

THE LADY OF CROWS

by Claudio Pozas

Artwork by Claudio Pozas



O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised; thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of men, and covered them all over with these two narrow words, "Hic jacet.".

- Sir Walter Raleigh

For all mortals, one certainty lies: death. So it is not a small irony that the god that personifies that inexorable end is one of the few ascended mortals of the world. Some call her The Uncaring Scythe. Others refer to her as Her Wintry Majesty, or the Veiled Crone. But all cultures recognize her beloved heralds, and acknowledge the god as The Lady of Crows.

The Lady's origins are a mystery, and one of her own doing, for her enemies are legion. But two facts are undeniable: she was once a mortal woman, and she since her ascension she has claimed some of the most powerful forces of existence as hers: Fate, Winter and Death. Although specifics may vary, there are enough common threads running through all of the Lady's myths that a common ground can be agreed upon by the various churches and sects that worship this god of death.

Her legend, it is said, began with a mother's quest.



THE RISE OF THE RAVEN

Several centuries ago, when humanity was establishing its first true kingdoms, a widowed wizard-queen - whose name has long since been forgotten - still felt the warmth of life, thanks to her beloved sons. But even back then, death's silent scythe spared no mortal, royal or not. Many were the wizard-queen's enemies, and mighty were they with their magic. The little princes simply vanished, disintegrated from existence.

The wizard-queen, a diviner of unparalleled power, failed at every attempt of determining the true fate of her sons. There was no magic that could bring back the joy of her life, and no oracular sight that could determine the location of their souls. The wizard-queen fell into despair, much to the lament of her loyal bodyguards. Yet even in despair, the wizard-queen's ability to pierce the Veil and see into tomorrow served her well. She knew the answer to her plight lay to the north, and to the north she went.

Leaving behind her throne and her realm, the wizard-queen began her journey north, bereft of titles, riches or

Unaligned Death

The origin of the Lady of Crows is meant to be a look at an Unaligned death god that abhors undead. If you wish to make the Lady a force of Evil, she can simply fall into madness during her long pilgrimage, and takes over Null's realm in a bid to bend death to her will.

Either way, she is a tragic figure, motivated by love and loss, differentiating her from the other immortal gods and for ambition-driven ascended mortals.

comforts. Her only companions were her four loyal bodyguards and her raven familiar, who served as a scout. In the dead of the night, the small band began its walk to the far ends of the world.

THE WANDERING RAVEN

Carrying no riches, the former queen could offer only her oracular powers in exchange for shelter and food. The cause of a child's disease, the best day to sow a crop, the name of a true love. All this the former queen revealed. And slowly, word of this wandering oracle spread through the countryside. A pale angel, they said, with hair as black as a the feathers of the raven that spoke to her.

In time, commoners began to follow her, in hope of an answer to some lingering doubt about their lives. More and more often, severely diseased people were brought before the pale woman, who could see that their only fate was death. But even to them, this certainty was a balm that brought peace to their final days.

The journey was by no means peaceful. Bandits, monsters and worse beings threatened travellers in those days, as they still do, and the pale woman's bodyguards, faithful and loving, laid down their lives in defense of their queen. One by one they met violent ends, but the pale woman granted them a boon. As their bodies perished, she encased their souls in the shape of crows, so they could continue serving them as they were sworn to do. And thus she began to be called the Lady of Crows.

Sometimes the Lady would meet a supplicant that was specially grateful. Of these she would ask something in return. She plucked a feather from one of her crows and asked that, at a specific time of a specific date, the supplicant would offer a prayer on her behalf. Such a small request it was, it was never denied. But the Lady of Crows had once again pierced the Veil, and although she did not

fully understand why, she knew there would be a time when she would need these prayers.

As the Lady of Crows walked on into the frozen north, fewer and fewer supplicants came to her. Yet she advanced, inexorable in her pace. The cold bothered her no longer, and the few hermits who spied her at a distance called her "wintertouched". Until there was a point where no one else existed but the Lady and her crows.

And so she walked, onward, towards the north, until the world ended. And then she walked beyond the world.

A REALM OF DEATH AND SORROW

The Lady of Crows, her senses sharpened by her long pilgrimage, reached a dark shore beyond the frozen north. This was the realm of the death god Null. A dark and terrible deity, who took pleasure not only in inflicting death, but in raising the dead as his own personal army of undead abominations. His very existence was like a black sun casting a pallor over the Astral Sea.

And yet here was the pale woman, determined to find the souls of her missing family. She sent her crows forth to bring her knowledge of this dark land. She coerced many a wight, spectre, shade and ghost to speak to her. Some she threatened with magic. Others, though, she convinced with the promise of release, of an end to the endless torment of unlife. And as it was in the world, so it was that she gained a following in the dark land.

No one could say how long the Lady of Crows rummaged through the plains of Null's realm. But it was long enough that she, a living being, attracted the attention of the dark reaper himself. He appeared before her in all his grisly majesty, tattered cloak covering a decaying corpse,



WORSHIP OF THE LADY

Worship of the Lady of Crows as a primary deity is rare, for she is a harsh mistress that demands a lot from her followers. Occasional prayers are far more common, when a loved one dies or is near death. In such occasions, the Lady is deaf to prayers of mercy, but is said to heed prayers of a safe passage through her realm and into the Astral Sea.

Those that do worship Her Wintry Majesty tend to gravitate into two camps: those that see life as hopeless, for death is the end of all; and those that face life fearlessly, knowing that death will ultimately bring a release from all the worries of the world. Neither outlook is more common, and if the shadowkin are any indication, the Lady tends to favor the second camp. Perhaps it warms her frozen heart with its zest for life.

Worshippers of the Lady of Crows tend to work close to death, but not as direct causers of it. They often become mourners or undertakers, preparing the deceased for the funeral rites, and counselors, who help the living cope with the loss of their loved ones. They strive to make death seem not like a great evil, but as a necessary part of existence.

Another venue that sees a fair share of devotees of the Lady is undead slaying. No other type of creature is so anathema to the Lady's tenets as these mockeries of death. Necromancers and their ilk get no quarter from the Lady's pale ravens (see below).

Omens of the Lady invariably involve the sighting of ravens, crows and other such birds, usually as spectators of meaningful events. When the Lady is displeased, these birds watch mortals march to their doom. If she shows favor, the birds lead mortals to the solution of a current or future predicament, such as leading lost travellers to a nearby shelter.

skeletal hand resting on a blood-soaked scythe. Yet even in this terrible presence, the Lady did not flinch. Ever a queen, she demanded the souls of her loved ones. Taken aback by this mortal's defiance, the dark god laughed. This was his realm, and he would suffer no mortal's petulant demands. He brought forth four undead, their faces filled with sorrow - the Lady's own bodyguards, who loved her above all things, were now mere shells for Null's power. They wielded scythes made of fragments from Null's own tool, and would cut down the Lady. But her mercy unto them ultimately saved her, for she sent the soul-crows to join their animated bodies. Thus were born the first sorrowsworn, and Null felt his power could be stolen away. Frightened for the first time in his long eons, the Dark Reaper joined battle in full, commanding his endless army of undead to cut down the interlopers. As they did in life, the sorrowsworn stood in defense of their queen, while she faced down death itself.

Mighty as she was, the Lady of Crows could not hold her own against a god, specially one as terrible as Null, amid an endless army of undead. But then the specific time of the specific day came. Throughout the world, raven feathers were held close to mortals' hearts, and loving prayers echoes from mortals' lips. And the Lady of Crows, once a mortal queen, struck down the death god. Gazing about, she saw thousand of ephemeral faces, bowing to her. With a wave of her hand, the undead army dissipated, and only the sorrowsworn remained, their souls bound to service of their queen.

Splintering her raven familiar into countless shades, the Lady of Crows searched the dreadful realm in search for signs of her sons' passage, but found no lingering trace of them. And so the Lady of Crows, newly crowned god of death, began her long pilgrimage again.

INTO SHADOW

The realm of the deceased god, as the Lady learned through her crows, was supposed to be a conduit, receiving

souls from the world and speeding them towards their resting places among the gods' realms. The souls, upon death, passed from the world into the Plane of Shadow, as a necessary transit before reaching Null's realm.

Unwilling to stay in the wretched realm of the former death god, the Lady followed the flow of souls back into the Shadowfell, to a region that echoed the northern reaches of the world. There, where the souls gathered, she set up a new realm, more to her liking, and sent her crows to search for news of her loved ones' location. Even as she did this, she began to wonder who it was she was looking for.

THE REIGNING RAVEN

Upon establishing her realm, the Lady of Crows once again pierced the Veil and saw that many forces would be tempted to best her, just as she did Null, specially the demon lord Orco. To prevent others from gaining unduly power over her, the Lady gathered all her power and, for the last time in her life, whispered her true name. With that, she erased that name from the memories of mortals, and hid it in a place she has since forgotten.

The Lady's ability to pierce the Veil and look into tomorrow was mighty when she was a mortal, and increased a hundredfold upon her ascension. So much so the gods of Moon and Magic called upon her to assume a role among the Fates, who recognize and make known the strands that weave the destinies of god and man. In time, the Lady's place among the Fates rose from one of neophyte to one of leadership, and the other gods recognized Fate as a part of the Lady's portfolio.

The location of the Lady's realm in the Shadowfell, so close to the mortal world's north end brought her close to the forces of winter. Ghaeles of the Feywild's Winter Court have long since recognized the Lady's sisterhood with ice and snow. Whether she can truly control winter or not, the fact remains that of all the gods, none stands closer to winter than the Lady of Crows.