

A strange Christmas gift

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It's snowing.

No, that's not right. It is still snowing.

It started on Monday a week ago. Today is Thursday, 24th of December and it hasn't stopped snowing even once.

You could think the city has fallen asleep. There is hardly any traffic. Once in a while you see a taxi or some buses and even some cars heading from work home but it's not that loud and lively like it normally is. I can see only a few pedestrians too. They take the underground these days. The wagons are crowded and pressed with people. There is no air, only a bitter smell.

I'm walking down the street and don't mind the cold. It feels nice on my face. The air is clean and smells good. I have to admit that I hadn't expected my first winter in New York like this. The city looks good. There are hardly any traces of the storm left which destroyed Manhattan four month ago.

A storm they had said in the news but I had known better. I had seen this too.

I come from my workplace and since nobody is waiting for me at home I'm strolling the streets. The lights from the Christmas decorations are turned on. The few people I see hurry along the sidewalk, gifts under their arm or heading into the next store and buying something for their loved ones. I could be happy about seeing this. It's quiet and peaceful. Something I don't see every day in my life. And I didn't have a fit in the last two weeks. I should be grateful – and I am in a way.

Except I wish I wouldn't be here. It's not that I don't like New York. I guess my homesickness is drawing on me. I live in New York for three months now and planned to go back to my parents in Sacramento for the Christmas holidays but with so much snow around and no chance that it will stop in the next two days the airports have closed down. So I will see them sometimes in the new year.

It's my first Christmas without my family and friends and it shocks me how much that disturbs me. Even though I'm 22 I miss them very much right now. The worst is that I haven't found out anything in these three months. I still have as many questions as the day I came here. I'm not closer to my biological parents than before.

I'm adopted.

I found out when I was 14 but I had guessed and known it deep inside me for much longer.

I'm different than my two best friends Neil and Romeo. I can see things they don't even dream about. When I was 14 I finally told my parents what I see every day. I told them about the monsters who live right among us and no one sees but me.

The monsters are everywhere, looking like humans or are invisible to the others. But I see their true self. I learned their names and how to fight them. Well, I guess that happens when they try to kill and eat you several times.

The good thing is that these monsters told me who or rather what I am. I'm half a human and half a god. A demigod they called me. Well, in fact they called me tasty demigod. I try not to think about that term so often.

I told my parents about the other things too. The things in my head, the pictures that hunt me since my birth, making me numb, scared and desperate. Before they had known they thought I've got some bad epilepsy and taken me to so many doctors I stopped counting. But none of them could help me. It's not something with my brain. It's in my body, my blood. The pictures make me so scared that I can't move anymore. I start shaking and sweating and it takes hours, sometimes days before my life is back to normal again. The things I see are bound to happen. They are visions.

I told my mother and father all in one very long night. After that I felt much better. There was a little less weight on my shoulders. When they told me they couldn't answer my questions because I was not their biological child the weight was still gone. Like I said, I had guessed it long before.

My mother kissed me on my forehead, my dad patted my back, like they had done so many times before and they told me that they love me more than anything and that it doesn't matter what I am or what I see. They believed me right from the start and there is nothing I could be more grateful for. They still love me and that was all I was ever hoping for. And to tell the truth they became quite fascinated with the thought that the Greek and Roman gods did really exist and most of all still exist.

Demigod.

When I heard that word for the first time I knew that it was true. And it was the moment my search began. With this to be true I had known that I was not crazy, that the pictures in my head mean something. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know where I really came from – my parents found me on their porch – and of course who my godly parent is. So I start reading every book about Roman and Greek mythology I could lay my hands on. It was not always that easy because I have slight dyslexia but I managed to get through them sooner or later. With every book I was hoping to get some of my answers. Till now my search was not very successful.

To finally get some of the answers I came to New York. One day in Sacramento I met a satyr who told me that the gods are here. The satyr had also asked me why I haven't been claim and wanted to tell me more but first he had to look about this one child, who was probably a demigod too and make sure that it was safe. I was supposed to meet with him the next day, but he never came. I'm wondering what happened to him or the other demigod. I'd never found out.

With the knowledge that the Greek gods are in New York I was determined to go there. I got a job in the New York Public Library for Humanities and Social Sciences in the first try. After studying old Greek and Roman mythology for three years, learning old Greek and Latin since I am 16, it was rather easy. Yes, I'm quite a bit obsessed. But learning Latin and Greek was not that hard. In fact it was easier than some of my English lessons at school.

My pace becomes faster. After nine hours of stillness, slow and quiet movements, whispering, sorting and reading books my body aches for a run or even a fight. Unfortunately I can't see a single monster. Seems like they are celebrating Christmas too. I imagine them around a fire and singing Jingle Bells in the falsest of tones. That

makes me laugh a little.

Sometimes I wonder myself why I'm working in a library. It's not that I love books that much or like to interact with so many different people. This quiet and slow work it totally against my nature which loves to move, to run, to fight and to hold a sword. I guess that's exactly the reason why I chose this kind of job for a living. I'm the one who decides about my life and not my body. He strikes me down often enough.

I walk down the 5th Avenue and the Empire State Building is right in front of me. It's only a nine minutes walk from the library but I've never been here before. Even though I want to know so badly who I am I haven't had the courage. I don't know what will happen. I don't know what I expect to happen.

I reach my destination too fast and stand at the corner of the opposite building. I'm starring at the Empire State Building and watch the tourists go in and out. They don't care that it's Christmas Eve or maybe that's why they are going. To see all the Christmas lights in the city. My eyes travel the buildings side up to the top. There is nothing special to see. Only clouds and stars but nothing that speaks of some ancient Greek magic or Olympus and the gods.

I'm kind of relieved. I want to know the truth but the truth is what scares me the most. I ponder what to do know. Go in and ask for the floor the gods are in, ask for Olympus? Very unlikely. I am tempted to turn my back and walk away. I guess Olympus will be over the Empire State Building a little bit longer. So there is no need to hurry.

I flinch from myself. Since when am I a coward? Yes, I am scared but that always makes me go right through it, with the head first. Why not now? I will go to the top at least, see if I can find something... godly there, a way to go to Olympus. And if not, I have to think of something else.

Right in the moment when I want to take the first step, there comes a sound out of my pocket.

I've got a little more time.

When I take my phone out I'm expecting a message from my friends telling me how much fun I'm missing right now. I unlock my phone and hold my breath. It's not from Neil or Rome or even my parents it's from "It".

"It" is the person or thing who sends me messages without a sender. I don't know who writes these messages. I just get them for 10 years now. I don't hear often from "It". Once or twice a year at the best and I can't say that I'm happy about its messages. It's just freaking creepy to receive messages without a sender!

It started at the morning of my 12th birthday. I woke up and found a mobile phone on my nightstand. Back then they have been bigger than know. It hardly fitted in my trousers pocket. I thought it was a present from my parents but they said no. And from the look on their faces I believed them. So not knowing where it came from, I tried to get rid of it. Mobile phones were something new on the market; only for the rich and important business people and I didn't need one.

To make it short, I couldn't get rid of it. It always appeared on my nightstand the next day so I gave up. Eventually I turned it on but for five months nothing happened. I was more than shocked to get a message on day out of the blue and without a sender. The message said: "How are you?"

I couldn't wrap my mind around it. So I didn't answer. But it happened again and again. And one day I was so miserable, my fit has been so bad and I received the massage the moment it was over, I told "It". I told "It" the truth about me, about the things I see; about how scared they make me, how afraid I was that everything becomes true, that

I can't do anything to stop it.

The answer took me aback and turned my world upside down: "I know, I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"It" knew.

I don't know what or how much but "It" knew. That was the moment I start hopping to get some explanations.

I never got answers of my pleading questions that I wrote after that.

That has been 10 years ago and no explanation so far. "It" writes once in a while, asking me how I am or what I'm doing. Sometimes I answer, sometimes not. The phones change their appearance every year on my birthday, turning into a model which isn't even on the market yet. I can use it to phone and text with my family and friends and surfing the internet and it has so many apps that I can't use all of them in one life. Oh and the best part of it is - besides that I never got a bill - when I press the only little button at the left side it turns into a sword.

Yes, fantastic.

But if I had been ever asked I had liked to have the visions stopped. But I was never asked. The blade from my sword is celestial bronze and the hilt is black leather. I like the way it feels on my fingertips.

Of course I had the thought that the phone was a hint to my father or mother. A phone is for connection and communication so it could be Hermes. But the technique is very delicate so maybe Hephaestus too. But what is with my love for music? I couldn't live without it. I play piano and guitar and sometime I even sing – when no one is listening. So maybe Apollo?

I shake my head and with it the memories from my thoughts. Then I touch the little envelope on the screen of my phone and the message opens. "Rockefeller Center, Christmas tree", it says.

I get angry.

What am I supposed to do with that?! Shall I go there? Why? I curse under my breath and put the phone back in my pocket. I glance to the Empire State Building again. I could go home, I think. But no one is there. I would be alone and as much as I don't like the thought of going into the Empire State Building or to the Rockefeller Center I like it more than going home right now.

I turn my back to the building and I'm kind of relieved that it has to wait a little longer. I walk the 5th Avenue up, in the direction of the library, pass it and go straight ahead till I reach W 49th Street corner. There I turn left and that's when I can see the big Christmas tree.

What I see is overwhelming. My mouth drops a little bit open because I'm so impressed and blinded at the same time. I've seen many Christmas trees. My mom puts a lot of effort in the one which stands in our living room every year and no one is allowed to mingle with her. Only as a kid I helped her but when I grew older and saw and understand how much she loved doing it, carefully arranging the Christmas balls, the tinsel, the lights, and straw stars, I let her do it alone. She never complaint.

But this is just... I have no words.

The tree is gigantic. There are so many lights, so many Christmas balls, stars, bells, angels, sweets, tiny presents and tinsel I don't know where to look first. In front of it stands a row of white angels each one with a golden trumpet in his hands.

It's brilliant and totally exaggerated. I don't know if I shall look or not. It's like a car accident: You can't stand to look at it but you can't look away either. That is pretty much how I feel right now.

When my mind processed the sight I look at the people. There is a couple right in front of me. The man and woman are holding hands, looking dreamingly into each other's eyes and share a kiss. Then there is a little girl at the hands of her parents. She jumps up and down. Her eyes full of wonder and excitement. The parents are smiling and look at their girl lovingly. There are more of them: young and old, rich and poor people. When they pass the Christmas tree it seems that all their worries disappear, their hurry is not so urgent. They become children again, loving the sight of the Christmas tree.

For a moment I forget why I'm here. I go to a bench and sit down, looking at the Christmas tree. A soft sound comes from somewhere. I try to capture some of the mood, to let myself carry away with it and forget my own worries and questions.

My phone rings again and I'm back in the present. Another message and I expect it to be from "It", but this time it's from Neil. I guess they are at a Christmas party right now. When I read the message I know I was right. "Where r u? Have a drink 4 u 2"

My lips form a smile while I imagine them both on a party. Neil is probably getting drunk and tries to hit on two or three girls at the same time – of course they don't know from each other – so that at the end of the night he will get himself into trouble, when he is so drunk that he can't remember their names and tries to take them home all at once. Neil is mostly a player and sometimes I want to slap him right in the face – not that I hadn't done this – but when Rome or I are in trouble, have worries or simply a very bad day, he is the one cheering us up and let us think that it isn't that bad. Rome will be at the party too, trying to prevent Neil from getting so drunk. It's a fulltime job. Rome, or rather Romeo, but never calls him by this name, is very responsible. He is the oldest of five siblings so that explains a lot. He is more like me except the fits of course.

When I want to answer Neil another message comes in. It's from Neil again: "looking for a new girlfriend 4 u, say thx."

I'll punch him.

He knows exactly that I hate it and he still don't stop. For the first time this day I'm happy not to be in Sacramento. I don't know what I would do to him right know. I decide not to answer. I don't have to say anything to that. It's not worth it. But there is a new message incoming. This time from Rome.

"Hell, why do I bother?! Why am I the friend of such a dick? I should let him make some stupid mistakes and not babysit him! He is 23 and not 3. Could really need a hand here! Not funny."

Despite my anger I have to chuckle. Some things never change and that is not always something bad. I answer Rome: "He needs someone who watches out for him, you know that. That's just how he is. But tell him I'll kill him if he tries to get me a girlfriend. I can do this alone." Before I send the message I decide to be honest and add: "I would rather be with you and babysit Neil, than be stuck in this big city alone. Not funny, too."

I send it and the next moment I take a picture of the big Christmas tree in front of me. Then I send it to Rome, Neil and my parents and sit waiting for an answer of them but my phone keeps quiet for a few minutes.

"Don't tell me...", I mutter under my breath. Did the snow cut the connection too? That would make this day just a little bit more awesome. Turns a crap day into a bitch of a day.

"Bad day?", asks a voice behind me and all the hairs at my neck stand up. I haven't realized there was someone sitting at the bench behind mine. I didn't hear him coming

and that startles me. Usually I'm always cautious and watch my surrounding. I turn my head slightly but only see his head. He is wearing a jacket for hiking I think and he has got brown hair. I don't answer and turn around again. I glance one last time at my phone and decide to go home. Whatever "It" wanted me to do here I don't care anymore.

"You don't talk with strangers, do you?", he asks again.

"I just don't have anything to say to you. But if you insist on it: It was not one of my best days but I had far worse."

"What happened?"

I shake my head and can't believe that I'm about to answer him when the words come already out of my mouth. "My friends and family are in Sacramento while I'm stuck in this city because of the snow. Someone told me to come here and I don't know why."

"Maybe he had something to say to you."

"Would be a surprise.", I say through gritted teeth and then stop. He? I've never said it was a "he".

I turn my head again, but I can't see his face.

"Who are you?", I ask and silence follows. A knot forms in my stomach but I won't ask again. Eventually he says: "Can't you guess?"

"You are 'It.'", I say matter-of-factly.

"It? I have many names but no one ever called me 'It.'" He seemed amused by that and I feel my anger rise.

"Then tell me your name!"

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because you would want to know more, and that will hurt you one day."

I snort. That's so stupid. I pull my half-fingered gloves from my hands and stare at the scars on my palm. "I don't think it can be worse than that.", I say not directly talking to him.

I've made the wounds for these scars myself. Every time I feel it starts I take my pocket knife and hold onto the blade. The pain bounds me to reality. It's the best reminder that the things I see are not real, not yet.

I started it when I was 15 and there are many scars on both of my hands. On my work and before my friend I hide them under the gloves. I don't want them to ask questions that I can't answer. But I guess they know about it somehow. I wonder why they never ask.

"It hasn't stopped?", he asks behind me and jerks me out from my thoughts, which I'm grateful for.

"No."

For a moment we both fell silent. I can feel the words on my tongue. They want to be said. I feel the urge to talk about it, to talk to someone, anyone. My parents would only be troubled and scared and most of all hurt. Scared for the things I tell them and hurt because they can't help me.

"He died like I saw it so many times.", I blur out. Then I can't stop anymore. "I couldn't do anything to stop him because I couldn't find him. I guess you didn't want me to find him. He fought for what he believed was right and lost, but he didn't regret anything. I thought it would be over with his dead but two month later it went on. Only the pictures are different." I catch my breath.

"How?"

"More destruction, more death, a face in the heart of the earth awakening, giants

rising and fighting, one for each Olympian god. I see the gods fall. The world will die and reborn in blackness by its mother."

My sentences hardly make sense. When I say it out loud I'm aware of it. There are so many things I see, I want to say, but I can't find the words for all that horror. Maybe he thinks I'm crazy. He wouldn't be the first one. I am on top of that list.

"Outside of New York there is a camp.", he begins. "It is for demigods like you. They build a ship, the Argo II, to fight against Gaia. They need your help. You see more and clearer pictures than the oracle. And you're a good fighter. I've seen this."

"They need my help?" I emphasize the first word. He hesitates. I can hear it in his breath.

"Yes, they need your help and so do we. The gods, Greek and Roman, have to work with the demigods and fight together to stand a chance. The more demigods the better. Some of us don't want to but not all of us are so blind. "

"You have watched me all the time, haven't you?"

"Yes.", is his simple answer.

"Why do you bother now? You only send cryptic messages once in a while but you never told me who you are or who I am. A Cyclops told me. And now you want me to fight for you? Isn't that a bit too much to ask?", I snap at him.

"You know, you wouldn't only fight for us."

I hate it when he is right.

"Where is that camp?", I grumble.

"The camp is in Montauk, at the end of Long Island on the North Shore. The main entrance is through Half-Blood Hill. You will know when you're there. There is a dragon at the entrance."

"Nice.", I say and my voice is full of sarcasm. "When I go there, I want you to answer a question for me."

"I do not negotiate."

"I won't go to camp."

Again there is silence. "That's it? I don't want you to go there.", he says.

"What? Then why telling me?"

"Because it's the best for all the others."

"And not for me?"

"I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. Probable not."

"That's getting better and better."

"I can only tell what I wish for."

"And that would be?"

"For you to be happy and without pain. ... What is it that you want to know?"

I concentrate on the last he had said. "It's just one question and you only have to answer with yes or no. Let's say it's my Christmas present since I won't get any other tomorrow or for this year."

"I hadn't expected you to say something like that. It's not you.", he says and sounds amused. Great, I made a god laugh twice this evening. It should count for something.

"You can always try."

Again there is a light chuckle in the air. "One question.", he grants me finally.

"Oh." No I'm the one who didn't expect that.

"Do you need a moment to think about it." He had heard my surprise.

"No. Are you my father?"

"Ah...", he says and I don't know if he is surprised or disappointed.

"Yes or no?", I remind him.

"What will you do with that answer?"

"I haven't thought that far.", I admit and again he chuckles softly, then he answers.

"Yes."

I close my eyes and try to figure out what I'm feeling. I'm not surprised or anything. Somehow I had known and this has only been a confirmation.

"When you go to camp don't wonder about their reactions. They haven't seen a new demigod in your age for a while, especially one that is not claimed."

"Will you claim me one day?"

"No, not if I can avoid it."

"Why? Oh let me guess, it saves me from pain."

"Yes, you and someone else. Which reminds me; maybe they will recognize someone else in you. Don't think too much about it. Demigods of one god can look the same sometimes."

"That sounds so fantastic.", I mutter and regret having made that deal. "Will I see you again?", I ask but only silence follows. I turn around and see that he is no longer there. I sink back in the bench, take a deep breath and let it go. I'm confused and curious and scared and happy all at once. I feel strange and sick... I take out my Mp3-Player turn it on high volume and listen to the music. The singer is screaming loud in my ears and I imagine it to be my own screams. That is it what I want to do. I stare at the Christmas tree a little while longer.

Was this day really necessary?

I'm on the hill, on Half Blood-Hill to be precisely. It's still snowing of course. A little far ahead there is a pine tree with something golden in its branches. It's guarded by a dragon. Before me is the Camp. I can see some houses and a strawberry field. On the field there is not a bit of white snow. It's December 25th. I haven't closed my eyes since yesterday but I'm not tired. Adrenalin keeps me going or maybe the 20 cups of coffee I had in the night. Normally coffee makes me want to sleep and I wanted to sleep but it didn't work. So I took a taxi and drove to Montauk. The rest I walked making a stop once in a while to buy something to eat or drink and pondering if I should tell my parents what I'm about to do or not. I have talked with them this morning but haven't said a word about my strange encounter last night. They knew anyway that something is not right but didn't ask about it. They will wait till I will tell them my own. That is one of the many reasons I love them.

No monsters had been on my way too. I'm disappointed. I would have liked to have some of my stress released on them before facing whatever lies between the trees.

I shake my head and go on. My hand finds the way into my pocket and I feel for my mobile phone. It's better to have a grip on it when I don't know what will happen. I walk down the hill. I hear some sounds like a hammer on metal, shouts and voices but I can't make out a clear conversation.

I walk through the forest, some nymphs staring at me and whispering to each other.

Then I walk on a clearing and there is a big house in front of me. Before it stands a centaur and when I come closer I can see that he was expecting me. But the closer I get the look in his eyes change. It becomes bewildered, shocked and disbelieving. But then his face change again and he smiles as if he is happy to see me.

"Nice to meet you.", he says and of course I don't answer. I don't like the fact that my sire had planned all this. "My name is Chiron and I'm glad you found your way here. I

hope you didn't have any trouble."

"He told you, didn't he? That I would come.", I state. I don't know why I get angry about it.

His smile disappears. "Yes, he did. But you must know that it was rather a warning. It is not very common for demigods to find their way alone into camp, especially if they had been on their own for so long."

"And whose fault is that?", I say more to myself than to the centaur in front of me.

"Chiron, who is that?", asks a blond haired girl with gray stormy eyes, who stands suddenly besides him. But her last words had been more like a whisper. Because as soon as she saw me her face became pale and her eyes as big as golf balls. She looks like she has seen a ghost.

"I was about to find out.", answered Chiron, his eyes still wary.

"What's so shocking about me?", I ask the girl and she backs away for a moment. I've always had a special effect on girls but never like this and I'm a little bit offended.

She breathes in and shakes her head. "Nothing.", she answers. "For a moment I thought you were someone else. You resemble him."

Was that why he has warned me? "How?"

"Blue eyes, blond hair, and something in your physique."

"Your boyfriend?"

Her look becomes sharp and warning. Ah, 2 minutes in the camp and I committed a blunder. That beat my old record from fifteen minutes. Neil will be happy when I tell him.

"What is your name?", she asks not so scared anymore, if she had ever been.

"What is yours?", I ask back and can't hide a little smile. Again there is this shocked expression in her face.

"You should behave yourself.", says Chiron now. "You are new to this camp and welcome but it is your turn now to introduce yourself." His voice is full of authority and I'm not sure if I like it. I roll my eyes. Don't understand a little bit of fun at all, I think. I decide it will be best to answer. I'm still determined to find out who my parents are and I know that I can get some answers here.

So I say: "Corey Ravenos."