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Reality, Tel'aran'rhiod, and Winning Tarmon Gai'don

Submitted by [glaur_dm](#)

Posted on 6/3/2008 8:09:55 AM

Reality, Tel'aran'rhiod, and winning Tarmon Gai'don

Assuming that victory at Tarmon Gai'don ("TG") will involve the One Power ("OP") is probably a fallacy, though one certainly encouraged by Robert Jordan (misdirection). I would go a step further and say that the nature of the Dark One ("DO"), Tel'aran'rhiod ("TAR"), and the OP virtually preclude any OP solution to TG. Instead, I would argue that TG will be fought solely within Rand's psyche.

Let me hasten to add that by "solely within" I do not mean to imply that there will not be massive real battles, with conventional armies and channelers. Others have pointed out the likelihood that Caemlyn and Tar Valon are likely to see enormous clashes between the forces of Light and Shadow. I agree with that. However, winning the Last Battle will require something other than defeating the Shadow's forces.

The trigger for this theory was the question "What will happen when the DO breaks free?" My response was that the Pattern, all of reality, would simply unravel and vanish. I think this is clearly implied in the series. That fact can be the touchstone for thinking about TG as well. The DO wants to unweave reality, make it fade away like mist. The "ripples" in reality show him starting to break free. Normal barriers, like those between life and death, begin to give way. Dead towns spring up and then vanish. The Pattern is not threatened by bad things happening, because bad things as well as good things can be part of the Pattern. The Pattern is threatened by nonbeing, which is what the DO will bring. That, therefore, is what Rand has to fight – not armies, or True Power channelers, but the disintegration of reality.

But how do you fight the unweaving of existence? Well, as it happens, Rand has already done this before, in a sense. When fighting Ishamael/Ba'alzamon in Tear, Rand follows him into an alternate reality (almost certainly TAR) where Ishamael sets a number of traps, including one trying to unmake Rand (his body started to vanish). Rand used his innate "sense of balance" to defeat this trap. Similarly, when Rahvin took the fight in Caemlyn into TAR, he tried a number of tricks showcasing the malleability of TAR. Rahvin's last plan was, like Ishamael, to imagine Rand out of existence, transforming him into some beast that could not channel. But this time, Rand struggled to hold his own form in his mind, had trouble picturing his own face, and was losing

Quote of the Moment

Blood and bloody ashes!

-Brandon Sanderson

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saidin, before Nynaeve succeeded in distracting Rahvin.



We have been told and shown many times that reality in TAR is entirely malleable to a strong mind, and that strength in the OP is less important there than strength of will. I propose that TAR is, quite literally, the World of Dreams – TAR is a reflection of the world that owes its existence to the collective (un)consciousness of all souls in the Pattern (maybe all souls in all the worlds in the larger Pattern of the Lace of Ages). Because TAR is literally “made out of” living consciousness, it can be manipulated by conscious beings. We see numerous examples showing that the key to controlling TAR is a strong will and a strong sense of one’s own self and reality. Inexperienced TAR walkers are shown with their clothes “flickering” or being caught in nightmares – their sense of self and their grasp of reality is not secure enough to anchor themselves in their preferred reality. Strong and experienced dreamwalkers can control their own reality and also the reality of others by fixing their preferred reality in their mind and holding it firm. Within TAR, the OP is just another malleable piece of reality. Nynaeve can control Moghedien’s access to the OP just by imagining an a’dam. Rahvin can strip *saidin* from Rand just by imagining him as something that cannot channel.

The nature of TAR is key to understanding TG. The DO is trying – and from what we have seen and heard, able – to do to the entire Pattern what Ishamael and Rahvin tried to do to Rand, i.e. make it disappear. As TAR shows, the OP is a part of the Pattern, and if the DO breaks free, then the OP will not be able to stop the disintegration of reality; the OP itself is part of reality and will be unraveled along with it. The OP cannot fight the DO, because the DO is outside the normal scope of reality and can manipulate it how he pleases, just as an experienced dreamwalker is outside the normal unconscious scope of TAR and can manipulate reality there. This makes sense given Jordan’s clear borrowing from various Eastern religions. All the “created realities” are probably, to Jordan’s dueling deities (DO and Creator), like TAR is to humans: constructs of their collective consciousness reflecting their own higher plane of reality, and thus malleable to the deity that enters them. The DO’s limited touch on the Pattern now is like a dreamwalker’s control of TAR in spirit; when the DO “breaks free” it will be like Rahvin and Rand entering TAR in the flesh, with immensely more power to reshape (or unravel) reality.

Remember also that TAR, while malleable to those who enter it, “resists” being changed. Doors that are closed will reopen. Serious damage, even (mild) balefire, flickers between damage and repair. The collective consciousness of souls that creates and sustains TAR has its own inertia – it wants things to reflect the way they were last perceived. It takes time for that perception to change and it is difficult to overcome the inertia to enact permanent change. Similarly, the Pattern is infinitely malleable in its details, but has its own inertia that resists wholesale

permanent change or destruction. The Dragon, the champion of the Light, is spun out by the Pattern as the embodiment of the Pattern's resistance to destruction. In that sense, Rand represents every thread in the Pattern, and is the focus of those threads' collective desire to remain in existence. He is the champion of the Light, the champion of the Creator, the champion of the Pattern's desire to keep itself whole. (Mat and Perrin, as fellow ta'veren, will probably also play a role, but the Dragon is the key.) We have already seen that Rand molds reality (e.g. his ta'veren "miracles") the way dreamwalkers mold TAR. Thus, Rand is capable of meeting the DO on a relatively even playing field in the struggle to keep reality from dissipating. The DO can manipulate reality like TAR; the Pattern uses Rand as a focus to counter that manipulation.

Rand as a channeler, wielding the OP, is no match for the DO. An understatement; it is not just that Rand is overmatched, it is that the DO can control the OP just like the rest of reality. We have already seen Shaidar Haran (a mere avatar of the DO) effortlessly shield Forsaken who are nearly as strong as Rand, and indeed make it for them as though the OP does not even exist. It seems apparent that the DO himself could do the same to Rand without even thinking about it. Again, the OP is part of reality and thus it is part of what is under assault. We are seeing more examples of this – wardings fail, allowing vermin in: more than one character muses that it was as if "saidar itself were failing." (KoD). The Seven Seals were as unbreakable as the OP could make them, but they failed eventually as the DO touched them. The OP itself fails at the DO's touch, so the OP cannot be the solution to defeating the DO. But as non-channelers (e.g. Aiel dreamwalkers) can match or better much more powerful people (e.g. channelers) by controlling TAR, so Rand can match or better the DO by struggling to wrest control of reality. Even though Rand is just one man, he focuses the collective will of every thread of the Pattern to maintain itself (just as those souls collectively create and maintain TAR), which allows his force of will to "compete" with the DO's force of will. As Herid Fel said, strength and order maintain the Pattern, while chaos strips it of power. The more chaos in the world, the less natural cohesion the Pattern will be able to supply to Rand. And the more chaos within Rand himself, the less strength he will have to maintain the order of the Pattern.

All the masters of TAR we have seen stress that, inside TAR, manipulation of TAR is qualitatively superior to the OP. To control TAR, you need to have full control of yourself. Unfortunately, Rand has been regressing, not progressing. Ironically, as he has become more powerful, he has lost his sense of himself. You can see the regression in his TAR encounters. Against Ishamael, he was so "centered" (to borrow another Eastern phrase) within himself that he could defeat the attempted disintegration without even knowing what was happening. Against Rahvin, he could no longer even picture himself as he would look in a mirror. Rand won the TAR battle with Ishamael; he lost a near-identical TAR battle with Rahvin (if not for Nynaeve's interference). The battle with the DO will involve a struggle of will to retain the Pattern.

Rand is losing control of his mind, which has become increasingly divided (Lews Therin, Moridin). He is losing control of his emotions (bouts of coldness and rage). He thinks of himself only as a sacrifice, but not as an individual, so he is losing control of his own soul. And he is losing sight of other people as individual souls, treating them instead as weapons or tools. In short, Rand is steadily losing his control over himself and his kinship with the other souls that make up the Pattern. This may prove devastating, because TG will pit Rand's ability to visualize and will the fabric of reality into cohesion and continued existence, against the DO's attempt to unravel every thread into oblivion.

This defining struggle of TG ties in with a number of themes throughout the series. One such theme is the ultimate irrelevance of physical power (including strength in the OP), when compared to strength of character. Sorilea can barely channel, but is incredibly formidable by force of will. The Tua'than have no power, but have survived for millennia based on the strength of their commitment. Two Rivers folk "will survive, Light willing, and if the Light doesn't will, well, we'll survive anyway." (TEotW) Another is ta'veren. Rand is the Eye of the World, the focus of the Pattern, the champion of every soul. Another is Rand's conflict within himself. And another is Rand's connection to every living soul in the Pattern – the "Fisher King" whose health is intertwined with the land.

As of KoD, Rand has become so powerful that he has become accustomed to using his power to prevail instead of prevailing by strength of will. I think this is the greater part of "Cadsuane's lesson." Rand has lost control of his mind, emotions, and soul, and has lost his empathy for and connection with the world and all the souls therein. Cadsuane tries to help him regain control of his mind, since she has knowledge of Rand's struggle with Lews Therin, including using Min to help draw Rand back to control in KoD when Lews Therin seizes *saidin* during the trolloc attack. Cadsuane tries to help him regain control of his emotions by her rules about manners and temper. She tries to help him regain control of his soul, by agreeing with Sorilea to teach him "laughter and tears." And she tries to help him regain his connection with the world, with her insistence that he is becoming too "hard" – divorced from caring about himself or the world – instead of "strong" – fully in control of himself and relying on that strength.

But the biggest hurdle that Rand faces in regaining the right kind of "strength" (the strength of will to counter the DO, control over himself strong enough to anchor himself in his preferred reality, and empathy and understanding of the world strong enough to hold the Pattern firm in his mind) is *saidin* itself. Tainted *saidin* would have given victory to the DO by leaving Rand mad, unable to control himself. Clean *saidin* is still a stumbling block to Rand, because it represents power. This is the key lesson that Cadsuane will teach both Rand and the Asha'man – that

strength in the Power is not real strength. In part, she teaches this by what she is – a woman, far weaker than Rand, who nevertheless dominates everyone around her by her strength of will and character (let's leave aside the question of whether she is actually a bully buoyed by her *Ter'angreal* of Doom). To win TG, Rand will have to let go of *saidin* -- and its representation of power -- and embrace "inner strength" (for lack of a less-squishy term) so that he can defeat the will of the DO. He will not like this, nor will the Asha'man (who, you remember, are trained to do everything, even mundane tasks, with *saidin*). Cadsuane's lessons in control, humanity, and strength of will without regard for the Power will contribute to Rand's victory.

In summation, the Last Battle will not be fought using the Power, but instead will be a struggle of will between Rand and the DO to control reality, just as Rand has fought in the past to control TAR. By reclaiming his mind, emotions, soul, and compassion, Rand will be able to "hold in his mind" the threads of the Pattern and maintain them against the DO's attempted unweaving.

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