

THE STORYBOOK  
CORONER

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## Chapter 1.

# LONG, LONG AGO

She was the most beautiful woman in the Universe.

He had just grown a moustache.

Once upon a time, and at the *same* time, they were both in the very same field. A craggy sort of place, but green. It smelled like decomposing. Not a bad smell, not a rotting smell. A decomposing smell like growing things. Like plucky little sticky things clawing their way up through the ground, through the roots of trees. A ratty smell, like goats had rubbed hard against it.

Many, many years later even, neither one could imagine why they would have gone there. 'I hadn't even brought a book with me' she would ponder to herself.

Not that it was a bad place, but why on earth had she gone?

He at least had some excuse. He was a goat herder. He loved his work. You may think that goat herding would be dull, but not to him. He was the sort of man who regarded the extraordinary as being commonplace. And the other way around.

Like this.

He had met any number of gods. At this time, of course, most of them were Greek. A lot of them hadn't been created yet. But there were Norse gods and Egyptian gods and Aboriginal gods. Pagan. You know, the long, long ago type of god, when they would still hang out on earth. Classic vintage. Well, he'd be talking to a god, and the god would usually end up talking about something pretty extraordinary. Thor might start chatting about how he was '*the storm.*' Or



how he killed Thriazi the mind-reading giant and tore out the eyes of Allvaldi's son and ground them into the black heavens.

One time Thor even announced that someday he'd have a day of the week named after him. Just like that, '*someday I'll be a day of the week,*' and he sipped his mead. What makes *that* extraordinary is that they didn't even have 'weeks' yet, that's how long ago this was. But he was right, as gods *always* prefer to be:

Thor's-day.<sup>1</sup>

At any rate, when a god says extraordinary things like that, you can't really *do* anything about it, which is pretty commonplace.

But if someone says something like, 'we're out of milk, would you remind me to get some?' or, 'why the hell won't this

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<sup>1</sup> True, from the Old English, Thunresdæg.

damn thing work? I followed the directions *exactly* goddamn it!’ or, ‘could I borrow your finger while I tie this knot?’ well *those* are things you can really *do* something about, which is pretty extraordinary.

You can really herd goats.

Even so, there was no special reason why he was in that field. He might have herded his goats anywhere, but there he was. It was so quiet, he imagined he was the only one there (and so did she). He was stretched across the ground on a checkered picnic blanket. He was a long, thin man – so long that he couldn’t fit on the blanket all at once. He was just about to enjoy his sandwiches.

She had just finished eating one before she came round that little scarp,

And he saw her.

And she saw him.

And they were perfectly still.

And the whole world was silent.

Then she said, 'I like your moustache.'

And he stood and he said, 'Thanks.'

Because what do you say at a time like that? What can you possibly say? There she was, the most beautiful woman in the Universe, a billowing, immaculate gown, standing there just steps from him, admiring his moustache...

Everything about this was extraordinary as he had never known it could be. She was Extraordinariness herself. And he'd like to do something about it.

So he said, 'Would you care for a sandwich?'

And she said, 'I just had one.'

So he said, 'Oh?', and she nodded, 'But one should never turn down a sandwich,' he said.

She smiled the dearest smile in the Universe.

She took a step towards him....







Then the ground beneath her exploded.

## Chapter 2.

# HIM

His name is Maximilian Asterisk.

He didn't remember how he came to be standing on the very edge of the chasm, looking down into absolute darkness, but there he was. He was silent - he couldn't call out to her. He didn't even know her name. He thought about jumping in after her, but he didn't know if she was down there. Maybe she'd been blown up into the clouds, or blown into a million pieces. She could be anywhere! Or nowhere, anymore. No blood or body to be seen. Just this abyss that, despite the calm afternoon sun, was totally and uniformly of blackest black. So he just stood, deathly white, limp, at the very, very edge, looking into it.

‘What have you got there then?’ from out of nowhere and from directly behind Maximilian came a friendly, hearty voice, and Maximilian, startled, fell.

‘No you don’t’ said the voice, and Maximilian was grabbed by a powerful hand, and just as suddenly as he fell, he was again on solid ground. Poor Maximilian’s heart was whiplashed. He gave the pit a stern look (as though the pit cared), and then turned with a kinder eye to his rescuer. Standing before him was a goat-man. Maximilian blinked. No, it’s a goat-man. He had the face of a rogue, the arms of an Adonis, from the waist down he was an animal. He smelled pungently of earth and sex both freshly turned and stale, and at that moment, was happily scratching his arse, really digging in. Maximilian liked him immediately, and with great tenderness.

‘Pan’ said the goat man shaking hands. ‘You’re lucky I was here, mate, you don’t

want to fall in there. You know what that is?' Maximilian shook his head. 'That's a hell hole that is. That's what I call it anyways. Hades hole you could call it. But have you ever *been* to Hades?' Maximilian shook his head. 'Well. It's Hell.'

Pan took a seat near the mouth and peered down. 'Giddy prick!' he shouted down it. Maximilian shakily sat down next to Pan, who smiled at him and repeated sweetly, 'He's a giddy prick.' Maximilian squinted questioningly. 'His name's Hades right? The giddy prick in charge of Hades. He named the bloody place after himself. I told him, that's going to be bloody confusing, that's the stupidest thing I've heard in an age. And do you know what he said?' Maximilian shook his head. 'Piss off, that's what he said, and then he sort of *preened*. And do you know why he said that?'

‘Because he’s a giddy prick?’ Maximilian ventured, dazed.

‘That’s exactly right. Exactly.’ He shouted down the hole, ‘SEE? EVEN-sorry, what’s your name, mate?’

‘Oh, Maximilian Asterisk.’

‘EVEN MAXIMILIAN ASTERISK HERE KNOWS THAT YOU’RE A GIDDY PRICK, YOU GREAT, SILLY MONSTER YOU!’ Pan turned and smiled wanly at Max, ‘My old man, Hermes he’s called, well he’s Zeus’s messenger, right. You’ve heard of Zeus? He’s the one that’s *Lord of the Sky*, the one with the ruddy great thunderbolt. Oh, very impressive yes, he can arm-wrestle all the other gods at once and win. Breezing. Not that he does much except chase skirt behind Hera’s back, but you can’t help but love the guy. At any rate, my old man works for him, *and* for the git down there. Leads the dead

there, that's him part-time. I could tell ya stories... I'm not boring you, am I?'

Maximilian shook his head.

'Well I'll tell you. Zeus, he's on top of that mountain there in Olympus, he's with the Muses, he's with the Graces, he's with the Goddesses, each one sexier than the last. That's living I say, that's healthy living. Hades now, he's down there, underground, in all that darkness. His chosen companions? Well, he keeps this hulking great three headed dog with snakes coming out of it. For a pet. Cerberus. Curby he calls it. He's down there playing cards with Sleep and Death and the Furies. And if you haven't met any of them, let me tell you, they're right fecks. I feel for the ferryman down there, I do, Char he's called, he's a sport really. Poor guy, paddling about all day taking money from dead folks, and the ones that can't pay all wandering up and down the shore, *moaaaning* and taking

cheap shots at him. Terrible line of work. Poor Char. Even the rivers down there are for shite. You've got your river of *woe*, your river of *lamentation*, and what else, er, *fire*, somehow, and, oh, *unbreakable oath*, and damn I can never remember the last one... It'll come to me... Oh! The River of *Forgetfulness*. Ha.'

'She's down there.' Maximilian breathed.

'Who's down there?' Pan leaned in and whispered.

'I don't know.' Maximilian whispered.

'Love at first sight.' Pan said loudly. 'I knew it. I knew it - just like that. I've been in love at first sight, oh, what would it be, I dunno I've lost count, thousands of times now. At least.' He leaned in to whisper again, 'I made the Moon once.' He smiled, 'now what do you think of that?'

Maximilian was staring into the pit.



‘Don’t you dare.’ Said Pan. ‘Look. You’re not a god are you?’

‘I’m a goat herder.’

‘You are? You’re kidding. I love goat herders, wonderful people, some of my favorites. I knew I liked you! But this is what I’m talking about. You’re mortal. That means, you can go down there, but you can’t get back out. That’s old Curby’s joy in life, the stupid brute. Worse than him, Hades himself. Now if he took your woman down there, he wants her. He’s not supposed to make these bloody hell holes. Look at it, just sitting there, right there, right out in the open, pretty as you please. It’s reckless endangerment is what it is! Not that he cares. But Zeus will. Look, the point is: if you go in there alive, you’re not coming back with her. You’re not coming back, period.’

‘Is she still alive?’

'I doubt it. Even if you take your body with you, being dragged down to hell is bound to have some effect.'

'Then I'll die, and I'll join her.'

'No. If you die, you'll be his. And he's not going to care about your great, beautiful love at first sight. And if she loves *you*? He'll torture you. He'll annihilate you. And do you know why?'

'Because he's a giddy prick.'

They both turned to look into the hell hole. Pan put a comforting arm around Maximilian.

'We'll have a good think about it. I know a few people... Tomorrow, we'll put our heads together, and we'll come up with a terrific plan. One for the books, alright? But not now. Now, we need to get really drunk. Come on then, up you get, mind your step there, Maxi.'