

THE LADY OF CROWS

by Claudio Pozas

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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.

THE DREAD GAZEBOS

Throughout the land, devout worshippers of the Lady of Crows have donated to their faith. But instead of giving money to local temples of the Lady, they built countryside shrines to Her Wintry Majesty in places - so they claim - she visited during her mortal pilgrimage.

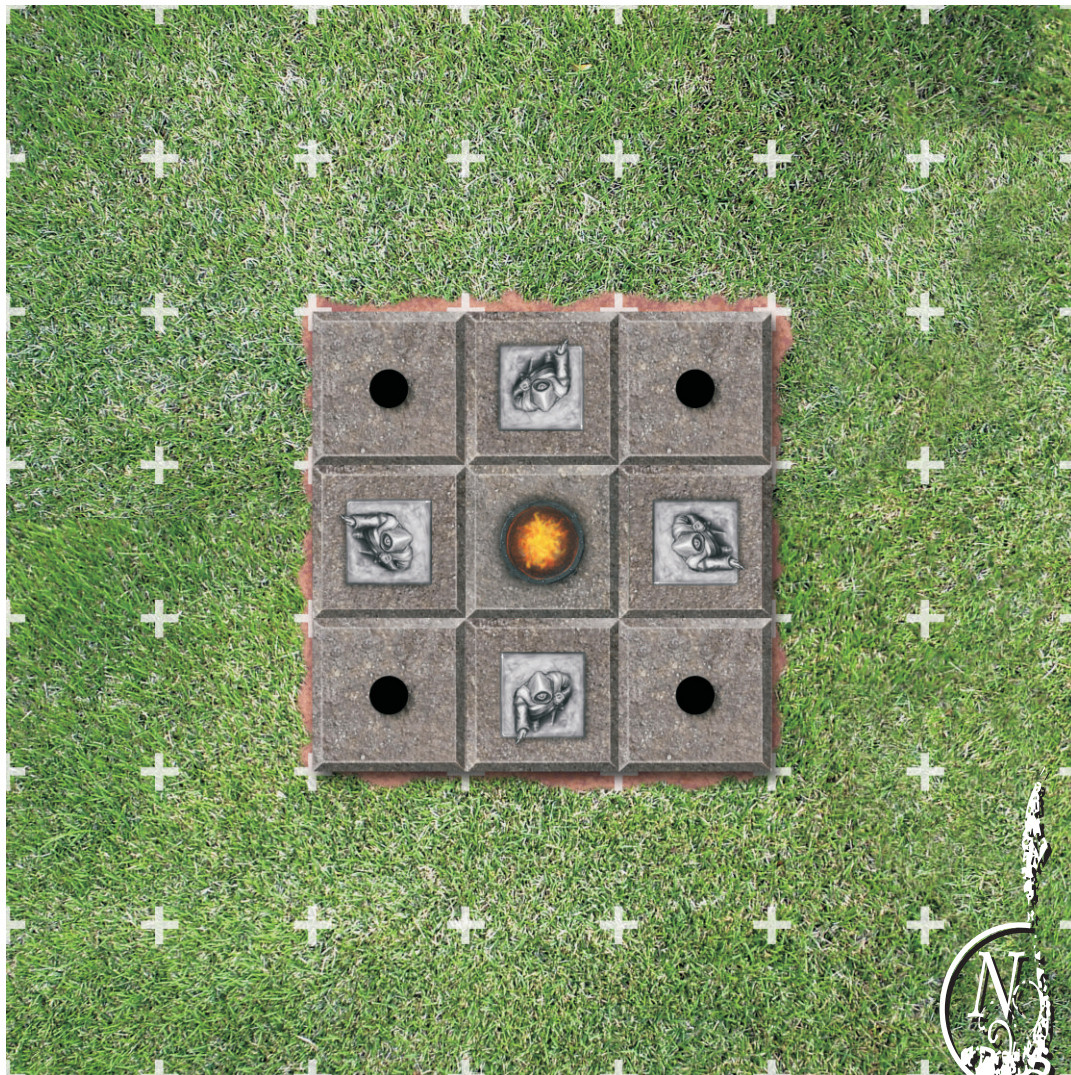
While the style of the shrines vary according to local customs, the basic structure is always the same: a square, four-pillared gazebo. Facing outward, four stern statues protect a magical brazier that sheds no warmth. These statues depict the four bodyguards that eventually would become the first of the sorrowsworn.

These structures, sometimes called “dread gazebos”, are often littered with offerings to the Lady. But the greatest offering one can give is faith, and it is said that a worshipper of the Lady may be granted a glimpse of his or her future, in exchange for a simple prayer.

Prophetic Boon

If a worshipper of the Lady of Crows stands adjacent to the central brazier and spends a standard action offering a prayer to the Lady, he or she may gain a prophetic boon: the next time that character rolls a d20, he or she may roll twice and choose either result.

The DM is the final arbiter if prophetic boons are available in his campaign, or if they are just products of superstition.



1 square = 5 feet

HER MAJESTY'S SUBJECTS

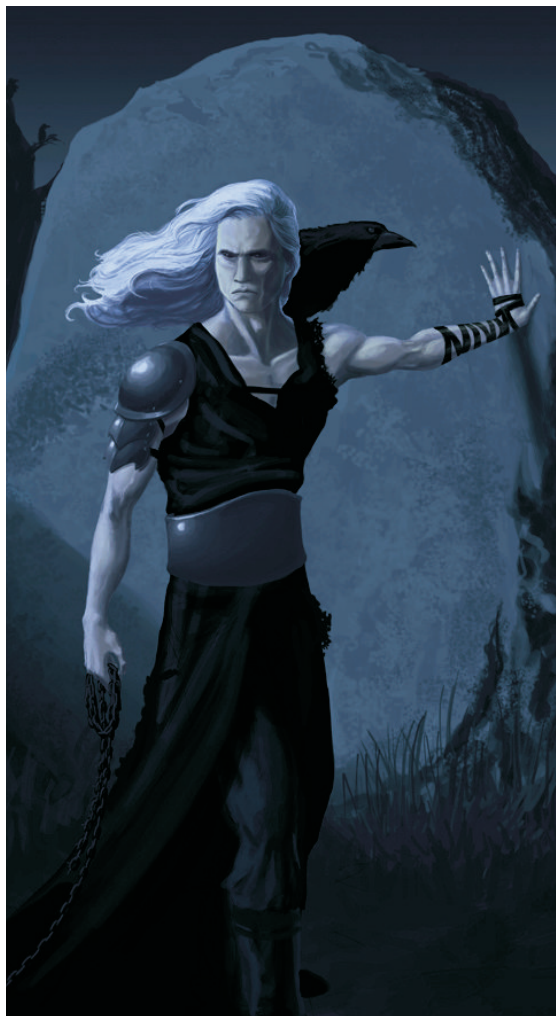
While divine characters have several ways of showing devotion to the Uncaring Scythe, others have to take a subtler path to honor the Lady.

Martial characters, specially rogues, seek a communion with the Lady's winter aspect (through the Wintertouched and Lasting Frost feats). It is the least esoteric of the Lady's aspects, and one that appeals to characters grounded in the mortal world. Fighters devoted to the Lady often wield large scythes (use the same statistics as a glaive). Rangers devoted to the Lady tend to be beastmasters, taking ravens or crows as their raptor companions. A small sect, though, takes wolf companions, which are invariably white and resemble winter wolves.

Arcane characters devoted to the Lady often take the Arcane Familiar feat and choose a raven as their familiar. Unlike most masters, these arcane characters feel strangely disconnected of their ravens, as if they were a part of someone else's soul, and not their own. Warlocks can emulate a devotion to the Lady through the fey pact. Instead of faerie lights and glamers, their spells take more somber aspects, such as ghostly apparitions, shadow ravens and the like. When such a warlock teleports, his form explodes into a multitude of raven shades that coalesce back in a different location. Swordmages often wield scythes, just like fighters. Regardless of how they do it, arcane characters often worship the Lady's fate aspect, usually alongside the deities of Moon and Magic.

Primal characters tend to focus on the Lady's winter and death aspects, seeing them as a part of the four stages of the year's cycle. They most often take cold-based invocations, with barbarians and druids channeling the winter wolf.





Most races revere the Lady of Crows in her commonly accepted guise, that of an ascended mortal woman. Usually, the Lady's perceived race changes to match the race that tells the tale, but a few exceptions exist.

Tieflings depict the Lady of Crows as a human, since the legend hails from a time before the tainting of the Tanarathi nobility. Some modern depictions of the Lady have adopted a tiefling's appearance, but these are met with disapproval of most tieflings.

Dragonborn legend claims that the Lady was not a widowed human, but actually a dragon lady trapped in human form by Tiamat, and that she undertook her pilgrimage to retrieve her unhatched eggs. According to dragonborn tradition, the Lady is depicted as a black-scaled dragonborn woman with feathered wings, akin to those of a black couatl.

Revenants don't have a specific rite, hailing from all walks of life (or rather, death), but they do merit special mention. Their mask-like features bear a striking resemblance to the human depictions of the Lady of Crows. Some whisper that the Lady created revenants to take the place of the sons taken from her.

Most of the savage humanoid races, including orcs, hags, ogres, goblins, harpies and trolls, depict the Lady in her Veiled Crone aspect, an elderly woman of prodigious height, veiled eyes and large raven wings, accompanied by four crows. The Veiled Crone is featured in most legends discussing and bickering vigorously with an elderly man accompanied by seven canaries.

Despite claims that the iconography of the Lady features skulls and bones inherited from Null's worship, the truth is that the Lady favors depictions of somber cloaked spirits instead of rotting and skeletal corpses, which she finds distasteful. These skeletal features are now associated

much more strongly with the worship of Orco, demon lord of the undead, and the Maimed Lord, lich-god of magic and secrets.

***Claudio Pozas** lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with his wife Paula, son Daniel and their pet dire tiger Tyler. Curiously, South America is entirely devoid of ravens and crows.*

