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Opening extract from

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PERSEUS WANTS A HUG

I HAD TO START WITH THIS GUY.

After all, he's my namesake. We've got different godly fathers, but my mom liked Perseus's story for one simple reason: he *lives*. Perseus doesn't get hacked to pieces. He doesn't get damned to eternal punishment. As far as heroes go, this dude gets a happy ending.

Which is not to say that his life didn't suck. And he *did* murder a lot of people, but what are you gonna do?

Perseus's bad luck started before he was even born.

First, you gotta understand that, back in the day, Greece wasn't one country. It was divided into a gazillion different little kingdoms. Nobody went around saying 'Hi, I'm Greek!' People would ask you which city-state you were from: Athens, Thebes, Sparta, Zeusville or whatever. The Greek mainland was a huge piece of real estate. Every city had its own king.

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Sprinkled around the Mediterranean Sea were hundreds of islands, and each one of them was a separate kingdom, too.

Imagine if life were like that today. Maybe you live in Manhattan. Your local king would have his own army, his own taxes, his own rules. If you broke the law in Manhattan, you could run away to Hackensack, New Jersey. The king of Hackensack could grant you asylum, and Manhattan couldn't do anything about it (unless, of course, the two kings became allies, in which case you were toast).

Cities would be attacking each other all the time. The king of Brooklyn might decide to go to war with Staten Island. Or the Bronx and Greenwich, Connecticut, might form a military alliance and invade Harlem. You can see how that would make life interesting.

Anyway, one city on the Greek mainland was called Argos. It wasn't the biggest or most powerful city, but it was a respectable size. Folks who lived there called themselves the Argives, probably because 'Argosites' would've made them sound like some kind of bacteria. The king was named Acrisius. He was a nasty piece of work. If he were your king, you would totally want to run away to Hackensack.

Acrisius had a beautiful daughter named Danaë, but that wasn't good enough for him. Back then it was all about sons. You had to have a boy child to carry on the family name, inherit the kingdom when you died, blah, blah, blah. Why couldn't a girl take over the kingdom? I dunno. It's stupid, but that's how it was.

Acrisius kept yelling at his wife, 'Have sons! I want sons!' but that didn't help. When his wife died (probably from stress),

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the king started getting really nervous. If he died without male offspring, his younger brother, Proteus, would take over the kingdom, and the two of them hated each other.

In desperation, Acrisius took a trip to the Oracle of Delphi to get his fortune read.

Now, going to the Oracle is usually what we call a *bad idea*. You had to take a long trip to the city of Delphi and visit this dark cave at the edge of town, where a veiled lady sat on a three-legged stool, inhaling volcanic vapour all day and seeing visions. You would leave an expensive offering with the priests at the door. Then you could ask the Oracle one question. Most likely she'd answer you with some rambling riddle. Then you'd leave confused, terrified and poorer.

But, like I said, Acrisius was desperate. He asked, 'O Oracle, what's the deal with my not having any sons? Who's supposed to take the throne and carry on the family name?'

This time, the Oracle did not speak in riddles.

'That's easy,' she said in a raspy voice. 'You will never have sons. One day your daughter Danaë *will* have a son. That boy will kill you and become the next king of Argos. Thank you for your offering. Have a nice day.'

Stunned and angry, Acrisius returned home.

When he got to the palace, his daughter came to see him. 'Father, what's wrong? What did the Oracle say?'

He stared at Danaë – his beautiful girl with her long, dark hair and lovely brown eyes. Many men had asked to marry her. Now all Acrisius could think about was the prophecy. He could never allow Danaë to marry. She could never have a son. She wasn't his daughter any more. She was his death sentence.

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'The Oracle said that *you* are the problem,' he snarled. 'You will betray me! You will see me murdered!'

'*What?*' Danaë recoiled in shock. 'Never, Father!'

'Guards!' Acrisius yelled. 'Take this vile creature away!'

Danaë couldn't understand what she'd done. She always tried to be kind and considerate. She loved her dad, even though he was scary and angry and liked to hunt peasants in the woods with a spear and a pack of rabid dogs.

Danaë always made the appropriate sacrifices to the gods. She said her prayers, ate her vegetables and did all her homework. Why was her dad suddenly convinced she was a traitor?

She got no answers. The guards took her away and locked her in the king's maximum-security underground cell – a broom-closet-sized room with a toilet, a stone slab for a bed and twelve-inch-thick bronze walls. One heavily grated air shaft in the ceiling allowed Danaë to breathe and get a little light, but on hot days the bronze cell heated up like a boiling kettle. The triple-locked door had no window, just a small slot at the bottom for a food tray. King Acrisius kept the only key, because he didn't trust the guards. Each day, Danaë got two dry biscuits and a glass of water. No yard time. No visitors. No Internet privileges. Nothing.

Maybe you're wondering: if Acrisius was so worried about her having children, why didn't he just kill her?

Well, my evil-thinking friend, the gods took family murders very seriously (which is weird, since the gods basically *invented* family murders). If you killed your own child, Hades would make sure you got a special punishment in the Underworld. The Furies would come after you. The Fates would snip your lifeline. Some major bad karma would mess up your day. However, if

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your child just 'accidentally' expired in an underground bronze cell . . . that wasn't strictly *murder*. That was more like *Oops, how did that happen?*

For months, Danaë languished in her underground cell. There wasn't much to do except make little dough dolls out of biscuits and water, or talk to Mr Toilet, so she spent most of her time praying to the gods for help.

Maybe she got their attention because she was so nice, or because she had always made offerings at the temples. Or maybe it was because Danaë was knockout gorgeous.

One day, Zeus, the lord of the sky, heard Danaë calling his name. (Gods are like that. When you say their names, they perk right up. I bet they spend a lot of time Googling themselves, too.)

Zeus peered down from the heavens with his super-keen X-ray vision. He saw the beautiful princess trapped in her bronze cell, lamenting her cruel fate.

'Dude, that is *wrong*,' Zeus said to himself. 'What kind of father imprisons his own daughter so she can't fall in love or have kids?'

(Actually, that was exactly the sort of thing Zeus might do, but whatever.)

'She's kind of hot, too,' Zeus muttered. 'I think I'll pay that lady a visit.'

Zeus was always doing stuff like this. He'd fall in love with some mortal girl on first sight, drop into her life like a romantic hydrogen bomb, mess up her entire existence and then head back to Mount Olympus, leaving his girlfriend to raise a kid all by herself. But really . . . I'm sure his intentions were honourable. (*Cough.* Yeah, right. *Cough.*)

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With Danaë, Zeus's only challenge was figuring out how to get into that maximum-security bronze cell.

He was a god, of course. He had skills. He could simply blast the doors open, but that might scare the poor girl. Plus, then he'd have to kill a bunch of guards, and that would be messy. Causing explosions and leaving a trail of mangled corpses didn't set the right mood for a first date.

He decided it would be easier to turn into something small and sneak in through the air vent. That would give him plenty of privacy with the girl of his dreams.

But what should he turn into? An ant would work. Zeus had done that once before with a different girl. But he wanted to make a good first impression, and ants don't have much of a 'wow' factor.

He decided to turn himself into something totally different – a shower of gold! He dissolved into a swirling cloud of twenty-four-carat glitter and sped down from Mount Olympus. He poured through the air shaft, filling Danaë's cell with warm, dazzling light that took her breath away.

FEAR NOT, said a voice from the glitter. *I AM ZEUS, LORD OF THE SKY. YOU LOOK FINE, GIRL. DO YOU WANT TO HANG OUT?*

Danaë had never had a boyfriend. Especially not a god boyfriend who could turn into glitter. Pretty soon – like in five or six minutes – she was madly in love.

Weeks passed. Danaë stayed so quiet in her cell that the guards outside grew incredibly bored. Then one day, about nine months after the glitter incident, a guard was pushing a food tray through the slot in the door as usual when he heard a strange sound: a baby crying inside the cell.

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He ran to get King Acrisius – because this was the kind of thing the boss would want to know about. When the king got there, he unlocked the door, stormed into the cell and found Danaë cradling a newborn baby in a blanket.

'What . . .' Acrisius scanned the cell. No one else was there. No one could've possibly got in, because Acrisius had the only key, and no one could have fitted through Mr Toilet. 'How . . . Who . . .'

'My lord,' Danaë said with a resentful gleam in her eyes, 'I have been visited by the god Zeus. This is our son. I have named him Perseus.'

Acrisius tried not to choke on his own tongue. The word *Perseus* meant *avenger* or *destroyer,* depending on how you interpreted it. The king did *not* want the kid growing up to hang out with Iron Man and the Hulk and, from the way Danaë was glaring at him, the king had a pretty good idea who she wanted destroyed.

The king's worst fear about the prophecy was coming true – which was kind of stupid, because if he hadn't been such a butt-brain and locked up his daughter, it never would've happened. But that's the way prophecies work. You try to avoid the trap, and in doing so you end up building the trap yourself and stepping right into it.

Acrisius wanted to murder Danaë and the little boy. That was the safest bet. But there was that whole *taboo* thing about killing your family. Annoying detail! Also if Danaë was telling the truth and Perseus was the son of Zeus . . . well, angering the lord of the universe wasn't going to help Acrisius's life expectancy.

Acrisius decided to try something else. He ordered his

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guards to find a large wooden box with a hinged lid. He had some airholes drilled in the top, just to show he was a nice guy, then he stuffed Danaë and her infant son inside, nailed the lid shut and had the box tossed into the sea.

He figured he wasn't killing them directly. Maybe they would perish from thirst and hunger. Maybe a nice storm would smash them to pieces and drown them. Whatever happened, it wouldn't be his fault!

The king went back to the palace and slept well for the first time in years. Nothing like condemning your daughter and grandson to a slow, horrible death to really ease your mind. If you're an airhole like Acrisius, that is.

Meanwhile, inside the wooden box, Danaë prayed to Zeus. 'Hi, um, it's me, Danaë. I don't mean to bother you, but my dad kicked me out. I'm in a box. In the middle of the sea. And Perseus is with me. So . . . yeah. If you could call me back or text me or something, that would be great.'

Zeus did better than that. He sent cool gentle rain that trickled through the airholes and provided Danaë and the baby with fresh water to drink. He persuaded his brother, the sea god Poseidon, to calm the waves and change the currents so the box would have a smooth journey. Poseidon even caused little sardines to leap onto the box and wriggle through the airholes so Danaë could enjoy fresh sushi. (My dad, Poseidon, is awesome that way.)

So, instead of drowning or dying of thirst, Danaë and Perseus survived just fine. After a few days, the S.S. *Wooden Box* approached the shore of an island called Seriphos, about a hundred miles east of Argos.

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Danaë and the baby still might have died, because that box lid was nailed shut tight. Fortunately, a fisherman named Dictys happened to be sitting on the beach, mending his nets after a hard day of pulling in the fish.

Dictys saw this huge wooden box bobbing on the tide and thought, Whoa, that's weird.

He waded into the water with his nets and hooks, and dragged the box to the beach.

'I wonder what's inside?' he said to himself. 'Could be wine, or olives . . . or gold!'

'Help!' said a woman's voice from inside the box.

'Waaaaah!' cried another, tiny voice from inside the box.

'Or people,' Dictys said. 'It could be full of people!'

He got out his handy fishing knife and carefully prised off the top of the box. Inside sat Danaë and baby Perseus – both of them grubby and tired and smelling like day-old sushi, but very much alive.

Dictys helped them out and gave them some bread and water. (Oh boy, Danaë thought, more bread and water!) The fisherman asked Danaë what had happened to her.

She decided to go light on the details. After all, she didn't know where she was, or if the local king was a friend of her dad's. For all she knew, she'd landed in Hackensack. She just told Dictys that her father had kicked her out because she'd fallen in love and had a child without his permission.

'Who's the boy's father?' Dictys wondered.

'Oh . . . um, Zeus.'

The fisherman's eyes widened. He believed her immediately. Despite Danaë's grubby appearance, he could tell she was beautiful enough to attract a god. And, from the way she talked

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and her general composure, he guessed she was a princess. Dictys wanted to help her and the little baby, but he had a lot of conflicting emotions.

'I could take you to see my brother,' he said reluctantly. 'His name is Polydectes. He's the king of this island.'

'Would he welcome us?' Danaë asked. 'Would he give us asylum?'

'I'm sure he would.' Dictys tried not to sound nervous, but his brother was a notorious ladies' man. He would probably welcome Danaë a little *too* warmly.

Danaë frowned. 'If your brother is the king, why are you only a fisherman? I mean, no offence. Fishermen are cool.'

'I prefer not to spend too much time at the palace,' Dictys said. 'Family issues.'

Danaë knew all about family issues. She was uneasy about seeking help from King Polydectes, but she didn't see another option, unless she wanted to stay on the beach and make a hut out of her box.

'Should I get cleaned up first?' she asked Dictys.

'No,' said the fisherman. 'With my brother, you should look as unattractive as possible. In fact, maybe rub some more sand on your face. Put some seaweed in your hair.'

Dictys led Danaë and the baby to the main town on Seriphos. Looming above all the other buildings was the king's palace – a mass of white marble columns and sandstone walls, with banners flying from the turrets and a bunch of thuggish-looking guards at the gate. Danaë started to wonder if living in a box on the beach wasn't such a bad idea, but she followed her fisherman friend into the throne room.

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