

Teen Writing Contest

Of Patron Gods and Saints

"It doesn't matter what story we're telling, we're telling the story of family."

- Erica Lorraine Scheidt

Ω

There are patron gods and saints for almost anything – that is a truth as old as the world, as real as the sun and moon in the sky.

Gods, saints, icons, idols. Some for love, some for suffering, some for solace. Some of perseverance, some of justice, some of death and war and sickness. Just as they live in the hearts that believe in them, they live in the sky or beneath the ground, existing to fulfill their purposes.

In a palace of onyx and ebony, in a spirit realm with ties to our world, resides one of the most powerful elder gods to *ever* exist. There are statues frozen in pain in all the corridors, and grotesques adorn the exterior of the palace that almost no-one ever sees. On a throne as solid and intricately carved as its occupant sits Phantom, god of the Wastelands.

Long black hair painstakingly braided in the style of the warriors who model themselves after him, blazing ruby eyes that hold no mercy or empathy, and a sheathed sword that can cut through souls – such is the appearance of Phantom, god of the Wastelands, patron of the Rogues. As the one they pray to concerning matters of war and assassination, his appearance is as fitting as his mandate.

All alone in a home built on lies and lives, he waits until the bloodthirsty or his Rogues call upon him. He is the one who blesses those that wish harm on others, who influences the weak and guides the powerful, and who takes care of the dirty work his brethren find too repulsive. There are patron gods and saints for almost anything – including the dark side of human nature. Someone has to do it.

So it is, and so it has been, for untold millennia. So it is, until one fateful prayer.

Ω

Phantom is lounging on his throne, busying himself by polishing his treasured knives.

The visit from Laverne, patron goddess of the warrior-healers, has left him bitter and *angry*. 'Tis never a good thing, when he gets like this, so he sets tasks for himself. Distractions to centre him, so he does not lose that carefully cultivated control. He is needed, after all, and he cannot afford to incapacitate

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himself. That, more than anything, is what keeps him going. He is needed, after all.

Just as he sheathes the last knife in his worn leather boot, a sudden burst of pain explodes from his chest. Phantom does not gasp, or double over, even as the pain spreads to his every limb. The pain is as familiar as his sword and his mandate. He is needed, and he has never shirked his duty.

The main altar is in a room adjoining the throne room, a vast chamber with a dais of bone and metal and stone. While most of the gods he knows use their altars for offerings, Phantom has also always used his as a conduit for prayers. There are many kinds of prayers; some deliberate, some conniving and accompanied by rich sacrifices, and some that are instinctive.

Those he prefers the most, for they are sincere and visceral the way most of his adherents are not. This time, however, is different – this he knows as soon as he steps into the room. There is no rare offering or sacrifice on the altar, nor words echoing with conviction and hate and bloodthirstiness. No. There is none of that. Only the desperate plea...of a child?

Phantom knows children, children exploited by war and horrible circumstances, or even nature. This little girl and her prayer is anything but them.

"Please," she begs, voice tiny and terrified and yet so *resilient*. *"It hurts..."*

At first, Phantom can do nothing but stand, dumfounded. Is this the case of a mistaken prayer? It must be. He does not deal with hurt children; he is not his sisters and brothers.

Yet, as the keening sounds of a little girl travel through his being, Phantom decides to be reckless. The girl is entreating the wrong person – but he is the one who has heard her. He *must* do something. No-one needs his help right now, except the girl who has now given up on words. That's okay – he prefers raw feelings anyway.

Phantom, bracing against the pain, clutches his sword and *focuses*. Soon, he is but dust and air, and alights at a beautiful home. It reminds him too much of his own palace, and as such he does not bother asking why the prayer comes from someone clearly well-off.

In front of him is the little girl whose voice he's heard, curled up in a corner of an opulent room. He notes her puffy eyes, the bruises on her wrist, and the lesions on her soul. Phantom has never done this before, does not know the protocol; every-one else knows exactly who they are summoning. For lack of a better thing to do, he alights on the ground and materializes, gauging her reaction so he knows how to proceed.

He expects many reactions, from anger to disgust to distrust – "I was not asking for *you!*" – but he does not receive that. Instead, the child spots him, eyes

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widening. Pushing against the wall, she straightens, and blinks at him. The scrutiny, so different than any he has experienced before, lasts eons.

“What...are you...doing here?” she sniffs, looking as perplexed as he feels.

“I am here through your summons,” he speaks, trying gentle. He does not think he pulls it off. The child continues her confused blinking.

Realization slowly dawns at the lack of recriminations. The child was not expecting *anyone*; she had not been praying to him, or to anyone else. The Laws are clear, in such situations. As his services are not required, he can leave and never look back. ‘Tis what his brethren would do.

Phantom is not his brethren, as Laverne had just made clear. He does not leave. Instead, he crouches, and asks permission to hold her wrist. The bruises fade. She is still hurting in her soul; Phantom, used to wars and battlegrounds, draws on his experience with wounded soldiers.

Thus he begins to spin a story. At first, he worries it is too harsh and cruel for such a child to take comfort in, but he draws conviction and strength from her now-eager eyes and the softening of her face. By the first story’s end, she has bridged the gap between them, and is snuggling by his side. Phantom only leaves when he senses the approach of an adult.

“Do not hesitate to call upon me,” he says softly before disappearing. What a stupid thing to say, he tells himself later. He is on his throne again. “Why would she call upon a god such as me?” Phantom merely hopes that he was able to bring a tiny bit of solace to that hurting little girl.

It should be the end of that. The girl never prays to him again, and he attends his own acolytes. Warmongering is a lucrative business in the land of men and women right now, and so Phantom is kept busy.

That is, until he is called by another such innocent child – a boy trying to protect his younger siblings. There is no hesitation this time. Using his powers of deception, he hides the three children from sight until their monster of a guardian tires, and only departs when one of his Rogues pray to him.

After that particular incident, the kinds of children he has no dealings in continue to pray to him; unlike that first little girl, it is deliberate. *They want him*. Phantom still has no idea what to do, but he tries his best. He hides children, tells them stories, heals their physical wounds. The talkative ones, he listens to them. When an adult is particularly hurtful or violent, he hurts them the way he always has (the only difference being no-one asks him to. It makes such things bearable, he realizes). He always responds to their calls.

It takes quite a bit of time for him to realize that he has a new mandate. Not one that he chose under duress, not one dictated by the Laws. A mandate that comes from the children who call upon *him*. He has no regrets.

Unbeknownst to him, there is a folk tale – powerful stuff, them – that hurt children tell each other.

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“There is a god out there who always responds, who listens, who helps, who cares for you, should you pray to him. There is someone who gives you a family, a parent, when you have none.”

Slowly but surely, Phantom becomes not only the god of the Wastelands. He is the patron god of lost children who become found. But that is another story altogether.