division had hardened to a point where many female Aes Sedai refused to speak to male Aes Sedai, and the reverse as well), Lews Therin resolved to carry out his plan without the approval of, or even approaching, the Hall. Plainly it was going to be impossible to hold the huge sa'angreal long enough for the access ter'angreal to be smuggled out. In Lews Therin's view, there was no longer any choice.

A group of powerful young male Aes Sedai, vocal in their arguments (apparently to the point of several times disrupting meetings of the Hall), had formed in support of Lews Therin during the struggle with Latra Posae, a group popularly called the Hundred Companions, though in actuality they numbered one hundred and thirteen at this point. As the highest military leader for the Light, Lews Therin was able to assemble a force of some ten thousand soldiers unbeknownst to

the Hall. With that force and the Hundred Companions, he launched his planned attack at Shayol Ghul.

Exactly what occurred that day can never be known, only the results. Of the soldiers, not a single man or woman returned to give any account. The seals were placed safely, without ripping open the Dark One's prison as many opponents had feared. By chance, all thirteen of the Forsaken were at Shayol Ghul (perhaps summoned for a conference with the Dark One?), and they were trapped in the sealing, thus decapitating at one stroke the Shadow's leadership. Though most of the world was held for the Shadow, if that had been the whole result it is certain that over the next few years the Shadow would have been extinguished all across the face of the earth. Civilization had retained a large degree of cohesion in the areas held by the Light, far more so than in those held by the Shadow. Deprived of their highest levels (and also perhaps because of the loss of the Dark One's influence) the Shadowsworn fell into struggles among themselves for power, dividing into warring, vulnerable well before the Breaking progressed to a point that made the war the least of anyone's concerns. In any case, the War of the Shadow must be said to have ended that day at Shayol Ghul. So it is generally recorded.

But that was not the only result, of course. Instead, there was the counterstroke from the Dark One at the moment of sealing, and saidin itself was tainted. Lews Therin and the sixty-eight survivors of the Hundred Companions went insane on the instant. Within days they were leaving trails of death and destruction in their paths. By the time the taint on saidin was discovered, hundreds more male Aes Sedai had been driven mad, and what remained of civilization after the war itself had fallen into chaos. Even informing all the

remaining sane male Aes Sedai of the danger was now impossible. That fateful day at Shayol Ghul ended the war, and began the Breaking of the World.

The most suitable comment surely comes from what appears to be the introduction of the fragmentary manuscript. "Whoever read this, if any remain to read it, weep for us who have no more tears. Pray for us who are damned alive."

Author's Note

All volumes of "The Complete History of the War of the Shadow" and "The Breaking of the World" will be available by subscription upon application to Mistress Jorille Mondevin at the Palace of Aesdaishan in Chachin.

End Notes

(1) Speculation of the wilder sort is rife among some who call themselves historians, and the discovery of this material has resulted in the expected from the usual quarters. Would the great sa'angreal have proven effective used as Patra Posae desired? Had the seals been placed by a circle comprised of men and women together, might the men, or even saidin itself, have been protected in some fashion from the Dark One's counter stroke? Or would saidar have been tainted as well? The last possibility is enough to curdle the coldest blood, yet the fact is that events transpired as they transpired, and such speculation is no more than a fireside game to frighten the gullible. Those I speak of will know who I mean.

(2) According to the manuscript pages, all of the agents responsible for this smuggling were caught, though that was not known until events had far outrun anyone's plans. They were brave men and women, for although those who were not

killed outright were tortured, and though some revealed the purpose of their mission, none betrayed the location of any of the access ter'angreal. Still, the only real result was that the ter'angreal were widely scattered across areas held for the Shadow, their locations and even their existence to remain hidden for millennia.

(3) The manuscript indicates that there were several peace factions during the course of the war. Or perhaps only one, with fortunes that waxed and waned. It is clear that several times during the war this group sent parties at its own initiative to the Forsaken seeking a negotiated settlement, and that upon returning, members of each of these delegations were later discovered carrying out activities that aided the Shadow's cause, though it seems that in some instances, they were completely unaware of what they had done. It is a wonder that those people did not remember a saying that is supposed to have originated during the War of the Shadow. "There is never peace with the Shadow."

(4) Before her death during the Breaking (which cannot be specified from the evidence of the manuscript, unfortunately either as to time or place), Latra Posae apparently rose to a prominence which rivaled that of Lews Therin before her. During the fighting against the Shadowsworn before the Breaking put an end to what by that time seemed inconsequential by comparison, she gained the name Shadar Nor, best translated as "Cutter of the Shadow" or perhaps "Slicer of the Shadow" (the difficulties of precise translation from the Old Tongue, with all its multiple meanings, will always remain with us). It is thus ironic that no other document yet discovered so much as mentions her name or accomplishments. Perhaps this will serve to restore Latra Posae Decume to her proper place in history.

