



A PROFESSOR OF DISASTER

Perhaps a small shopping mall parking lot full of college kids was not the ideal place to doze off, but as Arica leaned on the large pickup, she did just that. To be fair she'd waited an hour for Mindy during what was supposed to be a quick shopping trip before an afternoon lecture. She knew her best friend enough that she wasn't surprised, but their roommate, Vanessa, had gotten tired of waiting and went in after her. After fifteen minutes without either of them, Arica was regretting not going in herself, especially without the keys to the newer black truck that probably cost more than her yearly salary.

The painted metal gave her a comfortable warmth, so she settled deeper against the grille, her sneakers gripping dry asphalt.

Comfortable until the truck jerked forward, sending her into a parking spot next to the four Vanessa occupied. An agitating crash of metal on metal followed. Her hands scraped the rough ground as she caught herself and, too shocked to keep her weight steady, she sat on the ground.

A small blue car rested against the truck's rear fender; the entire vehicle several feet further than moments before.

"Holy—" She forced herself to her feet and ran to the driver's seat. "Are you okay?" she yelled through a crumpled door. It easily opened with a jerk.

Its young, burly occupant glanced up, dazed. Arica recognized the reddish-brown hair and matching well-groomed beard, before realizing the old brown blazer should've tipped her off.

"Professor Lannert," she said, hoping his name would jog more of a response.

"Wow. And here I thought I could have a refreshing nap in the fresh air from my windows," the professor groaned.

He was making light of the situation, fitting his usual outward attitude, but Arica was too shocked to even consider laughing.

"Oh my... Professor?"

Arica turned to the familiar voice of a petite blonde in high-waisted jeans and a frilly top, finally returning, but with enough shopping bags to justify a day's worth of shopping. Vanessa walked at her side, a tall, athletic woman that Arica could only ever guess was in her thirties despite rooming with a couple of girls in their second year out of high school.

Vanessa's sharp features were stony, unemotional, as was usual, but this time she was looking upon her victimized vehicle. She ignored the damage and nudged Arica out of the way to give Lannert a supportive shoulder as he tried pulling himself out of the vehicle.

"You're standing fine," Vanessa said. He stood on his own, so she let him go and pushed her long brown hair back behind her shoulder.

"I'm alright. Lucky too, it seems."

The question burning Arica's tongue finally came out. "What happened?"

Lannert's thin eyebrows rose as he shrugged. "I closed my eyes a moment too long, I suppose. Is this your vehicle, Miss Tanson?"

Arica answered by pointing over his shoulder at the truck's owner.

“My apologies,” the professor expressed as he turned to Vanessa, hand extended politely. “Lovely pickup. Luckily, I have great insurance. We can get her fixed right up. I’m Ben. Benjamin Lannert.”

“Vanessa,” was all she said as she gently took the offered hand.

“I think I’ve seen you around campus; Mindy and Arica here are in my class. You aren’t a student, are you?”

“I’m not in your class, that’s all you need know,” she said.

“R-right,” the professor agreed as if completely thrown off by her brusqueness and not the accident he’d caused.

“I guess we should call the cops,” Arica suggested, noticing a few onlookers. Their lack of panic seemed to deter anyone from running to help.

Vanessa walked assuredly to the smashed fender of her truck before answering. “No need to involve the government.”

Lannert made a noise of confusion or disagreement, but none of it was an actual objection.

At only a touch, the tailgate dramatically tore itself loose from its cords and fell to the ground. With a click of her tongue, Vanessa turned back to the others. “A tow truck, though, may be beneficial. You’re spilling coolant.”

“Ah, good idea...” Lannert pulled a phone from his breast pocket as he walked out of earshot.

Arica followed Vanessa, intending to help even if she wasn’t sure what they were doing. Mindy waved Lannert to the side as if trying to get beauty shots of the damage with the best possible lighting.

They pried off the plastic bed cover sporting a new series of cracks in one corner and laid it on the asphalt. This gave Vanessa room to elegantly hop in.

Arica wondered how fast he’d been going to achieve so much damage to the tall truck, but only for a moment before a large, glistening hunk of metal strapped to a bed anchor distracted her.

A gilded handle large enough for at least four hands stuck out of a leather-wrapped scabbard, wider than her hand and almost as long as the full-size pickup bed. The cross guard curved down, shaped like an umbrella's silhouette with tiny white jewels dotted throughout the gold with no real pattern, and while she couldn't see it, she could only assume that within the hard case there was a long blade. It looked way too big to even think about hauling around, but there was no way it wasn't fake. Ignoring that it would've had a good few ounces of gold on it, nobody would've allowed something like it on school property.

As curious as she was about Vanessa's secret cosplay life, she wasn't surprised. There weren't many things she knew about the older woman, and the few she did only urged more questions. Like how she'd gotten strong enough to haul a full-sized wheel over the truck's bed and lower it to the side with one hand.

Arica decided she'd be more help focused on the situation. "Do you have a jack?"

"Under the driver's seat."

She found the tools where she'd indicated and returned them to their owner.

"It'll only be a few minutes," Lannert informed the rest of the group as Arica stood over Vanessa, watching her spin off lug nuts. "What are you doing?"

Vanessa responded calmly. "Other than a few ugly marks and a torn tire, my vehicle is intact. Unless you're more injured than previously decided, I haven't time to wait for your ride."

Arica noticed he was staring into the back of the truck, hands casually in his pants pockets.

"That's quite the piece," he mumbled, eyebrows lowering.

“Thank you.”

He pulled his antsy hands from his pockets, his voice suddenly cheerier. “Are you in some sort of production? Do you mind if I—”

“I do mind,” Vanessa interrupted, slinging one arm over her knee as she crouched, but her voice was more amusement than annoyance. “What are you a professor of, exactly?”

“History. Understanding causality regarding knowledge available, the steps that achieve the good and the bad we as a world have accomplished, and sparking an initiative to drive our future from correlating with the more horrific of those achievements.”

She made a little noise and left it there.

“Well, I hate to bail, but I’m gonna be late for class,” Arica said. She only had fifteen minutes, and while she was only two blocks away, she didn’t want to take the chance something else was going to happen. Hopefully, they wouldn’t find anything else wrong with the truck.

Vanessa waved a dismissing hand and went back to wrenching.

Arica returned to the front seat of the truck to fetch her book bag. Upon grabbing the bag off of the nice black leather seats, she noticed an old book near the throttle pedal, as if she’d pushed it out from under the seat with her rummaging.

Normally, she would leave something like this alone, especially since Vanessa had a lot of curious, unmarked possessions and was generally private. But the weaponry sitting in the vehicle’s bed still threw her off. She peeked through the window as the reflection of her dirty blonde ponytail shifting caught her eye. Then she reached across the seat to grab the dusty book.

The page she opened was a rough full-body sketch of a wolf-like creature. The next page read *Appetite & Afflictions*. If it had been a journal or similar, there was no way she would’ve invaded anyone’s privacy. However, since it

seemed to be more of a dossier for a tabletop game and could potentially shed some light on the sword, she felt her thievery was justified... If only slightly.

The book settled safely into her bag. As dirty as it was, it clearly would not be missed.

“Professor,” she acknowledged as she returned to the scene of the fender-bender. He nodded a quiet goodbye, then reevaluated.

“Oh, while I have your attention, Miss Tanson, I wanted to invite you to my library on Friday.”

She waited patiently as the professor dove into his mutilated sedan and dug into a bag, only to come up with a white card and a sharpie. He scribbled like his life depended on it. If she hadn’t already been used to his inelegant scrawl, it would’ve been illegible.

“I apologize that it’s so last minute, but you weren’t there on Monday, so... It’s just a casual get-together, maybe to show off the library I’m responsible for, but mostly because I need something fun to do. I hope you can make it.”

She tucked the impromptu invitation into her bag, smiling in appreciation. It was a nice offer, but among one of many she’d blow off for no reason other than she could do something in her room instead. “Thanks. Sounds fun.”

She beckoned Mindy as she passed since their classes were close.

The girl barely looked up from her phone as she followed, her bags already packed in the rear seat of the truck as if they were a horrible burden.

She hadn’t even noticed the sword lying in the back of Vanessa’s truck, but all Arica could think about was her stomach churning with uncertainty. She needed something to talk about.

“I’m gonna call Travis and tell him I was in an accident with no context,” she said, then forced a snicker.

Mindy didn't look up from her phone, running on peripheral only. "You call your brother weirdly often."

"It's not *that* weird," she mumbled through her teeth.

One of the few things that would distract Mindy from herself or her own belongings was a pretty face, and being within walking distance of the campus, the surrounding shops were full of young ones.

It was one of these that distracted Mindy, her flirty smile and fluttery eyes lighting up immediately.

"What happened to Matt?" Arica asked, eyeing the young man as they passed, more annoyed than interested. Mindy turned her head to keep his eye a moment or two longer but didn't chase him.

"You mean Mark?"

"Uh... Yeah."

"We just didn't..." She clicked her tongue. "You know? Not my type." Mindy's stride lengthened, her steps more determined. Her piercing, narrowed eyes were no doubt searching the area for worthy prey. "Oh, maybe one of them is, though."

Arica followed the nod of Mindy's head until her eyes rested on a pair of guys walking towards them along the concrete sidewalk, happily talking to each other in low tones.

One of them was unusually tall, dark-haired, an active athlete, and had what was probably a permanent smirk. The other one was thinner, bouncier, and looked friendlier just from his laugh lines. He walked only a few inches taller than her with an unusual limp that he almost made look natural.

"Jake and Zak," Mindy whispered as she leaned over Arica's shoulder. "This is their first semester. I sat between them in our introductory humanities lecture."

“Sorry I quit that at the last second,” Arica added with guilt. Sticking with things was not a trait she was known for, but that had been pretty abrupt even for her. “Honestly, I just needed the extra hours at the nursery.”

“Ah, yes, because the hose-watered plants would die without your infinite love.” Mindy giggled, then shrugged her small shoulders. “So what do you think of them—the boys, not your plants—from appearance only?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to judge,” she whispered as they approached.

The blond looked more towards Mindy, tipping his head in polite acknowledgment.

Arica watched them pass, locking eyes with the towering one briefly. His eyes were azure, glancing at her with amused mischief. She clasped her bag to her chest, suddenly feeling naked. The girls slowed to a stop, both of them looking attentively over their shoulders like a couple of cats watching birds.

Mindy made a sizzling sound between her teeth. “I mean, muscles, cute eyes, the blond has nice lips, probably a good kisser. What else could you want?”

Turning back into their walk towards campus, Arica did her best to express herself. “I dunno, scars or odd features, or, or... Something interesting.”

“People can be interesting without looking weird. Intelligence and personality matter too.”

“I should’ve said *someone* interesting. But if you really believed that, you’d be less focused on chiseled jaws and shoe size.”

With a dismissing wave, Mindy turned the corner to face the campus, but before Arica did, she looked back towards the pickup in the distance, then at the pair of boys some ways down the sidewalk.

“Wait,” Arica forced cheerfully as she chased after her, a successful but temporary distraction from the gnawing uneasiness growing in her stomach.



That night was darker than she'd expected, and of course, on the first moonless night of the semester, Mindy had stayed behind to flirt with a frat guy instead of walking with her. It wasn't the safest trip, but most of the campus was usually lit up pretty well. She could've done without the rain, however. It pounded down hard enough that she could barely hear her own thoughts and had to pull her hood up over her hair. Normally, she'd stop to enjoy the fresh scent and cool dampness on her skin, but tonight she was more in the mood for crashing straight onto her mattress.

She jogged along the sidewalk, spurred by the sight of her dorm and the inviting light shining from the windows. The slapping of her boots abruptly stopped, her heart lurching as a shadow shifted at the base of the stairwell. A hulking figure in a black hoodie wandered across the grass towards their window, slow but unalert.

Arica released her held breath. It wasn't that strange for people to be wandering around or hanging out, and the guy didn't hold himself like a thief or a creep.

"Hey," she called, eating up a few more yards between them. "What are you doing, dude?"

As she approached, he turned slowly, and doubt ate at her stomach.

He was large, but it could've been just layered sweaters under the oversized hoodie. Then again, he also towered near seven feet. His face remained hidden in the shadow of the comfortable hood, his hands in the pockets of baggy jeans. She probably couldn't have recognized him even if he was her brother.

“You can see me?” he asked. His voice was low, resonating from deep in his chest, but it was also steady, almost calming.

“Y-yeah.” She did a quick once-over of the area, checking streetlamps. She usually had excellent vision when others were struggling, but it wasn’t *that* dark.

“Interesting,” he murmured, turning towards the sidewalk as if she’d lost all relevance. “Is Vanessa home?”

“I don’t think so. Are you one of her friends?” Truthfully, Arica wasn’t positive she had any.

Hands back in his pockets, he stepped back a foot or two, still out of the direct glare from the windows. Dark eyes glinted under the concealing fabric, and as he turned, light from a streetlamp touched his washed-out temple and squared jaw, along with a strip of his black hair. “I’d guess she’d say otherwise.”

“So you’re a stalker.”

Unruffled, the corner of his smirk appeared. “You’re the little blonde she’s been shadowing, aren’t you?”

Her words came out as jumbled as her thoughts. “Well, I, yeah, no, I don’t think she’s been...”

“I was making sure she wasn’t around so I could gain a moment with you.”

Eyes narrowing, Arica stared at him. Everything was off about him. An accent touched his words; not unusual itself, but his wasn’t familiar. Mix it in with his stature, his weird paleness and odd behavior, and her conscience was screaming for her to hightail it as far away from him as she could. But she’d never be able to outrun him if it came to that.

He snorted and shuffled his feet barely enough to notice. “Stare all you want, child. I won’t be the oddest thing you’ll see.”

Arica balked, stepping back an extra foot just in case. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged with dismissal. “I wouldn’t worry. You’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she braved.

“You’re young; inexperienced.” Then he tsked his tongue, tilting his head enough that his eyes were revealed for a moment. Slender, mischievous eyes circled in thick paint the color of tar. “Never know what could happen with someone like you running around.”

Arica placed her hands on her hips, ignoring the slight shaking. “I’m sorry, you’re the creep out here... waiting outside female dorms,” she retorted as confidently as her weak voice could achieve.

“I’m not trying to scare you,” he teased with an annoying amusement. Was it too much for him to be serious? It felt impossible to tell if he was just messing with her, or was an actual threat.

“What are you doing, then?”

He eased a small rock through the grass with his foot. The faintest whitish-purple glow outlined his feet, like he wore light-up sneakers with dying batteries. It was odd, but Arica brushed it off.

“Thought I’d say hello before we’re formally introduced. Or less-than-formally, should you find yourself in the wrong company.”

“Wrong company?” Arica questioned rather forcefully. “Look, you’re a weirdo, and I need to get home, so...” With every intention of doing just that, she walked into the light of the window, when the strange man reached into the front of his jacket.

She froze. *Please no, please no.*

“Can I give you something, at least?”

“I-I’d rather you didn’t,” she squeaked, taking another step back.

He pulled a small folded piece of leather out of the jacket, then casually tossed it at her torso.

Known for her clumsiness, she was proud to catch it, however she was a little embarrassed that it required dropping her bag and the loose book into the wet grass.

“Please don’t what?” he mocked.

Arica held the strap of the piece so it could fall, revealing a rather crudely sewn bag. “This is a... a satchel? Why would you—“

She looked up, but he was walking away down the path as if they’d never had their odd little conversation.

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