

Lawson Meets Compassion and Grief

By Seraphina Maurer

The first time that he really noticed them it was at the scene of a multi-car pileup where an off-duty officer heading home in his cruiser had been trapped between a van and a semi in the wreckage and had died on scene. Lawson had been just a regular uni back then and saw them standing with a pair of EMTs. One of the EMTs was strapping a little girl into a stretcher and making sure that she was comfortable, and the other was taking a spare minute to sit down and catch her breath with her head held in her hands. Just behind the EMT securing the child was a woman in a pink dress smiling down at the little girl with a warmth that radiated out of her. Both the little girl and the EMT ignored her even when she reached out and ran a gentle hand through the back of the EMT's hair and gave him a kiss to the temple before fading into the crowd, reaching out and gently touching people on the arms and shoulders as she went.

When he looked to the other EMT between one blink and the next there was a woman in a long black dress, her hair pinned up and hidden under a small cap with a veil like you would see at a funeral. The EMT had crumpled forward over her knees and was crying into her hands, and the woman shushed her quietly, wrapping her into a hug and just sitting with her as she broke down. The woman whispered something to the EMT and Lawson could see her shoulders slump in relief, her tears slowly starting to calm. He took a worried step towards the EMT and the veiled woman's head snapped up and their eyes met for one long moment. He felt some vertigo and had to catch himself so that he didn't fall, and between one blink and the next the veiled woman had disappeared. The strange occurrence didn't seem like much to him at the time, especially with such a large crime scene to help canvas, and Lawson shook his head and let it slide.

The second time that Lawson saw them was when he had been promoted and was working with Homicide. There had been a domestic violence complaint called in, and since Lawson and his partner were the closest car in the area they had arrived at the house just in time to hear a gunshot. He had rushed in to see the wife standing with her children huddled behind her and the husband on the ground looking spitting mad with a hole blown in his thigh. It had taken a bit of time to calm the wife down enough that she gave up the gun to Lawson's partner while Lawson cuffed the husband and had him turned over to the EMTs.

When the husband started to spout obscenities at his wife Lawson stepped in, blocking the man's view of his wife with his frame. "Sir!" When the man continued to scream Lawson put his face down next to the man and dropped his tone, growling with barely restrained anger as he said, "Sir if you do not shut your mouth this instant I will have one of these nice EMTs sedate you. Do you-" when the husband raised his voice and tried to shout over him Lawson gripped the edge of the stretcher he was on and shook it, making sure that it jarred his injured leg and turned his swearing into a moan of pain. "You listen to me you worthless excuse for a human being, you will not speak to your wife like that ever again. Do you understand me?" The man opened his mouth to swear at Lawson but stopped short when he saw how much he had pissed off the officer looming over him.

“Do you understand me?” Lawson snarled. The man shut his mouth, anger contorting his face into one of defiance. When Lawson turned to look to see the wife and children looking at him from where they were speaking with Elain he could see the woman in the pink dress standing just behind Elain, and the woman in black standing just behind the wife with a gentle hand on her shoulder. It caught him off guard for a moment because he knew that neither of those women worked with Elain or the Social Works office.

It was just then that the husband decided to deck Lawson with a snarled, “You don’t get to tell me how to speak to my wife!”

Lawson held his jaw, tasting blood in his mouth and on his lip where the man’s wedding ring had split the skin there. The officer chuckled darkly and slapped a pair of cuffs on the husband, securing him to the stretcher with a bloody smile. “Oh I’m so glad you did that. Thank you for giving me an excuse to arrest you.”

“For what?” the husband barked.

Lawson leaned in and smiled, “Assaulting an officer in front of multiple witnesses.” He took a small bit of satisfaction in the way the man’s face paled as he read him his Miranda Rights and had him transported to the hospital so they could get a better look at his leg. The backup that had arrived followed after the husband to secure him at the hospital while his partner took pictures of his face and evidence samples for the assault charges to follow after him.

When Lawson finally got a chance to look over at Elain again the family was back inside the house packing up overnight bags and preparing to be moved into one of the local women’s shelters, leaving Elain alone. “Hey Elain,” Lawson called out to the social worker and she looked up from where she had been typing on her laptop.

“Hey what?” She responded.

“Who were those two women that were with you?” he asked.

Elain took her laptop with her and set it on the cruiser’s hood, touching Lawson’s chin and turning his head back and forth with a puzzled expression, “Pretty boy, you musta got hit harder than those EMTs thought. I’m the only one here from my office.” Lawson frowned in confusion and Elain gently patted his uninjured cheek, “Get yourself checked for a concussion officer.”

Lawson laughed to cover up his confusion and joked, “Yeah, I will. I musta just been seein’ double. You take care of them, Elain.”

The social worker gave him a smile and gently patted his shoulder, “Always do.”

His partner, a stout black matriarch with almost more years in the force than Lawson had been alive looked up at him with worry from where she was bagging evidence. “Once the CSI clear out the house we’ll get you over to the ER to get that concussion looked at.”

“Yeah,” Lawson agreed quietly, puzzling over it in his mind. Maybe he had just imagined the women in the pink and black dresses. “Yeah, he musta hit me harder than I thought.”

“That’s what we’re saying,” Officer Makeda Jones shook her head and gave him a worried smile, “You okay Gray?”

Lawson gave her a tired smile, “I just got to arrest a wife beater for a charge that will definitely stick, I’m doing great. What? You think the blood on my teeth doesn’t make me look more handsome? Jones, I’m hurt.”

“Gray, you Irish guys are a special batch of reckless,” Makeda joked as she put up the evidence bags. “Stay here and don’t wander off while I check on the CSIs.”

“Ma’am, yes Ma’am.” Lawson smiled at her and relaxed back on the cruiser, the feeling of contentment after a collar battling with his sense of worry over his hallucination. Later on Lawson would be diagnosed with a very mild concussion and sent home to recover.

The third time Lawson saw them he only saw the woman in the black veil. There had been a robbery and shooting downtown in the suburbs and he and Makeda had been called to the scene as backup. The shooting had claimed a young neighborhood kid who had been alone at home while his Ma worked a double shift. The woman was standing at the edge of the police tape amidst a group of grieving neighborhood kids who were crying at the loss of their friend. It was hard not to spot her, her pale skin and mourning clothes in stark contrast to the street clothes and darker complexions.

He kept looking back at her while he worked helping to secure the scene, unable to stare and reassure himself that she wasn’t an illusion. After nearly an hour of this the kids had started to disperse through the crowd, looking much calmer than they were at the start of the evening. When they were all gone she remained and turned to look directly at him while he was staring at her.

It was the first time that Lawson had ever really gotten a good look at her, and something was definitely off. Her skin was too pale to be real, her veins showing in stark relief underneath the streetlights, and her clothes weren’t normal mourning clothes and seemed too old to be from anything but the Victorian era. Sure, she could just be gothic and into wearing Victorian clothes, but there was just something wrong about her that Lawson couldn’t put his finger on. The more he stared at her the easier it was to pick out oddities about the woman. Her eyes were so dark that there was no separation between her pupil and her irises, and her hair kept seeming to move, like some living thing was moving around in her updo. After a few more moments of staring something seemed to click and Lawson froze at the force of his realization.

She was a spirit, or a supernatural thing, like the stories about the little people that his Ma used to tell him before bed.

He was staring at a real life myth.

Lawson had heard rumors about strange things in the city, and lord only knew he had seen some police reports where there were things that just couldn’t be explained by normal means. The brass had always just swept aside any concerns from the officers, but his Ma had raised him to know better. Violet might be Catholic but she had always been able to see things that other people couldn’t, and she had been honest with her son about that since he was a little boy.

He just never thought he had inherited her gift.

The woman in the mourning dress turned and looked directly at him and everything slowed down until Lawson could no longer hear the chatter of the police radio and the neighbors. Until every person had stopped moving, and the only things that were real were him... and her.

She gracefully lifted up the police tape and advanced towards him, her features softening and becoming more human-like as she advanced. Her skin filled out until it was no longer translucent, the things moving in her hair slowly grew still, and when she looked up at him Lawson could now see a separation between her irises and her pupils, a subtle difference between black and something even darker.

“So you can see me,” she stated. The woman smiled at him and it was a tired little upturn of her lips, something around her eyes crinkling with understanding at his visible fear. Those eyes were going to haunt him in his dreams, he just knew it. There was something about them, as if they had seen too much of the world’s hurt to ever be contained, and as he watched he could see the beginning of tears pooling in them.

“Who are you?” Lawson asked, forcing himself to stand up straight and look her in the eye, trying to ignore the thundering beating of his heart against his ribcage.

“I told Compassion that you saw me,” she laughed, but it was a sad and bitter thing that belonged more at a funeral than in casual conversation.

“Who are you?” Lawson repeated, watching as she lifted up a hand and reached up towards his chest. “Lady-”

“Shhh,” she soothed him, “I’m not going to hurt you.” Lawson froze as she placed her hand right above his heart. Her hands were icy cold even through his bulletproof vest and he couldn’t help gasping as the chill seeped into his veins and spread across his skin.

“Oh. Oh my,” the goddess blinked a few times and Lawson could see her begin to cry, tears slowly spilling down her cheeks as that icy feeling spread across his chest. He was overwhelmed with memories and sensations of times where he had felt sad, times he had spent silently crying late at night, and when he had been overwhelmed with the emotional ache that his job sometimes brought him late at night when his only companion after a hard day on the job was a glass of scotch.

Lawson could feel his own tears welling up as the emotions that these memories contained flooded through him again. “Oh you poor dear,” the goddess removed her hand from his chest and gently wiped away his tears even as she continued to cry. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for that to be so unpleasant. If I had realized you had so much sadness hiding inside of you I would have waited for a time Compassion was with me.”

Her hands began to warm against Lawson’s cheeks and his tears dried up as those crippling emotions began to fade. When he looked down into her eyes he could see the barest shimmer of purple in her irises that had not been there before. “Who are you?”

She smiled again and this time there was something mischievous in her eyes, “If I tell you that takes away half of the fun of the surprise you’ll feel when you figure it out. So, how about you guess? I’ve already told you my sister’s name-”

“The woman in the pink dress.”

The goddess laughed lightly, “Yes, the woman in the pink dress is my sister, Compassion. Now let’s see if you can figure out my name.” Lawson opened up his mouth to guess and she placed a gentle finger on his lips, “Shh, not right now. I have to be going, and I want you to think about this instead of just guessing names until I respond to one. If you can figure out my name, I’ll see if I can give you a boon in reward for being so clever.”

“Does this mean that I’ll be seeing you more often from now on?” Lawson asked when she removed her finger.

She smiled and there was that same tiredness to it as before, and Lawson felt a relaxing coolness as she gently stroked his cheek, “Oh my dear Lawson Gray, I have a feeling we are going to be seeing quite a bit of each other.”

“Wait- How did you know my name- Hey!” Lawson called after her as she pulled away and walked underneath the police tape once more, disappearing into the crowd as the world exploded with noise as time began to move again.

“Lawson! Quit daydreamin’, I need you inside for a second.” Makeda called from the front porch of the old railroad house.

“Yeah. Sorry. I’m comin’...” He took another second to look back at the empty streets where the mourning woman had been just a second before then turned back and went to work.

When they finished processing the crime scene both officers headed back to the downtown district to fill out paperwork. Since they hadn’t been lead on this case they didn’t have any additional interviews to process so once they were done with their paperwork for the evening the two officers would be able to head home.

The only problem was that Lawson’s mind kept wandering to the mourning woman, his mind aching to solve her puzzle. Eventually Makeda sighed and put down her pen and demanded, “Gray if you don’t spit it out I will make you go put on your boxing gloves and work it out in the gym. You’ve been distracted since you were on crowd duty.”

“It’s nothin’,” Lawson insisted, copying down another bit of information from an evidence bag onto the paperwork in front of him. There was a bit of silence while Makeda stared him down, using the exact look he had seen her use on her own kids when they didn’t want to tell her something. He looked up to meet her gaze and she raised her eyebrows insistently. He sighed in defeat and put down his pen, leaning over his desk and lowering his voice as he asked, “What do you think about some of the, uh, weird supernatural stories some of the other officers tell about the city? Like disappearing people, goblins, and-”

“You mean the tall tales the boys tell in the locker rooms late at night?” Makeda asked skeptically.

“No,” Lawson insisted, “Not that tall tale crap we all know the old guys are lying about.”

“As opposed to...?” Makeda waited but Lawson just sighed.

“Forget it,” he insisted.

“Well it’s gonna be pretty hard to if I have to watch my partner do the silent brooding nonsense because he can’t stop thinking about it, so you might as well just spit it out.” She stared him down again, less chastising this time and more genuinely interested. “Come on, what weird shit have you been noticin’ that’s buggin’ you?”

Lawson clenched his jaw in thought, staring Makeda down until he was sure that he wanted to admit to what he’d been seeing. “You gotta promise you’re not going to turn me over for a psych eval just because I saw some weird shit.”

Makeda rolled her eyes then fixed them on Lawson reproachfully, “Gray, it’s Crossroads. Every other person here has some sort of weird story, the trick is sortin’ out the actual weird shit and when people are just hallucinatin’ or don’t understand what they’re seein’. So just go on and tell me what happened that has you so spooked.”

“Okay,” he sighed, “I’ve been seeing these two ladies lately. One’s this brunette with her hair in a braid wearing a pink dress, the other one has black hair and wears like some sort of Victorian mourning dress. The brunette is always in pink but the dresses have been different every time, and the raven haired one always has a veil in her hair - like the ones you see at funerals, not the kind that brides wear. First time I saw them was at the wreck that killed McCroy a few years ago. I saw them hovering around some EMTs and didn’t think about it at the time. Then, I saw them a few months ago when I got that concussion.”

“But you were fine the first time you saw them? No concussion or anything?” Makeda asked with intent, her dark eyes pouring over Lawson.

“No, nothin’. I was perfectly fine. They just looked like normal people. The mourning girl was hugging an EMT that was crying, and the pink girl was watching over an EMT loading a little girl into an ambulance.”

Lawson waited for Makeda to absorb this information then motion for him to go on, “Okay.”

“The second time I saw them it was the night I got the concussion. The pink one was just standing behind Elain while she was talking with the family, and the mourning one was standing behind the wife. I think she was rubbing her back while Elain interviewed her.”

“Then they disappeared again?”

“Yeah, I didn’t even see them walk away. One instant they were there and the next they were gone. I didn’t think anything about it until-” Lawson started, holding his hands up incredulously.

“Until Elain said no one had come with her,” Makeda finished.

“Exactly!” Lawson sat back in his chair and sighed.

Makeda leaned forward a little bit and asked, “But that was months ago, why are you just thinking about this now? Did you see them again?”

“Yeah, tonight when I was on crowd duty. It was only the one in the mourning dress this time, the pink one wasn’t there, and she was standin’ in the middle of the neighborhood kids - stuck out like a sore thumb.” Lawson rubbed tiredly at his face, his stubble scratching at his hand. “I watched her standing in the middle of all these kids for over an hour, she didn’t move, or say anything, and all of the other kids were ignoring her even though they made a space for her right up against the tape. When all the neighborhood kids left she was still just standing there looking at the house, and there was something... off about her this time Jones.”

“Like how?” Makeda frowned a little, her chin resting on her hand as she gave Lawson her full attention.

“Okay, so you know how albino people have really translucent skin?”

“Yeah. Where you can kinda see their veins?”

“Yeah, her skin was like that but it was worse. You could see all of her veins on the back of her hands and up her neck and even in her face. I couldn’t see any difference between her pupils and her, what’s it called, her iris, and, this was the really weird part... her hair was moving.”

“Moving?” Makeda asked, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

Lawson nodded, his nose wrinkling in a similar fashion. “Yeah, I kept seeing like these long fuzzy legs wiggling and stretching in her hair.”

“How long?” Lawson held up his fingers with about two inches of space between them and Makeda let out a loud noise of disgust. “That ain’t right. Well, what was she doing there?”

He shrugged, “Hell if I know. She didn’t talk to anyone like she’d done before, but this time she saw me.”

Makeda sat back in her chair, fiddling with a pen in her hand as she asked, “What she didn’t see you before?”

“No,” Lawson shook his head, “they never even looked at me any of the other times.”

“Well, what did you do?”

“She looked over at me, and it was like time completely stopped.” Lawson whistled and made a cutting motion with his hand to emphasize this point. “All the noises from people, electronics, traffic... everything stopped. Everyone was frozen in place except for me and her.” Makeda stopped fiddling with her pen, watching Lawson closely. “She looked me straight in the face and said, ‘So you can see me’. I asked her who she was and she ignored me, just repeated herself, said that ‘she told Compassion that I could see her’.”

“Did she say who Compassion is?” Makeda asked, already leaning forward in her chair and typing on her laptop to run a search.

“I asked her if that was the brunette in the pink dress and she said that was her sister, Compassion.” Lawson tried to lean over so he could see what Makeda was pulling up on her search only to be shooed away.

“What else did she say?”

“She told me not to be afraid of her, and she did this trick where she started to look more human. The stuff in her hair stopped moving and her skin took on more color as she approached me... then she, uh, she touched me.” Lawson gave Makeda a reproachful look when she raised an eyebrow at him. “Not like that! She put her hand on my chest right over my heart, and it felt like her hand was full of ice just reaching underneath my skin and riffin’ through my memories. I was seeing and rememberin’ stuff I hadn’t thought about in years.”

Makeda paused in her typing and clicking to look up at Lawson over the back of her laptop, “What kinds of memories?” Lawson went quiet, embarrassment coming over him as he scratched the back of his head. His partner wasn’t intent on letting him off of the hook that easily though, “What kinds of memories, Gray? You brought this up, remember?”

“I know, it’s just... embarrassin’.” Lawson rubbed at his temple, lowering his voice even more to avoid being overheard by a passing sergeant. “She made me remember when I was sad, times I’d cried, funerals I’d gone to, rough days on the job...”

Makeda’s face softened with sympathy, “That’s rough.”

“Yeah...” he sighed and had to take a moment to clear his throat fighting off the urge to cry that he’d felt since the mourning woman had left. “She apologized for it though, and said she should have approached me when Compassion was around, she seemed to think that would have helped with the situation somehow.”

“Well, if she lives up to her name I guess it would have helped. I mean, what else would you want when you’re feeling bad than someone to be compassionate to you?”

“That makes sense.” Lawson sat back in his seat and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. Silence fell between the two partners as Makeda kept up her internet searches and Lawson mulled over the evening. “...She wouldn’t tell me her name.”

“She wouldn’t?”

“Nah, she said she wanted me to guess. She said if I guessed right she’d give me a ‘boon’ or something like that.”

Makeda clicked her mouse a few times, closing out her internet searches and pulling back out her evidence bags so they could finish up their paperwork. “This sounds more like somethin’ you should talk to your mama about.”

“You think so?”

Makeda gave Lawson a deadpan look, her face just asking him to realize how stupid of a question that was. “Your mama still leaves milk out in a saucer for the ‘brownies’ that live in your house. If anyone’s gonna know about some weird mourning lady it’s her. Besides, I wasn’t pulling up much on the internet. You’ll probably be able to find something though, you’re better at all this technology crap than I am.”

“That’s true.” Lawson gave her a shit-eating grin at his teasing, to which Makeda responded by throwing a balled up piece of notebook paper at his face.

“The only reason I didn’t throw somethin’ heavier is cause I know if I fuck up your face I’d never hear the end of it. Now let’s finish up this evidence logging. The sooner we get done the sooner I can get back to my kids, and you can go bug your mama for information.”

“Yup,” Lawson pulled back out his evidence box and they both reverted to companionable silence as they worked. It took them another hour or so to finish up and then the pair made their way out to the parking lot together.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Jones. Say hello to the kids for me.” Lawson waved as he headed down the far side of the lot towards his car, noting his partner’s yell of agreement and wave in response before she got into her station wagon.

It didn’t take long for Lawson to drive from the downtown station office to The Friendly Avenue Diner where his Ma had worked since he was a kid. Sure, she’d normally worked at least two jobs at once, but her job with the diner had always been constant. He’d practically lived in that diner when he was a kid, sitting in the back out of the way and filling up salt and pepper shakers and rolling silverware into napkins with the bussers when he’d finished his homework. It wasn’t until middle school that he’d been allowed to stay at home by himself unsupervised.

The diner was the same as always, on the outside it was a humble building with large windows out front and a small overhang over the door to shield people from the rain on their way out, and featured a bulletin board with a sign that read, “If you are homeless and hungry, come in for coffee and free sandwich with a side” above advertisements for local businesses and community events. Just through the windows you could see the wicker chairs at the tables in back, the old wooden tables and booths from when the diner first opened, and the old oak bar with the glass display cases showing off the pastries and desserts to tempt the diners into eating just a little bit more than they had originally planned. Lawson held a finger up to his lips when Lenore spotted him, dropping down so that he could sneak inside and into a seat while his Ma had her back turned on the bar seating, yelling an order through the window. The order was most likely for the tired mid-shifters coming off of work seated in the back left table they always took before dragging themselves home on Thursday night.

Lawson pulled up one of the plastic covered menus and tried to hide his face to keep the illusion for a little longer, but before he could even attempt to disguise his voice his Ma turned around with that knowing sigh and placed a coffee cup in front of him and poured it full of decaf, "If you think ah'm goin' to give yeh full caff when yeh just got off work, at this time of night, yeh have another thing comin'."

He put down the menu down with a laugh, "You're not even gonna let me try to fool you?"

Violet put the coffee pot back on the burner and turned back around to watch Lawson, her eyes ringed with those tired bags she always carried around but still sparkling with love and good natured mischief. "I saw yer reflection in this," she pointed back up towards the shiny metal strip that hung in the window to the kitchen which held the slips of paper holding people's orders.

"Really? I thought it was the eye in the back of your head." Lawson smiled gently at his Ma, relaxing when she returned it with a smile of her own.

"No, ah'm too tired to keep that one cracked open. It closed a few hours ago, didn't it Lenore?" Violet turned to the goth college student that had started to work at the diner a few months ago.

"It did, she didn't even call me out on giving Gale a cigarette until he tried to sneak out for a smoke break." Lawson and Violet both fixed Lenore with a disapproving look, "What? Don't look at me like that, he turned eighteen last month. He's legally allowed to ruin his lungs if he wants to! Besides, his parents have been fighting again, give the kid a break." Lenore fixed Lawson with a 'so there' look before disappearing to go back into the kitchen to change out the sanitizer water.

Violet shook her head in disagreement with Lenore before turning back to Lawson with a tired sigh, "I know yer not here to pick me up, I still have a few more hours on the clock. So what's up? Is this about that shootin' on Magnolia? I saw yeh working the crowd, yeh looked troubled."

Lawson pulled the steaming mug of coffee in front of him and wrapped his hands around it, welcoming the warmth that it brought into his still chilly extremities, "You know I can't discuss open cases-

"Ah'm not askin' about a case," Violet interjected, "ah'm askin' about what has you lookin' only 'alf 'ere. So, come on, what is it?"

Lawson sighed, "Can I at least order first?"

"Are yeh gonna order somethin' other than yer usual?" Violet countered haughtily.

"Yeah, actually. Who made the stew today?"

Violet's face darkened with concern, Lawson didn't normally turn to the stew unless if he was in need of comfort. "Clyde did."

Lawson wrinkled his nose in distaste, Clyde could never get the stew right, "Never mind then. Who's on grill tonight?"

"Carol's on grill."

"Can I get the two egg special with bacon? Do you have any muffins left?" Lawson asked tiredly, resting his cheek in his hand and rubbing at the headache developing above his left eyebrow.

“No, but we’ve got cinnamon raisin toast still,” Violet wrote down the order as Lawson gave it, regarding her son with worry as she did.

He considered the substitute and shook his head, “No, I’d rather have biscuits and some of the apple butter.” Violet frown grew and she reached across the counter to place the back of her head against his forehead, testing his temperature. “Ma, I’m not sick, I promise.”

“You’re not feverish, but-”

“Order up!” Clyde yelled from the kitchen and Violet glared back at the grizzled fry cook for his unnecessary volume when she was standing right in front of the kitchen window. “Sorry Violet,” Clyde apologized, voice still very loud, “am I screamin’ again?”

“Yes,” Violet chided as she handed the written down order to Clyde. “Please get yer hearing aids checked, Clyde. I think there’s something wrong with them.” Clyde’s face fell at her assessment and Violet gave him an apologetic look, “I know yeh don’t want tah have tah go to the VA, but you’ve been screaming fer a month now. Somethin’s wrong.” Violet gently pat Clyde’s arm in sympathy before loading the steaming plates full of dinner specials onto her serving tray so she could deposit the food to the table in the back.

Clyde caught sight of Lawson through the window and gave him a sympathetic, “You look like shit, Lawson.”

“Thanks Clyde,” Lawson drolled ignoring the young black veteran as he turned back to his coffee and took a few tentative sips of the hot bitter liquid. After finding the bitter drink not to his specifications he added some raw sugar and one of the cups of half and half that sat up on the counter.

Violet returned in time to pour herself her own cup of decaf coffee, fixing it with more sugar and creamer than her son. “So are you goin’ tah make me guess, or are you goin’ tah tell me what’s wrong?”

Lawson sighed into his coffee and put his cup down on the counter, “I saw something tonight I can’t explain, and I need your thoughts on it.”

His Ma watched him quietly, sipping at her coffee, “Yah saw, or yah saw?” He fidgeted uncomfortably on his seat and was saved in time by Carol and her matronly bulk as she filled the window.

“Lawson! I haven’t seen you in a while. Where have you been hiding?” When Violet got up to pick up the food from the window Carol waved her back down into her seat and picked up the plate herself, pushing her way out of the kitchen using her wide hips to open the swinging door without her hands. She walked over and set the plates of food down in front of Lawson with a cheerful smile, “I’ll let you catch up with your mother sweetheart, but you make sure you visit more often, you hear? Bring your partner too and all her little ‘uns too.”

“I will Carol,” Lawson smiled good naturedly at the cheery cook, accepting the refill to his decaf that she offered.

“You better,” Carol chided him before bustling back into the kitchen where they could hear her yell at Clyde, “Why didn’t you tell me Lawson was here!” The two at the bar chuckled at Carol’s friendly nature, feeling rejuvenated after being in her presence.

“So, what did yah see?” Violet asked her son, turned towards him on her chair so she could keep an eye on him and the table in the back in case if they needed refills.

Lawson started to eat as he answered her, "I keep seeing these two women at crime scenes. One of them is a brunette in a pink dress named Compassion, and the other is in a black mourning dress but she won't tell me her name. She says she wants me to guess what it is-

"She wants you tah guess 'er name?" Violet repeated.

"Yeah," Lawson took a sip of his coffee to clear his throat before he started to butter up the biscuits so that the butter and apple butter would have time to melt into the warm fluffy biscuits. "She didn't say if I had one guess or anything, just that she didn't want me to say a lot of names in a row."

Violet rested her elbow on the counter, lost in thought for a few moments while Lawson kept eating his eggs. "What were they doing at the crime scenes?"

"Well, the first time I saw them Compassion was talking to a little girl being put into an ambulance by an EMT. The second time she was standing behind Elain while Elain was discussing options with a woman who'd been abused by her husband. The asshole I arrested for giving me a concussion, you remember."

"It seems like she's living up to her name," Violet joked, then looked past Lawson, confirming that the other men needed refills on their drinks. "Just a second." She got up and went to fill up their drinks just as the bell connected to the front door rang, signalling the entrance of another patron.

Lawson turned around to glance at the door and blinked in shock. It took him a few seconds to recognize Compassion, as she had changed her facial features and even her skin color, but there was still those warm brown eyes, her long brown braid resting over her shoulder, and pink dress that made her recognizable. The longer that Lawson looked at her the more that her appearance shifted back to the form he had first seen her in. She flowed over into the seat on the other side of Lawson and held up a finger to her lips, "Don't tell her. I want to see if she can see me through the disguise." Compassion giggled at her little joke before she turned and looked at the diner from her seat, "Oh this place is lovely. I can see why you like it."

"What are you doing here?" Lawson asked, keeping an eye on his Ma as she spoke to the men at the table in the back.

"You called *me*, silly!" Compassion teased. "You said my name quite a bit this evening. Generally people only do that when they want my attention. I'm sorry I took so long, I was in the middle of handling something else, and there's only so many places that even I can be at once."

"I-" Lawson sputtered just in time for his Ma to come back from filling up the other table's drinks. He went silent as he watched his Ma put the pitcher of water and sweet tea back in place. Compassion watched Violet with interest, her eyes sparkling good naturedly.

Violet turned back around and watched Compassion quietly for a moment, finally asking, "So are yah 'ere ta order somethin', or are yah 'ere tah listen in?"

Compassion laughed with delight, clasping her hands in front of her chest as she smiled, "So you *can* see through glamours! Oh, tell me, please tell me, how did you know I wasn't human?"

"Yer, uh," Violet made a vague motion towards the space around Compassion, "yah glow different than normal people er Fae."

“Oh I see,” Compassion giggled, and it appeared that she really did understand what Violet meant even though Lawson had no clue what either of them were talking about. “Have you always been able to-?” When Violet nodded Compassion smiled, “Well that’s wonderful! You have quite a gift. I must say, you’ve done quite a good job with your son. I am curious, does he know about his own little quirks?”

Violet shook her head emphatically and ignored the suspicious look Lawson gave her, “No, and ah’d rather yeh not tell ‘im.”

Compassion smiled and gave Violet a conspiratorial wink, “Not a word. Speaking of not spoiling things...” she rested her elbow on the table and turned to Lawson, smiling charmingly at him in a way that made her so beautiful his heart ached just to see it. “My sister told me about her little wager with you, Lawson. No outside help from now on, ok? You have to figure this out on your own or else it won’t mean as much.” She looked at him a little more and she frowned just a tad, “Oh dear, I can see what she meant about her affect on you. Lawson, how have you been feeling since you saw my sister? Be completely honest, please.”

The officer shifted a little self-consciously in his seat, and Compassion waited patiently. Even his Ma was waiting for him to fess up; after all he had come in asking for some of his comfort foods and had hardly been talkative. Violet knew that something was wrong, she always did.

“Depressed,” Lawson finally admitted, keeping his eyes turned down on the coffee in front of him and trying to ignore the worried frown from his Ma.

“My sister has that effect,” Compassion said gently, “normally it would have passed by now, but it appears you’re a bit more sensitive to her than others. I can do something to help if you’ll let me. It won’t hurt, I promise.”

“Wait,” Violet cut in sharply, placing her hands on the counter from the inside and fixing Compassion with a protective glare, “this won’t make ‘im beholden to yeh, will it? Or owe yeh a favor?”

Compassion smiled understandingly at Violet and swore, “I promise to you, Violet, this won’t made him beholden to me or under my sway. I’m not asking any charge or fee for it either.”

“So what *are* you doing?” Lawson asked, regarding Compassion with suspicion.

She turned to look back at Lawson and smiled, “Giving you something akin to the opposite of what she did to help put you back in balance. No more, no less.”

Lawson quietly regarded Compassion with suspicion, holding onto his coffee cup for its warmth as he tried to decipher Compassion’s words. He felt like he was missing a piece of the puzzle though, because the feeling of compassion wasn’t an opposite of depression, it was certainly something that you could use to help combat depression, but it wasn’t its opposite. That would have been joy or something similar... and a little joy or happiness was never a bad thing. Especially with how he was feeling tonight.

Finally Lawson nodded in consent to Compassion and she gave him another heart-warming smile before placing a gentle hand on his head and kissing his temple. She smelled faintly of ripe peaches and sunshine, and from the spot where she kissed him spread a comforting warmth. When that soothing heat reached his heart Lawson let out a sigh of relief, muscles he hadn’t been aware of tensing finally relaxing.

“There we go, that’s much better.” Compassion smiled gently at Lawson and then moved to pull a wallet covered in pink moths out of her pocket and passed Violet six hundred dollars. “This is to cover Lawson’s meal as well as the two gentlemen in back. Please split the change between yourself and all the kitchen staff as a tip for the wonderful work that you do.” She waved off Violet’s sputtered protest and gave her a warm smile, “Please, accept my gift. Now, if you’ll excuse me I have someone else dear to my heart that’s calling for me.” Compassion slid off of her chair and bounced right out the door, turning the corner into an alley and disappearing without a trace.

After a moment of silence and both of the Grays staring after Compassion before Violet said with a shaky breath, “Lawson... you have goddesses interested in yah. Tha’ was no Fae.” Lawson looked at his Ma with horror as the implications of that dawned over him.

The detective pushed away his plate, suddenly not feeling hungry.

“Fuck.” He took a shaky breath and put his head in his hands.

Gods.

There were other gods than God.

And they thought he was interesting.

“Fuck!” Lawson banged a fist down on the table as fear was overridden by anger. He didn’t need any of this! Being a police officer was hard enough as it was, he didn’t need goddesses dropping in and fawning over him because they thought he was interesting. He didn’t need the added fear that he might lose their interest and that they might do something to him he wouldn’t like either.

Violet waved off the other customers and the curious eyes from the kitchen before she gently tilted her son’s head up to look her in the eye. “This isn’t the end of the world.” When Lawson opened his mouth to protest Violet gave him a withering look that snapped his mouth closed. “If you obsess over this an’ let it control you is the moment tha’ you lose, and they win. ‘Sides, once you figure out what the other goddess’s name is you can find out why they like you. It sounds like they just like ‘ow yah do yer job, an’ tha’s not so bad, is it?” Violet gave Lawson an encouraging smile until he released his anger with a long exhale. “Tha’s mah boy.” Violet leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss to the top of his head. “Now yeh finish yer food, and put yer head to work on ‘ow to come out on top o’ this.”

“Yes Ma,” Lawson agreed with a sigh, his thoughts swimming around as he finished up his dinner while Violet cashed out both tickets and took the five hundred dollars left over and went to share the tip with everyone in the back after putting the change from the first hundred into the communal tip jar. Lawson couldn’t help the smile that came to his lips at the excited screaming from the staff in back as they each received a hundred dollar tip from Compassion.

Lenore came running out with the hundred dollar bill in her hand and a smile split across her face, “Where is she, the lady that left the tip? I need to hug her.”

“She’s already gone,” Lawson answered as he got up and put back on his coat.

The young woman clutched the hundred dollar bill to her chest and looked up at Lawson in near tears, “I didn’t think I would be able to afford my last textbook this semester, but with this-” Lenore choked on her words and began to cry.

“Shhh, shhhh,” Lawson soothed, tucking the shorter girl against his chest and gently petting her hair until she felt less overwhelmed. “You okay?”

“Okay?” Lenore laughed as she looked up at him from inside his embrace, “If she were still here I would kiss that mystery woman.” Lawson chuckled gently and let her out of his embrace now that he was assured that she was fine.

“Well then it’s her loss that she’s already left,” Lawson laughed. “You make sure you get someone to walk you to your car when you get off work, ok Lenore? Let my Ma know I’m headed-”

“Violet!” Lenore yelled over her shoulder and Violet rushed through the swinging door to the kitchen in alarm, “Lawson’s trying to leave without hugging you.”

“He better *not* be, he knows better.” Violet chastised her son on her way back out of the kitchen, standing there with her arms open until he gave her a big hug.

“Please text me when you get home safely,” Lawson told his Ma until she nodded in agreement. “Goodnight y’all.” He left the diner to a chorus of well wishes and headed down to his car with those pensive thoughts still buzzing around in his skull. His old white impala was there to greet him as he got out and he settled into the familiar coffee stained interior with a weary sigh.

The drive to the South Shore on the East side of the river that ran through the middle of Crossroads was short and uneventful, the night misty and grey from the fog that rolled in from the river. The South Shore area of Crossroads was a mix of eclecticism from the poor artists that lived in the old railroad houses left over from the time when the railroad company used to own the city. Most of the houses were slightly derelict, but the residents of South Shore made up for that by doing their own repairs as a community and painting the houses bright and vibrant colors and decorating their yards with a cacophony of statuary and local art pieces. Unfortunately for Lawson he didn’t make quite enough money to afford one of the railroad houses outright so he rented the second story of a house that had been converted into apartments. His downstairs neighbors were two artists collaborating on some sort of webcomic that seemed to be doing really well. Their schedules didn’t really allow for them to interact, but they had all met up for Pride Parade last year and spent the whole afternoon wandering around the Pride Festival and playing catch with their adorable basenji down by the waterfront park.

Lawson parked his car in his usual spot, collecting his mail from the slot affixed to the side of the house near the driveway on his way up the back stairs to his flat. The apartment was small, just an open living room and kitchen area with a bathroom off to the side and his bedroom in the back. There wasn’t even space for a washer and dryer - thankfully he and his Ma made a habit of spending at least one day of the week together and he did his laundry at her house while they relaxed and they either made dinner together or he spoiled her by ordering take out he knew she couldn’t afford.

After tossing his keys down on the little table beside the door for exactly that purpose Lawson collapsed down into his beat up leather couch and pulled up his laptop. Compassion had said not to ask for help to figure out her sister’s name, but she had never said that Lawson couldn’t do research on his own. He pulled up google and started to work on his searches, looking for Compassion’s name first.

Most of the initial search results just popped up with definitions of the word “compassion” so he altered his search to include the word “goddess” and finally started to pull up information. There were smatterings of sightings all over the world of Compassion and her sister in the black

dress. The more he researched and more links he read he started to notice a pattern. The woman in black was most often seen lurking or lingering near people that were crying at the sight of funerals, vigils held after tragedy, and by quite a few first responders.

“So why actually speak to me if she didn’t speak to any of these people?” Lawson wondered to himself quietly as he went through blurry picture after horrible picture of the woman in black. She had different faces in a lot of the pictures, but there was no mistaking the eyes that hid behind her veil, or the way her skin was so inhumanly white. A few of the pictures had even captured her with what looked like spider legs stretching out from her hair.

Lawson tried to focus on the locations that she had shown up. What was their commonality? What drew people together because of funerals, vigils, and was something that all first responders dealt with on a daily basis?

The answer seemed to come almost unbidden from his lips.

“Grief.”

The lights in his apartment became muted, all sounds from the television in the apartment below stopping as he said her name. Lawson put down his laptop and stared at the door and the sound of softly approaching footsteps. By the third knock he had answered the door with his service pistol tucked behind him to find the woman in the black dress standing there with her veil lifted back over her hair, a smile tugging at her downturned lips as she sighed with what felt like relief.

“You said my name,” Grief sighed and it sent shudders up Lawson’s back, a sort of euphoria radiating from her at something so simple. “It’s been decades since I’ve heard my name pass from mortal lips. You have no idea how much I had missed that sound.”

Lawson stood there with the door half open, his right hand held behind his body to hide his weapon from view. “So I guessed right? Your name is Grief?”

“Oh yes,” Grief reached forward to gently stroke Lawson’s cheek and he found himself unable to move away from her gentle caress with those hands that felt cold as ice. “I am Grief, the summation and avatar of all the world’s grief. I am every tear you and every other human has ever shed since the dawn of sentience. I am not inherently cruel, despite what you might think.”

Lawson found himself able to pull away from her touch this time and had to resist the urge to draw his weapon on her. “What exactly is it you want from me?”

“Why isn’t that obvious?” Grief laughed, and it was a bitter sound that filled Lawson with dread, “To live as you did before, to comfort those in mourning and to dispense grief upon those who would do harm to others.”

He frowned in disbelief, sizing up the goddess that stood before him. “You just want me to do my job? That’s it?”

Grief smiled and it reminded him of the sympathetic smile you might give someone at a funeral when you had experienced a loss similar to theirs. “Yes. That is it. Contrary to what you might believe, Lawson, I do not give grief to people. I merely inhabit the grief that all humans experience. I was born from the importance that humans placed upon grief. I am there with each human as they experience grief, to hold them through the pain until they can move on. That is my purpose.”

“But, you, Lawson, you do not only comfort those who are hurting... you use their grief to punish those that truly deserve it. You seek justice even though you fight every day against the pain in your own heart. It is so rare for me to see someone who purposefully uses grief to cause pain to those who are hurting others rather than to dispense it onto innocent people for their own gain. You are quite dear to me because of this.”

Lawson put the safety back on his service pistol and slowly put it down on the small side table next to the door, fairly certain that it wouldn't have done anything to the goddess even if he did fire on her. How in the world could you fight against someone that existed because of an emotion? How was she even a physical entity? Lawson had so many questions, but most of all he couldn't decide if he wanted anything to do with her.

“So you're favoring me... but not making me your champion,” Lawson clarified.

“Yes, Lawson. I have no need for a champion. I may on occasion ask things of you, but it would never be anything more than you could handle, and you would always be free to refuse without consequence.”

“What kinds of things?” Lawson asked suspiciously.

Grief smiled and her eyes lightened from their normal black to black with purple highlights, “To speak with others experiencing grief to help them move on from their pain. This would of course not be without repayment as a show of gratitude for your services rendered.”

There was a moment of silence as Lawson thought this over, weighing his options carefully. On one hand Grief wasn't asking for anything he wouldn't already do normally, and depending on the types of repayment offered there wouldn't be any harm in doing these favors - especially since she had said that he was “free to refuse without consequence”. Though there was currently nothing binding her to that statement...

“Do you swear that I will always be free to refuse these requests without consequences?” Lawson asked carefully, gauging her reaction for any sense of trickery or lies.

Grief sighed in irritation, “I do not understand why you are being so cautious about this, it is a solid offer.”

Lawson considered the wording of his answer very carefully, not wishing to upset the goddess unintentionally. “My Ma raised me to be respectful of any bargain offered by making sure both parties fully understand the terms involved so that there can be no argument that either side was ever cheated.”

The goddess regarded him for a moment and then her lips curled upward in a smile. “Your mother is a very wise woman. I suppose I have the Fae to thank for her caution.”

“Most likely,” Lawson agreed easily, his own lips quirking up in a bit of a smile.

Grief sighed and clasped her hands together across her stomach, almost as if she wanted to cross her arms but didn't want to be rude. “Well... if we are going to discuss negotiations to our relationship and future business together then it would only be appropriate to do so over food.” When Lawson opened up his mouth to protest Grief held up a gentle hand and clarified, “Purely mortal food without any magical properties would be offered. I swear this upon my name and good reputation, should I lie to you regarding this manner shall it be stripped from me forevermore.”

Lawson's shoulders and back relaxed just slightly at her oath. It was a pretty standard one, and good for opening signs of good father between two people - because if Grief cheated

him in any way he would have open recourse to bad mouth her for the rest of eternity without repercussion. "I don't have much to offer at the moment, I need to go shopping," Lawson admitted cautiously. "I apologize for being unprepared, but I was not expecting company."

"I accept your apology," Grief seemed amused at the formality of their encounter, "and should you allow me to invite my sister for these discussions she can provide us with the appropriate snacks. She's a wonderful cook." When Lawson didn't immediately agree Grief actually rolled her eyes with irritation, "Neither of us wish to poison you or enchant you Lawson. You're far too interesting on your own for either of us to risk changing you in any way that you did not choose to do on your own. Now," Grief clasped her hands a little tighter in front of her stomach and huffed with irritation, "may I, or may I not invite Compassion to join us and bring refreshments?"

Lawson weighed his options: either he could risk pissing off two goddesses that seemed to find him interesting and weren't asking any hard favors (yet), or he could accept their offer to sit down and talk and potentially gain more of their favor. Every story that Lawson had ever read or been told that involved gaining a deity's favor led to adventures and hardship. Was that something he wanted? Or did he want a quiet life without this extra influence?

The answer didn't require much thought.

If gaining two goddess's favor meant that he could help more people than Lawson would take that opportunity every time.

After taking a deep breath in the hopes of bracing himself for this new adventure Lawson answered, "Please invite Compassion over so we can all talk."

Grief smiled and suddenly the air grew warm and filled with the smell of ripe peaches as Compassion appeared with a large wicker picnic basket. "Oh I was so hoping you would say yes," Compassion smiled and took in a deep breath, "mmm, you smell delicious-"

"Compassion," Grief chastised gently when she noted the sudden alarm on Lawson's face. "You might want to explain your statement so as not to alarm Lawson."

"Oh!" Compassion giggled and blushed with embarrassment, "my apologies. I don't mean that as in I want to eat you, or anything quite so barbaric. I merely meant that you had been thinking about helping someone, and that makes you like... like... oh, Grief I've forgotten the word I'm looking for."

"Catnip?" Grief supplied.

"Yes!" Compassion smiled at Lawson, "Exactly. When you think and do things that are compassionate to others you're like catnip for me." The goddess bit her lower lip and looked over Lawson suggestively before pressing herself forward and asking, "May we come inside now? I don't want the food to get cold."

Lawson took a deep breath to steel himself, ordering his body not to respond to the very pretty goddess's advances. The last thing he wanted to do was dive headfirst into something when he wasn't even sure he wanted his feet in the pool. "Come on in," Lawson stepped back and let the two goddesses into his apartment.

He made sure to close the door behind them and showed them into the living room, making sure to move his laptop to make space for the two goddesses on the couch while he took one of the armchairs.

“Oh now that just won’t do,” Compassion pouted, “come sit with us.” She patted the space between herself and Grief with a flirty smile.

“I would feel more comfortable where I am, thank you.” Lawson deflected and ignored the puppy eyes that Compassion gave him.

Thankfully Grief seemed capable of getting her back on task by asking, “Compassion, dear, what food did you pack?” The other goddess seemed more than willing to change the subject once food was mentioned, and reached into her picnic basket to pull out an assortment of sliced fruit such as peaches and strawberries, steaming homemade muffins with butter and jams to go with it, and even mini quiches with spinach and bacon visible through the layer of cheese resting on top of the small breakfast pastries. To top it all off Compassion pulled out a full carafe of french pressed coffee.

“You made all of this?” Lawson asked in surprise, breathing in the smell of the freshly baked muffins with delight.

“I sure did!” Compassion smiled, “I love cooking for other people, it’s how I show them that I care for them.” She pulled out actual china plates from her picnic basket and fancy cups and saucers for the steaming coffee. “It’s decaf,” Compassion confided with a playful wink. “No need to make your mother upset if I can avoid it.”

“You’re afraid of my Ma?” Lawson questioned incredulously.

“Oh I don’t know that I’d go so far as to say *afraid*,” Compassion laughed, “but she’s quite admirable, and I would love to be friends with her should she let me.”

The officer glanced over towards Grief to see her reaction as he accepted coffee with sugar from Compassion. The darker goddess shook her head just a little to his unvoiced question. “Your father is much more to my tastes, but we don’t need to discuss that. I know how that subject can upset you.”

Just the mention of his father had caused Lawson’s jaw to tense, so he breathed a sigh of relief when Grief agreed not to discuss it further. “What types of muffins did you make?” he asked Compassion, hoping to get the topic onto more pleasurable things.

“I baked banana nut, bran with honey and raisins, and pecan crumble muffins. I hope you like them.” Compassion watched as he made a small selection of food onto his plate and then turned to serve her sister. The conversation lulled as everyone settled down and enjoyed the food, which was honestly some of the best that Lawson had ever eaten. He kept checking himself internally to make sure that he didn’t feel any differently than he had before, and thankfully enough nothing seemed different.

Finally when everyone had relaxed Lawson said, “So could you please explain what it is you both want from me, and what your requests might require me to do?”

“It’s just as I told you Lawson, we want you to continue to go about your usual business, but if we have someone we know would benefit from speaking from you we will ask that you go and give them council.” Grief answered as she sat comfortably on his couch with a saucer and cup of coffee in hand.

“Compassion?” Lawson asked, turning to the lighter goddess, his mind whirling as if this were a cross examination.

“Grief is right,” Compassion answered plainly, “sometimes there are people who would be better off hearing from someone who has been in a situation similar to theirs, or someone

who we know they would listen to. We might be goddesses, but most often a human just wants to hear from another human. Not us directly.”

Lawson mulled over their statements. It didn't seem like either of them was lying, and was a fairly simple request... but still... “What else?” That couldn't be it. They were goddesses, there had to be something more they were asking.

The goddesses looked towards each other and smiled, seemingly pleased with Lawson's straightforwardness. “As you know,” Grief started, “there are people in this world who don't always mean to do well by others.”

“Nasty, horrible people,” Compassion added, the temperature of the room rising a little with her anger, “that would do anything they could just to cause people pain, and suffering.”

Grief placed a gentle hand on her sister's forearm and the room went back to a comfortable temperature. “Sometimes there are people, and supernatural creatures, that work to throw the world out of balance and cause people harm. Sometimes these are people that the police are never able to catch, but...” the goddess paused, hoping that Lawson would catch onto her suggestion.

“You're offering to be informants to help me put criminals away?” Lawson asked.

“Not all of them will be human,” Compassion warned, fixing Lawson with a look that rooted him in place, her voice seeming to expand and fill the room. “Some of the people we point you to may be vile creatures of filth who we ourselves are bound from interfering with, but who have caused so much harm to the human race and the supernatural community that they must be stopped. Can I count on you to be one of my Champions, Lawson? I will help you and supply you with whatever I can should you accept this call.”

The magic singing in Lawson's veins tried to fill him with a bout of sensations he normally felt while he was on the job and managed to successfully make an important collar. The sensation filled him entirely until it reached his tongue and was about to accept Compassion's call. Lawson made himself choke on the words and the magic broke, leaving his heart pounding and his blood singing a discordant song of rebellion against being controlled and an urge to pursue valor at all costs.

Lawson glared at Compassion and snarled, “If you want me for a Champion you will never do that again.”

Grief slipping into hissing snickers that she hid behind a gloved hand as her sister merely giggled with delight. “Oh you're marvelous!” Compassion clasped her hands together over her chest and glowed with pride. “I was hoping you would pass that little test.”

“It was not appreciated,” Lawson growled, still smothering any call to please Compassion that her magic had left in his system.

Compassion deflated a little, “Oh dear. I didn't mean to make you so angry, I'm sorry. I would never really accept you as my Champion if it wasn't you - and only you - agreeing to it. I rescind my request for now, and will not ask - genuinely ask, not compel you - again until we've gotten to know each other better. I just needed to be sure how well you're able to resist compulsion-”

“Which you did marvelously,” Grief added.

“Truly, marvelously,” Compassion echoed. When she turned back to Lawson she looked genuinely apologetic, “Can you forgive me for that little trick?”

Lawson looked between the two goddesses, anger sparking behind those blue eyes as he tried his best to see if they were really and truly sincere. "Only if you swear to not ever do that to me again - or to my Ma."

Compassion melted happily and smiled at him, "Oh of course. I swear upon the fealty of my followers to not use compulsion magic upon you or your mother again. Do you accept my oath as one being made in good faith and honor, Lawson Gray?"

The officer considered the options and exhaled slowly, letting go of his tension until he felt his urge to toss the two goddesses out on their asses ease into a passing thought. "Only if you also swear that any request that is made of me will be mine to accept or refuse, and that there will be no consequences from you or your sister should I refuse a summon or a request placed upon myself or my Ma."

"I willingly and gratefully accept the terms of this deal, Lawson." Compassion swore, "I truly have no urge to control or compel you. I have enemies that may try - that was the cause for my test. I wanted to make sure of your safety should anyone learn of our association."

"You should have asked before you tried," Lawson snapped angrily.

Compassion looked like she might cry when Lawson chastised her, but once she was under control she nodded. "You're right, and for that I owe you an apology. What do you need? What will you accept from me?"

"Do not forget you have a boon from me as well," Grief added, seemingly unphased by her sister being called out for her actions. If Lawson was reading her right it seemed she approved of how he handled it.

Lawson fell silent as he considered their offer, sipping quietly on his coffee and nibbling on a muffin as he thought about what he needed, and what those of them nearest him needed most. "My partner at work needs a new car that doesn't break down on her every week that can fit her family of five."

"Does she like hybrid cars? And would she prefer a compact car or something larger?" Compassion asked without blinking.

"She's been looking at a few hybrids, specifically a Prius V." Lawson answered, a little taken aback by the suddenness of her response.

"Excellent, she'll have won one by the end of the week - all expenses paid even taxes, titles, and tags. I'll even include a settlement for whatever she owes on her current car. Is that sufficient for my apology?" Compassion asked, concerned that this might not be enough.

There was a moment when Lawson considered pushing for more from Compassion, but that was already more than he had hoped to gain. "That should work," Lawson agreed.

"What would you like from me, Lawson?" Grief asked, smiling gently at him and looking completely relaxed and at home in his apartment.

There was another long moment as Lawson considered her offer, before he finally asked a little tentatively, "Can you help people living with PTSD?"

Grief smiled warmly at Lawson, "Absolutely. Did you have someone specific in mind?"

"Yes and no," Lawson said, "I was wondering if you could stop by the group my friend Clyde attends and just make it easier on those vets to recover."

"It would be my pleasure," Grief agreed. "I will start attending their group sessions this week. Rest assured Lawson, I will do all I can to help them recover."

Lawson breathed a sigh of relief and finally relaxed into his chair. He wasn't sure how much she could actually help, but having a goddess that could help people through their grief at a PTSD group session seemed like it couldn't hurt - and Clyde and those other vets needed all the help they could get. "So, what now?" Lawson asked.

The two goddesses looked at each other then smiled at Lawson, "Well, first we finish this delicious food," Compassion started.

"-and then you go out and live your life as you did before... with potentially more danger and adventure." Grief finished.

The officer and the three goddesses looked at each other then fell into a companionable silence as they finished their food. When the evening ended and Lawson bid them farewell he went to sleep and dreamt of monsters laughing at him in the darkness until he was able to drive them out into the light where they perished and troubled his dreams no more. In the morning Lawson was greeted with a new coffee press and an apology card that smelled of peaches. He watched and waited during the week to see if the goddesses kept their word, and sure enough they did. Makeda was thrilled to tell him about the new car she had won and how much money it would save her, and slowly over the next few months Violet reported that Clyde jumped less at loud noises in the kitchen at the Happy Avenue Diner and was better able to socialize with his co workers. Lawson settled back into his schedule at work, and prepared to see the goddesses again... but hopefully not too soon.