



The Witch Queen

Of all the creatures of Aryth, few are more enigmatic than Aradil, the Witch Queen of Erethor. Her deeds are legends, and few are the folk who have never heard her name or at least her title. She is ancient even by the standards of the longlived elves; by some accounts she is nearly 9,000 years of age. She seems ageless, yet her eyes betray the weight of the years that she has lived. Her mood is often melancholy, her demeanor subdued unless she is moved to anger.

Even amongst her own people Aradil's true nature and goals are questioned. The most popular misconception is that she is a dragon who has chosen to take on the form of a beautiful elf woman. Other tales recount her amazing powers of sorcery, and suggest that she might be a living manifestation of Aryth's magic. Some Sarcosan legends say that Aradil fell from the sky like a star prior to the Sundering, a child of the gods who has since been trapped, like her dark enemy, within the shell of the mortal world. Even the Dorns have their tales. These are rarely flattering, since the men of the north fear the Witch Queen's magic almost as much as they despise Izrador's, and some say that she seeks control over the world in much the same manner as the Shadow in the North.

ARADIL'S YOUTH

Aradil was born in the Year of Falling Snow, deep in the heart of the Caraheen. As with many elf children, she was an only child. Her father, *Benaedan*, was a warrior on the Council of the Throne and a close adviser to the High King. Aradil's mother, *Tharadlia*, daughter of *Kirinhi*, was a seer and sorceress of great renown amongst her people. The blood of *Shadiuil*, first of the High Kings of the elves, ran thick in their daughter's veins, and her birth was seen as a blessing to her race. *Tharadlia* had seen visions of her daughter's rise to power. Though her premonitions lacked clarity, she could also see that Aradil would one day face an impenetrable darkness, and that her life would end in tragedy.

Even as she kept secret her visions of her daughter's ascendancy and doom, *Tharadlia* took it upon herself to prepare Aradil for the struggles that she would ultimately face. In so doing she isolated the girl from her peers and even from her father, *Benaedan*, but strengthened her as if she were steel being tempered for the forge. For five decades the three of them strove at their individual goals. The mother gathered all the knowledge she could fathom and instilled it in her pupil. The father defended his people from the Trapped and Lost, which sought to feed on their souls, and the monsters formed by the Sundering, which sought to feed on their flesh. And the daughter honored the example set by both her parents and became a prodigy of magic and power.

Fifty-two years after Aradil's birth, *Benaedan* left the Caraheen and never returned. The annals of history do not say what errand it was that became his last. Some sages say that he had journeyed north to learn of the Shadow's growing power; others believe that he ventured south to remove the threat that slumbered in Ibon-sul, or perhaps to harness it for his people's use.

What is known is that, upon learning of the disappearance of her husband, *Tharadlia* fell into a deep despair from which she would never recover. It was as if she had lost the will to live. Even the fate of her daughter seemed forgotten in *Benaedan*'s absence. Aradil cared for her mother as best she could, but the magics that she had been taught were not enough to assuage the anguish that her mother suffered. Twenty-two years to the day after *Benaedan*'s disappearance, Aradil's mother died with her husband's name upon her lips.

ARADIL'S ASCENSION

Despite her youth, Aradil managed to gain a position of power within the Council of the Throne. Her influence was due, in part, to her bloodline, for *Shadiuil*'s wisdom was praised and it was well known that he was descended of an intermarriage of one of the elthedar and a celestial being of great power and goodness. Aradil's direct relation to that ancient and powerful elf would have granted her a position of authority even if it were not for her undeniable skill at the arcane and her strong connection with the pulse of Aryth's life force. In addition, many of the council bureaucrats held Aradil in high esteem due to her father, an elf they had all respected and loved in his time.

Aradil proved quite adept at the maneuvers inherent in courtly intrigue, and she rose through the hierarchy swiftly and with little effort. Her goal, of course, was to learn the fate that had befallen her father. The more she searched, however, the less she learned. It was as if the knowledge had been hidden from sight, and none who might have known were willing or able to speak of it. She was verbally dissuaded from continuing her investigations by her fellow councilors. Some questions, they warned, were best left unanswered.

Though Aradil eventually relented in the questioning of her father's disappearance, she remained ever watchful of clues and insight into his fate. In time, the focus of her attention shifted to providing for her people. She became an outspoken advocate for all elves, from the Erunsil of the icy Veradeen to the Miransil of the western coast. She renewed ties with the distant Danisil, whose druidic magic had been scoffed at by the scholarly channelers at Caradul. She led missions of mercy to provide aid to those communities overcome by monsters, including a renowned magical battle atop the Mountain of the Sky in which she bested a strange, giantish witch-woman of the Highhorn Mountains in single combat. Her efforts, both martial and peaceful, earned her the love and admiration of all. So popular had Aradil become that High King *Shandrehn* appointed her as his successor despite the fact that she was the youngest and least tried heir in line for the throne.

The other heirs, who were as enamored of Aradil as the rest of the elven people, willingly gave up their rights of ascension so that Aradil could be crowned queen. At the age of 214 years, she was the youngest monarch ever to have ascended the throne. These events sparked long-standing but little-heeded rumors of conspiracy and magical coercion on Aradil's part. Even if they proved to be true, it is doubtful that any but the most cynical of elves would care. Aradil's actions speak for themselves.

ARADIL'S REIGN

Despite the rumors surrounding her ascension to the throne in Caradul, Aradil proved to be a shrewd queen who kept the best interests of her people in mind when making even minor decisions. Nearly 4,000 years passed peacefully, and the fey civilizations of Eredane thrived. The Veradeen and the edges of the rest of Eredane were occasionally troubled by incursions by the Trapped, by shadowspawn and sunderborn monsters, and even by the first orcs, giant-kin, and goblin-kin from the north. Such encounters were never organized assaults, though, and the elves became expert hunters, weeding their enemies' ranks before they could maraud the elven forests.



Aradil used this time of peace to learn all she could of the world, dividing her energy between ruling her people and studying at the feet of the elves' wisest sages and seers, and even by communing with the Elder Tree itself, an act that granted her amazingly long life and seemingly endless youth.

It was in the latter half of the First Age that Aradil began to have horrifying visions of flame and death, of magnificent creatures as large as maudrial trees, of dark wings and shining scales. She could not pinpoint the source of the visions, nor whether they occurred in the past, present, or future. She knew only that they came from far to the south, that great pain and woe was their cause, and that they involved creatures ancient and powerful. Just as she had resolved to investigate the troubles, a messenger came with an altogether different omen of dread. *Ressial*, who claimed to be a monk of the Order of Truth, arrived in Caradul carrying a message for the Queen. None of the fey had seen a creature like *Ressial* before in their lives; he was shaped somewhat like them, and would have been taller if not for his stooped back. His form might once have been sturdier than theirs but now was frail, and his skin seemed parchment-thin and covered in creases and ripples. This was something the elves had rarely seen, save among a few of their halfling allies and the occasional dwarven emissary: signs of a humanoid grown old. *Ressial* claimed to be of a race of "messengers," nothing more, but Aradil recognized him as one of the Trapped, a servant of the lords of light in humanoid form. She and the rest of her people would also one day recognize the race from whom *Ressial* had borrowed his body, for in time the Dorns, the first humans to inhabit Aryth, would arrive at their shores.

Ressial spoke to Aradil of an ancient prophecy that foretold the inevitable rise of Izrador in the north, and also revealed something far more painful: something that not only terrified Aradil, but made her fear her own power. Aradil was careful to keep *Ressial*'s message a secret, lest it cause panic amongst her subjects. She emerged from the meeting in a state of agitation, in part blaming herself for not acting on her instincts and fears sooner, in part terrified to act at all. The number of hunters in the north were doubled, and the bravest of the Erunsil were encouraged to travel farther east and north than once they had, to destroy orcs and goblin-kin on sight. Even the most peaceful and retiring of elves were instructed to train with sword and bow, and even the smallest village was asked to produce weapons for some unexplained purpose. Some debate was offered by the Council of the Throne, for Aradil's demeanor troubled them, and they wished to know more of what had passed between *Ressial* and their queen. Aradil would have none of their arguments, and her anger at being questioned was terrible to behold. Cowed by their queen's fury, the Council set quietly about their tasks.

THE SECRET WARS

The news of Izrador's rise was terrible enough, but *Ressial* also bore another story of woe, and it was this that caused Aradil such ache and hesitation. He revealed the fate of Aradil's father.

Ressial had been one of the celestials who, having long fought Izrador in the heavens, was pulled down with the dark god and trapped on Aryth by the Sundering. Only after millennia did the immortal muster enough strength to take form once more, surrounded as he was by the throbbing hate of the Shadow's essence.

The spirit slowly drifted through the north, watching in helpless horror as the orcs were created, as the highland imps were twisted into the goblin-kin, as Izrador's corpse exuded a vile essence of entropy and death. When he happened upon a group of creatures that glowed with the light of goodness, creatures who held prayers to the lords of light barely remembered in their hearts, he allowed himself a glimmer of hope. He made contact with the creatures, and learned of their intentions. They were elves, the bravest and most powerful of their kind, sent forth to learn of the corruption that seemed to come from the north. Having known the evil that is Izrador first-hand, *Ressial* told them all that they wished to know and more, and offered them his aid. If they helped him, if they let him occupy one of their bodies, he would lead them to the Scar and together they would destroy Izrador completely, banishing him to oblivion and possibly, should the gods be merciful, removing the Veil.

The name of the elf who offered his body was *Benaedan*.

Ressial spared Aradil the horrific details of their doomed assault on the Shadow's grave, but it became clear that every single one of the elves save her father were killed or succumbed to insanity before they even reached the dark essence of Izrador's corpse. *Benaedan*, with *Ressial*'s aid, was the only one to make it to their destination. Together, the courageous elven warrior and the powerful celestial within him battled through into the heart of the dark god's corpse, and they may have had a chance of, if not succeeding in *Ressial*'s ritual to banish the dark god, at least dispelling his essence, sending him into torpor for untold years. Perhaps their efforts did in fact damage the Shadow, forcing him to delay his inevitable rise. But in the end, they were overcome.

Trapped within the tendrils of darkness, alone in a barren crevice of ice and hate, the dual consciousnesses of *Benaedan* and *Ressial* foresaw their end. They knew that if they allowed Izrador to take them alive, they would be turned into a force for evil, perhaps made to betray their very family and kin. They would have become the first Night King. *Ressial* began to weave a spell, then, and *Benaedan* allowed him to complete it. It sundered *Benaedan*'s body and soul, destroying him utterly so that nothing remained for Izrador to corrupt, and flung *Ressial*'s essence far across Aryth. The last sound either of them heard was the dark god's unholy wails of rage and frustration.

Ressial, having seen the true nature of the fallen deity and knowing that no mortal could stand against it, then wandered the globe in search of some other hope. Perhaps he could find another way to breach the Veil, or a sign of the silent gods. Having vowed never again to cause the death of a mortal host, *Ressial* drifted for years across the continent of Pelluria and beyond, always in his bodiless form. Eventually he happened upon an old Dorn sage who had lapsed into a coma and was nearing death.

He offered peace and rest to the old man, asking him only for the chance to use his form when he was done with it. The sage, overjoyed at this communion with a servant of his long-silent gods, agreed. And so *Ressial* bound himself eternally to an aged and decrepit form, never to grow older but never again to feel the soft wind on his feathery wings or the warm grass beneath well-muscled limbs. In this form he began his sojourn, and in this form he ended it, when at last he came to Aradil's court, and found at last the being he thought might be the world's only hope... at the same moment that he fulfilled his old friend's final request.

Before that time he had not managed to find any sign of his old masters, nor of a way to breach the Veil. He did, however, encounter in his journeys many other servants of the lords of light who were similarly trapped. He created a network of such creatures, binding them by oaths similar to his own, that they would only possess those who willed it and would not knowingly bring mortals into danger. Their mission became to gather and keep all knowledge of the words and ways of their old masters, the Lost Gods, the lords of light. They became known as the Order of Truth.

Though *Ressial* gave *Benaedan* the greater share of glory in his tale, painting him as a strong and courageous protagonist to the last, Aradil believed that it was only the angel's presence in his father's mind that allowed him to resist Izrador's corruption. And that realization terrified her, for she felt within her two terribly strong forces: a need to avenge her father's death at Izrador's hands, and a certainty that should she ever confront the Shadow, she would be doing nothing more than offering herself up as a vessel and power source for the dark god. In order to advise her and temper her anger, she asked *Ressial* to bring as many of his brethren to her as he could find. Many had spread themselves throughout the world to assist in *Ressial's* mission, helping those who needed it and searching for signs of the Lost Gods. Few had the heart or will to preach their old masters' teachings, however, as none could give sign of their gods' powers. Instead, they worked quietly and consistently, with what powers remained to them, to keep hope alive on Aryth. Those who had wearied of their journeys came eagerly, and thus did the *Order of Truth* come to Caradul. In time that order would become peopled by beings of all races, not all of them possessed by the Trapped, though in those early years they were nearly all humanoids with an otherworldly aura and powers beyond those of mere mortals.

Together they began to prepare the elves for the war to come. Aradil walked a careful balancing act between tempering and training her people and allowing them to continue living the lives of grace and innocence that she so dearly wished to protect. Yet her brooding fury at Izrador's goals, at the destruction he had already wrought and would cause, continued to grow. And still she received the dreams from an unknown source, the visions of a war among great beings in the south. Once assured that the Council of the Throne knew only as much as they needed to, and that they would carry out her orders without question, she began to take longer and longer absences. In truth, she journeyed not to the north to investigate Izrador's realm, as is often assumed, but south. She went not out of fear of the dark god, but rather fear for her people. She knew that should she find the opportunity for vengeance, she would surely attempt it, and in so doing would lose herself to Izrador.

She never spoke of what she found or did on her journeys, though most assume that this is when she forged a pact with beings long thought gone from the world: the dragons. During that millennium, as the elves prepared for the foreseen war with Izrador and the unforeseen war with the Dorns loomed closer, Aradil left Eretor for entire seasons. This time of mystery and prolonged absences added to Aradil's reputation for intrigue and manipulation, and indeed this thousand-year effort honed her skills in those arts to perfection. She also subtly strengthened her own people and prepared them for war. When she dared, she used clairvoyance and scouting parties to explore the Northern Marches and the Highhorn Mountains, collecting what information she could about the growing threat and warning her fellow fey of its coming.



THE COMING OF MAN

When the Dorns came, she guided her people against them from afar, curious what this new player might mean in the greater tapestry of Eredane's history. When peace was finally made with them, she encouraged her people to be more gracious than bitter, for she knew that she had found a brave and powerful ally in the race of man. Whereas her people were gentle and long-lived, these creatures were violent and full of energy. Whereas her warriors would fight to the death to protect their homes, these expansionist folk would fight to the death to take new land. Her people and the dwarves, she knew, with the one in their forests and the other in their mountains, were as capable a shield as any general could wish. What they would need in their long-awaited war with the Shadow, and what they had been granted in the form of the Dorns, was a sword.

Aradil was grateful to the Dorns for having opened her people's eyes to the ways of war. The elves had been exposed to its necessities and patterns, had learned the balance between fighting and living, between killing one's foes while retaining one's value of mercy and life. And perhaps most importantly, they had shown the elves how a passionate warrior could defy all odds, could for the sake of pride and determination push himself to victory. She could now more directly order the training of troops and the forging of weapons, knowing that her orders would not destroy the elves' way of life. Part of the way she expressed that gratitude, as well as in order to further the Dorns' usefulness, was in encouraging their northward expansion.

Erenland had not always been a place of vast plains and open hills. Once, it was said that Eretor spread across the entire land, like a sea of forest surrounding the islands of the Highhorns and the Kaladrums. The Sundering destroyed much of it. Some became a rich prairie, brutal in the winter in the face of the cold winds coming down from the shattered north, but returned to life by the summer sun. Some was drowned in the Sea of Pelluria, while some withered and died as the rivers changed course in what became the plains of southern Erenland. But when the Dorns landed, much of Eretor still extended into what is now the Northlands and Westlands. Aradil knew that she could keep these lands for her own people, but she did nothing to slow the Dorns' peacetime advances to the north or to discourage them from settling where Cale, Nalford, Fallport, and even Bastion.

THE PLANTING OF THE SEED

Aradil hoped, above all, that the race of man might journey forth to destroy Izrador where she and her people could not. The idea seems laughable now, but had the Sarcosans not landed, had the cancer of the *Order of Betrayal* not spread throughout the human cities, perhaps these warriors would have become the champions of Eredane. Regardless, Aradil made two choices based on that hope. She gave up the eastern reaches of Erethor, what are now the western plains of northern and southern Erenland, to the Dorns. And she gave up herself to the forest.

Just as Aradil knew that she was not yet powerful enough to go forth and challenge Izrador, she also realized that she, like all elves, must eventually grow old and pass on. Yet she alone had learned the power of her mother and the elder seers, she alone had made pacts with the dragons of the south, she alone knew all the secrets of the *Order of Truth*. And she was growing old.

Ressial made the same offer to her that he had to her father: to become one with her, to empower her body with immortality. But she knew that the soul and mind of an angel could not govern the spirits and passions of a mortal race. And she knew, too, that her birth from the blood of Aryth was essential to her power; as wise and as mighty as *Ressial* was, he could not feel the pulses of Aryth's lifeblood as she did.

Yet she was determined to remain and defend her people, to keep what remained of her forest at all costs, to make it always a place of refuge and safety for her people. These motivations, along with the hope that the humans would go where she could not, were what caused Aradil and *Ressial* to seal themselves within the Elder Tree at sunset on one auspicious day. There they made a pact with the spirit of the *Elder Tree*. In exchange for the means to defend Erethor, to remain alive and powerful for as long as the threat of Izrador remained, Aradil forever tied her body and soul to that living arcane nexus, and *Ressial* gave up his own essence to allow that unification to happen. The Tree was the source, Aradil the vessel, and *Ressial* the bond that linked the two.

The Elder Tree had long been the most powerful of Aryth's nexuses, and its potency was central to elven magic and the bounty of Erethor. In the 4,000 years of her reign, Aradil had spent long hours in meditation within the Elder Tree's deepest chambers, and she had come to understand its intrinsic connection to the world around her. The radiant elf woman that finally emerged from the depths of the Elder Tree was undoubtedly the Witch Queen, but she had been forever changed by the pact that she'd made. Her strength now lay in the Elder Tree itself. In essence, she had become an avatar of the tree: timeless, ageless, and powerful beyond the reckoning of those who had once known her. Like the elemental world that surrounded her, Aradil's power had become primordial and ancient. She seemed to change with the seasons, even as the leaves of the forest turned golden in the autumn months and leapt back to life in the springtime. It is that creature, mortal but immortal, formed of pure magic and pure spirit, that today defends the elves and their home with her very will. She has in turn thwarted Zardrix's flames, Jahzir's pride, Ardherin's scheming, and Sunulael's zealotry. She alone might stand a hope of facing them in battle and winning, but the very thing that grants her power makes her vulnerable: Should she fall, so too will the Elder Tree, and so too will Erethor.

