A Christmas Carol

by ghostystarr

Summary

“Christmas wasn't always such a sore subject with you.” Or, Nico gets a reminder of what Christmas truly means. Solangelo.

Notes

Welcome to the lowest level of Solangelo hell. I shall be your guide. If you step this way, you'll find another Christmas special. Happy Holidays!

Based on "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens.

See the end of the work for more notes.
"I hate holidays," Nico groaned as he plopped down beside his sister at the dining table.

Hazel sniggered. "Good morning to you, too, Nico."

Nico flicked a green jellybean off of the table. "I mean, Christmas is a Christian holiday! Why is everyone here making such a big fuss over it?"

His sister sighed. "Oh, c'mon, Nico! It's Christmas! Look how happy everyone is! Isn't that reason enough to celebrate?"

"No," he huffed determinedly. "It's a dumb idea and I'm not going along with it."

"And what does Will have to say about that?"

Nico blushed heavily and quickly looked over his shoulder, as if expecting the son of Apollo to be standing directly behind him. "Nothing!" He spun back around quickly, glaring at his sister dangerously. "He doesn't own me, you know!"

"Oh, Nico, you're so whipped it's sorta pathetic."

He gawked at her. "Excuse me?"

Hazel lowered her sandwich and rolled her eyes. "What about last night at dinner?" She cleared her throat and continued in a deep, fake voice, 'Hey, Nico? I'm going to be working late tonight so can you maybe bring me some of that leftover lasagna you made?' And you just blushed and muttered that you'd be there at six." She poked his cheek. "Whipped."

Nico waved her away. "All right, all right! You made your point! But he still can't make me go through with this! Did you know he signed up to be Santa? And he wants me to be an elf."

Hazel giggled. "That's actually really cute."

"It's not cute!" Nico hissed. "It's embarrassing! And I'm not going to stand in the blistering cold in the middle of New Rome just so Will can ask some little kids what they want for a holiday that doesn't even go with our culture!"

"Sounds like someone's heart is a few sizes too small," Hazel taunted, singsong, and picked up her sandwich again. "Really, Nico, it's just one day. Will's excited. I'm excited. Heck, the whole city is excited! Just do it."

Nico crossed his arms. "I won't! You know, I used to be revered – feared, even!"

"And now you're like a little declawed kitten," Hazel teased. "Nice sweater, by the way."

Nico gestured to the hideous red and green sweater with a grimace. "See! This is exactly what I'm talking about! Will made me wear this!"

"How did he make you wear a sweater?"

"Uh." Nico's cheeks turned red. "He, er…"

"Never mind. If you're making that face then I don't want to know."
He resisted the urge to hide his red face or to melt into plentifully available shadows behind them. "Shut up."

Hazel shrugged. "Just bite the bullet. You two are going to Seattle together in the fall, right? You're probably going to be doing a lot of stupid stuff like this for each other."

Nico groaned and let his head thunk against the table. "Kill me now."

Hazel patted his head and began eating again, humming a Christmas carol that just lowered Nico's mood straight to miserable-levels.

"Nico!" a sudden voice shouted. Reluctantly, he raised his head from the table in time to see Jason Grace and Percy Jackson rushing up, bundled in their winter gear. "Can we borrow you for a second?"

"No." He face-planted the table again. "Leave me alone."

"He's hiding from Will," Hazel stage-whispered.

Jason and Percy nodded urgently. "That's fine," Percy said. "But we could seriously use your help!"

"It better not be Christmas related."

"Er…" Percy shuffled on his feet. "Actually…"

Nico glared up at him, but Jason stepped in front with his hands up. "Please, Nico? Boy Wonder, over here," he jerked his thumb in Percy's direction, "let Tyson pick the tree but it's huge. We can't decorate it all ourselves so we were kind of hoping you could summon some dead guys with extra hands."

Nico gaped at them. "That would be a huge abuse of my power! You think I can run around summoning skeletons willy-nilly just to decorate some stupid tree? You want Santa hats on them, too?"

"Can you do that?" Percy blinked and Jason smacked the back of his head lightly.

"Help us or we'll tell Will where you are!" Jason pointed at him threateningly.

The shadows at Nico's feet stirred. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh." He drew himself up higher. "I would! He's been looking all over for you. Someone about getting fitted for your costume."

Nico's eye twitched, but he relented. "Fine! But, I swear to Styx, if you breathe a word of this to Will —"

Jason pretended to zip up his lips. "Bones where the sun don't shine. Got it."

Nico rolled his eyes but stood up and followed the other two demigods out of the dining hall, using them as cover in case Will came by. Just as they were nearing the tree – which had to be as tall as most of the buildings in New Rome, Nico was actually pretty impressed – he became aware of a presence at his back. Feeling a formidable sense of foreboding, Nico cautiously turned and was immediately seized into two familiar arms. "GOT YOU!"

Nico squawked and struggled against his captive's arms angrily. "Let go of me right now! I'm not playing around! WILL!"
Will Solace just chuckled and held on, lifting Nico right off the ground and into a rib-crushing bear hug while somehow dodging the rapid stream of desperate kicks Nico was aiming at him. Nico hated when Will did this. It made him feel like a little kid. Stupid tall sons of Apollo. Will was oblivious to Nico's plight. "Thought you could just escape, huh? Sorry, hun, but in all that black you stick out in the snow like a sore thumb!"


"Nope! You agreed to our little deal! One day as an elf and I'd do that... thing."

Up until that point, Jason and Percy had been silent, but at the mention of 'that thing' they started to chuckle and Nico felt the blood rush to his cheeks again. "A thing?" Percy smirked.

"What's that about, Nico?" Jason sniggered. "Oh, is it one of those kind of deals?"

"Shut up, perverts, it's not like that at all!" Nico snapped at them, aiming his fluttering kicks at them next, but Will had a strong hold on him.

Jason and Percy just broke into hearty laughter, collapsing onto each other. "You know what? We'll just see if Frank will morph into an octopus or something," Percy choked out. "You guys have fun."

"Yeah, sorry for interrupting. Have fun as an elf, Nico!" Jason saluted him.

"Get back here, you cowards!" Nico yelled at their retreating backs.

Will just snorted against his hair. "Calm down, will you? It's not going to be as bad as you think!"

"Yes, it will!" Nico huffed, but ceased his struggling. "I don't want to do it."

"You said you would! You even agreed to the deal!"

"Deal's off."

Will's jaw dropped. "Deal's off? Seriously? You can't be serious!"

"Why do we have to celebrate something as stupid as this anyways?" Nico ripped out of Will's slacked grip and stumbled back while pulling his dark coat over his shoulder again.

"It's Christmas! And it's the first one we get to actually celebrate together!" Will gave him a kicked-puppy look. "I just wanted it to be special."

"Well, I don't!" Nico hissed out before thinking. "I hate this time of year! It's for idiots! Singing carols and dressing up trees. It makes no sense!"

Will's expression steeled. "Then I guess I'm stupid for actually wanting to act like a normal couple for once and spend the day with my boyfriend."

Nico's eyes gleamed. "Guess so."

Will let out a disbelieving cough. "Gods! Do you even hear yourself? We're not kids anymore, Nico! You can't keep pulling this stuff! Why are you always so...?" He shook his head, took a deep breath, and held his hands up. "You know what? Forget it. I don't even care anymore. I'll see if Piper or Hazel will help me. You can spend Christmas alone. Like you want. It's always your way or the highway, anyways. Why would I think this time would be any different?"

Nico squeezed his arms tighter around himself, staring down at the thin sheet of snow building on the
road. He already felt a guilty sting at Will's words, but instead of apologizing like he wanted to, he just gave a shrug and tried not to wince when Will gave an angry puff of air.

"Whatever. Just do what you want." Will straightened the knit cap on his head before brushing past Nico quickly, their shoulders colliding. "Merry Christmas," he muttered bitterly as he passed.

Nico spun around, but the apology died on his tongue as he saw Will's angry stomps. His shoulders slumped and he exhaled, long and heavy and a visible mist against the December chill, and made his way back to the little apartment Will and he were staying in during the winter break.

It had been Will's decision to spend Christmas at New Rome. Nico had wondered why he wouldn't prefer to spend it with his family, but Will had been adamant that he wanted to spend it there. "Wouldn't it be nice to spend it with all our old friends?" he had reasoned and Nico shrugged. It had been a while since he'd seen Percy and Annabeth or Jason and Piper. They were attending college, too old for camp, and Nico and Will were about to face their final summer as well. It was a strange thought. Camp Half-Blood had become the closest thing to a home he'd had in seventy years. He liked the Hades Cabin and how it overlooked the Apollo Cabin, and how he could sometimes hear the Apollo kids break into a musical number and, even though the medic would deny it later, listen as Will's slightly off-tempo voice led them. Will had grown into the role of head counselor of his cabin over the years, becoming to many young campers a guiding figure. It was going be a heavy loss when he left.

Nico kicked the snow off of his shoes and stomped inside, still reeling from their argument. It was nothing new for them to argue. They fought a lot. Constantly. But usually it was done while hiding a grin or immediately made-up for with a lot less talking and a lot more kissing. They rarely argued.

He knew he'd hurt Will by refusing to get all holly-jolly for the holiday season, but what did Will really expect? He didn't like parties, presents, or people, and all three were pretty much the definition of Christmas.

He started to miss the days where he would rush off and melt into the shadows whenever he wanted, could let off steam by tearing down row after row of monsters, and come back to camp to Will, whose anger would disperse the moment he saw the tiniest scratch on Nico's skin and immediately pull him into a warm hug, kissing the wounds until they resembled tiny freckles.

_We're not kids anymore, Nico! You can't keep pulling this stuff!_

Nico scowled at his reflection in the window. Nico was acting childish? Will was the one running around in a _Santa Clause_ suit. He shook his head. He didn't understand him.

He shrugged the thought off and went to go heat up some coffee. Will had turned him onto the stuff during all those mornings the moron had stayed up all night in the infirmary and downed the caffeine in gallons. Eventually, the dependency spread to Nico and he could barely get up in the mornings without it. He poured himself a cup, assuring himself that Will would come home soon and apologize for him and everything would go back to being normal.

Three hours later, Will still wasn't back.

Nico tried not to let the worry get to him. He ignored the guilt stirring in his stomach and got another cup of coffee.

The sudden strum of a harp made Nico jump and drop his mug, which splintered into a dozen pieces against the floor. He spun around when a loud, charismatic voice sighed out, "Young love can be hard. Stubbornness gets you nowhere. Suck it up and go."
Nico glared at the man sitting in the chair across from him. He was holding a harp, dressed in summery clothes, and smiling sunnily. His blonde hair and rugged features were identical to Will's, crystalline blue eyes obscured by a pair of dark sunglasses. "Apollo," Nico huffed. "What are you doing in my kitchen?"

The sun god chuckled and tipped back so that he was balancing on the back to legs of the chair. He gave a lopsided grin that his son so often used that it made Nico feel uncomfortable. The physical similarities between Will and his father were stunning, and did nothing to quell the sense of regret rising in him. "I'm answering one of my children's prayers." Apollo spread his arms out in a 'come-at-me-bro' manner. "Merry Christmas!"

Nico took a few steps back and said nothing.

"Now, Nico. Is that how you greet your father-in-law?"

He choked on air and blushed violently. "You are not my in-law!"

"Not yet!" Apollo winked. "God of Prophecy, my boy! Anyways, I couldn't help but overhear that lovely spat you got into with my son earlier…" he trailed off, but Nico could hear the warning in his voice, could see the threat glinting behind those sunglasses.

Nico gritted his teeth. "It's none of your business!"

Apollo let out a slow chuckle and leaned forward. "Actually, it's exactly my business! You see, I have a vision of the future – one that I would very much like to see happen – and you, son of Hades, are wrecking it!"

"Shouldn't you be locked away on Mount Olympus?" Nico hissed. "Butt out."

"My father… has dealt out his punishments." Apollo shuddered and played an ugly chord on his harp. "But that's neither here nor there. I'm here because of you."

Nico pointed at himself. "Me? What's the big deal? Just because I don't want to make a fool of myself suddenly makes me the bad guy?"

Apollo sighed and shook his head. "In order to please the ones you love, you will always have to do things you don't like. Even if it makes you a fool."

"There are some things that I just can't do," Nico muttered. "Christmas is one of them."

"And why is that?" Apollo tilted his head to one side. "Christmas wasn't always such a sore subject with you."

Nico scowled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Allow me to refresh your memory." Apollo grinned and snapped his fingers. At once, the kitchen began to dissolve around them. Nico, habitually, reached for his sword, but it wasn't at his side. He gasped as everything twisted, condensed, and went dark.
Past

Chapter Notes

I had to lie down after writing this chapter. I don’t do angst so well, guys. I’m not built for it. Plus, Nico is just so… hnnn. (Lies down.)

“Oh, don’t be like that. Open your eyes.”

Slowly, tentatively, Nico raised his head. He was standing in the middle of a dark street with a single lit lamppost. The air had a familiar scent to it, but Nico couldn’t quite remember why. It was cold and breezy, not nearly as warm as it had been in New Rome. Fat, lazy snowflakes drifted through the air and joined the slushy mess on the ground before it melted. There were rows of houses lined up on either side, all dimly lit, and Nico could hear the faint sound of music coming from the one on his right. A knot formed in Nico’s throat, his eyes widened, and it felt like someone had punched him in the gut. “Where… where are we?”

“Don’t recognize the place?” Apollo hummed. “Guess it’s been a while. Today is Christmas Eve 1939.”

Nico spun around to gape at the god beside him. “What…?”

Apollo shrugged. “Well, I mean, we’re not really there. This is more of a memory-link thing via Hypnos’s network. You know, it doesn’t even really matter. We’re in Venice, Italy. December the twenty-fourth 1939.”

A sudden chill possessed Nico that had nothing to do with the wind whirling past his ears. He immediately turned away from the homes and stomped in the opposite direction. “I don’t want to be here. Take me back.”

Apollo just sighed. “Can’t go that way,” he sang, bouncing on his feet.

“Watch me,” Nico started to say but suddenly ran into something solid. He blinked and cautiously raised a hand. It felt like a wall was there, but he couldn’t see anything.

“It’s as far as you can remember,” the sun god said simply. “You can’t go any further back.”

Nico scowled and spun around, nearly slipping on a bit of wet snow. “What was the point of bringing me here?”

Apollo pointed down the street to a brightly lit house. It was clearer than the rest of the houses, which all looked as though Nico was viewing them through fog or static. “I just want you to look through that window.”

At once, Nico shook his head, backing up against the invisible barrier. “No. Forget it.”

“Now, Nico. It’s nothing scarier than what your father is planning to give you for Christmas.”

Nico sneered at him. “You expect me to follow you when you kidnapped me and sent me back to the last place I ever want to be!”
“I know you’ve experienced great loss here. I still remember how Maria’s death affected my uncle.”

“Don’t say that name,” Nico spat, crossing his arms over his chest for warmth. His teeth started to chatter. “Just don’t.”

Apollo raised an eyebrow. “I had no idea my son chose such a coward as his partner.”

Nico’s hands immediately flew to his side, grasping for his sword, which was nearly eighty years into the future. “What did you say?”

“Can’t even face his own past,” Apollo continued in a lofty voice, waving his hands around uselessly. The gesture reminded Nico painfully of Will, who had no idea what was happening, who probably wasn’t even thinking of Nico at all. Nico felt something twist in his chest and he had to resist the urge to slide down the barrier and hide his face in his arms. “The way Will talks of you you’d think that you’d be some fearless, all-powerful god like me. Perhaps his trust was misplaced.”

Nico knew what game Apollo was playing. The last thing he wanted to do was continue to be one of his pawns and yet…

“Will you take me back to Will if I do this?”

For the first time all night, Apollo’s expression turned sympathetic. “Just go to the window. You don’t need to go inside or even say anything. Just look. Just remember.”

Nico stared down at his feet, folding his arms around himself again. He glanced back up at the brightly lit home again. He felt like the concrete beneath his feet were pulling him down, keeping him rooted where he stood, and he really didn’t want to move. For a few stubborn moments, he stood there, lost in thought.

He never thought he’d find himself back in the 1930s, even if it was only a projection of his own memories, never thought he’d be back on his home street, staring at his old house like nothing had ever changed. But it had. Everything had changed. He just hadn’t realized how much until he was standing in the freezing cold.

On the one hand, he really didn’t want to give in to Apollo’s little game. On the other, he knew the Olympians were stubborn bastards when it came to their plans. The sooner he would get it over with the sooner he could go back to New Rome and wait for Will. He might as well prove Apollo wrong while he was at it. No amount of holiday-themed poems and puns were going to make him change his mind about this holiday. He hadn’t had a Christmas since… well since 1939!

“Well?” Apollo called over to him. “Just because I’m the Sun God doesn’t mean I’m still not freezing my Jingle Bells off!”

And that was enough to make Nico’s resolve turn to steel. He started to march in the direction of his old home, passing Apollo without a glance. The closer he got to the house, the brighter it got. Some parts were clearer than others, like the front door and the one upstairs window overlooking the street and the small garden in the front. It almost looked like a patchwork quilt, all of them glittering from different times of days, as if his memories couldn’t all agree on one solid picture. It was disorienting and with each step Nico felt like turning tail and flipping off Apollo as he fled.

He glanced over his shoulder, but didn’t see Apollo anywhere. The street behind him was darkening, fading out of thought. Nico had no choice but to move forward.

Taking a deep breath, he walked up to the sidewalk. Curiously, he rested a hand on the picket-fence but his hand went right through, like he was nothing more than one of the shadows dancing around
him. He was reluctant to step onto the walkway leading up to the door, afraid he’d slip right through.

Suddenly, he felt a warm hand push him forward. He nearly smacked his head right off the concrete before he regained his balance. It was definitely solid. He spun around, ready to mouth off Apollo again, but there was nothing.

“Stupid gods,” he mumbled before walking forward. The longer he walked, the farther away the door seemed to become, and the dread started building up inside of him. It felt strange, wrong, to be back here, surrounded by dying memories. Even as he finally reached a foggy window, the images inside flickered and skipped like a broken video.

His heart was pounding so hard he thought it might burst. Nico took one glimpse inside before he quickly turned away. “I can’t do this,” he admitted out loud. “Is that what you want to hear?”

He felt a warm presence at his side. “You think I would waste my time just to hear that? I want you to prove me wrong, di Angelo.”

Nico took a deep breath before looking back into the window. At once, a scene started to form inside. A murky living room pieced together, complete with a couch and a low table. In the center of a room, there was a colorless rug and three figures came into focus. Nico’s heart immediately flew up to his throat and he choked back a gasp.

Bianca. She was there, looking more or less how he remembered her. Younger than their days at the Lotus Hotel, but her hair was still in a long braid with a sole piece hanging in front of her eyes. She was wearing a pale white dress, sitting on the floor as she played jacks with another boy with similar-colored hair and a huge excited grin on his face.

Nico almost didn’t even recognize himself.

There was no way that boy was him. Apollo must have been playing another trick. He didn’t remember ever being so… so small.

Nico’s younger self was bouncing on his knees and attempting to grab the little ball out of his sister’s hand, but Bianca held it out of reach. He pouted and, sheesh, could he still pull off that puppy-dog look at seventeen? Bianca said something, but her voice sounded drowned out, like it was coming from underwater. Little Him’s pout deepened and didn’t waver until Bianca finally sighed and relented the ball.

The real Nico stood outside, watching as his younger self as he tried and failed to play the game. Bianca laughed at him. Nico never took his eyes off of her. Then, he realized there was another figure sitting on the couch, watching them with a fond smile.

Nico turned away. “I looked. Can we go now?”

Apollo appeared at his side, looking into the window wistfully. “The Christmas of what was,” he mused. “The last one you shared with your mother.”

“Don’t,” he warned. Apollo may be a god, but Nico had never been so good at obeying the rules. He was pretty sure half of Olympus wouldn’t mind seeing him knock Apollo’s ego down a few pegs.

Apollo held his hands up defensively. “I still have more to show you. If you’re ready.”

Despite himself, Nico cast another look into his old home, watching himself play with his older sister, having no idea of what lay ahead, of what the next year would bring. Nico could feel old scars threatening to tear, and he hastened to turn his attention to something else. “How come it still feels...
cold,” Nico asked hoarsely, “if we’re not even really here?”

Apollo shrugged. “It’s your mind. Perhaps you feel cold because you want to.”

Why would anyone want to feel cold? Nico hadn’t chosen to always be cast in the shadows. It had been his life. He didn’t understand what Apollo was trying to get at.

Apollo seemed to sense his skepticism. “Ready to move on?”

No, was his immediate thought as he rested a hand on the window. His hand slipped right through, disappearing entirely. He didn’t trust his voice so he simply nodded and their world started to twist and darken once again.

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The next thing he knew, he was in a familiar-looking tunnel. It was dark, damp, and overall just downright depressing. Nico would know this place anywhere. “We’re in the Labyrinth,” he said. “Why?”

“Honestly, haven’t you ever watched those corny Christmas specials on TV?” Apollo shimmered into view, bringing warm light with him, illuminating the dark passageways. “Charles Dickens ringing any bells?”

“You’re Christmas Caroling me,” Nico grumbled. “I got that. Just why did you bring me here?”

“Another Christmas past,” Apollo announced theatrically. “‘You fear the world too much,’ son of Hades. Face yourself.” With that ominous message, Apollo disappeared but the light remained. Nico hated to admit that he was grateful.

Suddenly, he heard a stifled sob coming from behind him. His instincts spiked, his guard set, and he spun around quickly, eyes searching for the source. It sounded again, louder, and Nico once again found himself looking into the face of his younger self.

Piercing pain filled him. He remembered this day. It was Christmas Eve, only a few days after the Winter Solstice meeting had ended and Percy Jackson had returned to Camp Half-Blood with a figurine and a broken promise. It was only a few days after he’d lost her.

Nico backed up until his back hit the wall – solid that time – and slid down until he, too, was sitting across from himself. He remembered what the younger version of himself was feeling. Lost, confused, alone, angry, praying to any god he could think of, looking for answers that wouldn’t be given to him. Nico wanted to reach out and comfort him, wanted to say something, warn him. Gods, the advice he could give himself; a long list of “What Not to do.”

“This is actually breaking my heart a bit,” Apollo said, suddenly sitting beside Nico again.

“Merda!” Nico shouted, jumping in his skin. “Do you have to keep popping up like that? Either stay or go.”

“Hey, I’m a busy guy,” Apollo defended. “I can’t spend all night at your pity party! Especially when I’ve got an angry son asking for advice every other minute.”

“Will’s been praying to you?” Nico’s stomach twisted. “What… what does he…?”

“Oh, something about a grumpy promise-breaking elf, I’m not sure.” Apollo twisted a finger in his ear. “Sometimes it’s hard to hear him. He prays so loudly that it makes my ears ring. It’s that
supersonic gift of his coming through.”

Nico nodded. “No offense, but your son is really annoying.”

“How could I ever take offense to that?” Apollo rolled his eyes. “And he has some rather interesting things to say about you, too, you know. I’m just trying to help.”

Help. Nico looked at his ten-year-old self, who was curling in on himself, collapsing into furious sobs. “You have a funny way of helping people.”

“Same to you, Ghost King.”

“What’re you—?” Nico turned, but Apollo was gone again. “Gods damn it!” he hissed. “Why do I even bother?” Nico had no choice but to sit there, in the dimly lit corridor of the Labyrinth, watching his heart-broken self.

He took a deep breath. “It gets better,” he muttered, even though he knew his words wouldn’t be heard. “I mean, well, it actually gets worse first… but then it gets better.”

A sudden ghostly figure formed beside the younger Nico, transparent and floating. Nico felt sick. Minos.

The former Ghost King peered down at Nico, and he could see the intent already in his eyes, the lies spinning in those ageless eyes. “What’s this?” his raspy voice, laced with faux-empathy, rippled through the memory.

The younger Nico flinched. He looked up at King Minos in shock. “Wh-who are you?” he cried in a much higher voice.

“How did you get here? L-leave me alone!”

“How did I get here? How did a mere child manage to open the… ah, yes. That makes sense. One of his children would be able to do such a thing. Still… to have such power at such a young age…”

Already, Nico’s curiosity had been hooked. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You’re a son of Hades, are you not? I can’t say I can recall the last time I saw one. Alive.”

“I… I had a sister,” Nico’s small voice cracked. “But she’s… she…”

King Minos’s eyes glinted. Nico could practically see the plan forming in his transparent head. “Well… why don’t you just bring her back?”

The younger Nico stared up at him, wide-eyed and eyebrows drawn. “Wh-what?”

“Raising the dead is one of the perks of being a son of Hades. Didn’t you know? You have great power. It would be child’s play once you learn.”

Nico blinked. “H-how do I do that?”

King Minos placed a hand on his chest. “I serve as one of the three judges in the Underworld, your father’s realm. I understand it quite well. I could teach you how to control your powers. If you’d allow me.”

Nico’s eyes narrowed. “Why would you want to help me?”

King Minos grinned. Back then, Nico thought it had been comforting, sympathetic. But now, Nico could see the mal intent, the dishonesty. “What’s your name?”
Nico glanced down at the ground, uncertain. After a few moments, he relented. “Nico. Nico di Angelo.”

“It is a pleasure, Nico di Angelo,” King Minos proclaimed. “I am King Minos, ruler of Crete, son of Zeus and Europa! I had this Labyrinth constructed thousands of years ago. If you can locate the center, you’ll be more than ready to bring your sister back. What do you say?”

The younger Nico nodded at once, fresh tears building in his eyes. King Minos beamed and clapped Nico on the back. “Well, then! Merry Christmas, Nico di Angelo! Here’s to a new partnership!”

“Stay away from him!” Nico – the real Nico – shouted, rising to his feet. “Stop!”

But the scene was already slipping away, changing once more, and the Labyrinth was gone.

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Nico gasped as he was bombarded with light. It was blinding after being in the dark for so long. He groaned and rubbed his burning retinas, cursing in two different languages.

“So, when your sister passed so close to the holiday, you grew to despise it.”

Nico groaned again, raising his head. He blinked as his eyes adjusted and spotted Apollo in front of him. “Just how is this supposed to be helping?” he hissed.

“I still have more to show you.”

Nico choked on a bitter laugh. “Oh, great! I can’t wait to see what’s next! My jolly Christmas spent in the Underworld with dear old Dad? Oh, I’m really feeling the Christmas spirit now!”

“Hazel,” was all Apollo said before disappearing once again.

“Hey!” Nico shouted. “Get back here! I’m not done with you!”

“Nico?”

Nico froze as the ground solidified underneath his feet. A room formed around him. It was small, dirty, and covered in McDonald’s wrappers. A shimmering image of Hazel appeared. An Iris message. “Hazel!” Nico ran toward her. “Thank the gods. You have to help me. Apollo’s got me stuck in some sort of dream-travel state. You have to tell Will—”

“Hazel? What is it?”

Nico stared in disbelief as his fourteen-year-old-self ran right through him. He shivered. That was not a pleasant experience. As his memory-self approached Hazel, Nico quickly remembered. It was Christmas Eve, only a few years ago, the winter before Percy wandered into Camp Jupiter. Nico had searched and searched for any signs of the son of Poseidon, his already twisted brain concocting a thousand different scenarios which would never happen. Even though, at that point, Nico had already given up largely on Percy Jackson it had still hurt when he disappeared.

Hazel was wringing her hands together, looking almost nervous. “I was just wondering… when you were coming back.”

Nico frowned. “I told you to call only if there was an emergency.”

“I-I know! And I’ve been… well the blackouts have started back up and I was hoping…”
Nico sighed and shook his head. “I’ll be there as soon as I can, Hazel, but I’m sort of busy with something.”

Hazel looked down, nodding. “It’s just… I was hoping we could spend Christmas together. You know. Brother and sister.”

Nico scowled. “I don’t think I’m gonna make it. Sorry.” He didn’t sound very sorry at all. Nico wanted to go over and smack himself for sounding so ungrateful.

“Oh. It’s okay. I understand. Just be careful?”

“Yeah. You too.”

Both figures disappeared.

“Harsh.” Nico didn’t even flinch when Apollo placed a hand on his shoulder. “You shut her down pretty quick.”

Nico shrugged his hand off. “I was… preoccupied. Percy had gone missing and—”

“Right, of course. Percy Jackson, how could we forget him?”

Nico blushed. “I never said I was proud of it. I regretted saying no the minute I said it.”

“So why didn’t you go? You could have shadow-travelled there in an instant.”

“I… I don’t know.”

Apollo hummed. “I thought grudges were your flaw, not hubris. It’s all right to let your hair down every once in a while, you know. Every few millennia I like to take a vacation to unwind. Few years back I went to Norway. Too cold for me, but it was still pretty nice.”

Nico groaned and sat down on an overturned box. “I get what you’re trying to do, okay? Just take me back already. I’ve had enough.”

“Sorry, Nicky Boy, you’re just not seeing the whole picture just yet.” Apollo snapped his fingers and a golden lyre formed in his hands. He gave it a strum. “Will is starting to regret your fight, by the way. He’s looking for you.”

Nico chest clenched. After what he’d just been through, he would rather face his pissed-off boyfriend than spend another minute with his delusional father. He stared down at his toes. “I don’t deserve him.”

Apollo snorted and played another chord. “Well, that’s not entirely true. No one deserves love more than another. It’s one of the only things in this world that doesn’t have laws or limits.” He sighed dreamily. “It’s beautiful.”

“Oh, gods, I think I liked it better when you made puns.”

“You flatter me. Anyways, we’re only part-way finished with our little bonding trip.”

“Bonding trip,” Nico repeated. “Are you kidding me?”

“Well, I like to bond with all of my children! You are my son-in-law so technically—”

“I’m not getting married to Will!” Nico’s face turned red. “We’re not even twenty yet!”
“And I have the greatest wedding gift planned out, too,” Apollo said. “You’ll love it. It screams, ‘FLASHY!’”

Since when had Nico ever been flashy?

Apollo grinned. “Well, you’ve faced your past and the spirits that haunt it.” He snapped his fingers. “Let’s try the other direction, shall we?”
Will sighed, tapping his foot against the floor impatiently. His internal clock was telling him it was half-past seven, which meant that Nico was ninety minutes late. Was he still angry from earlier? It had been a nasty fight. Will’s temper had just grown its own mouth and started talking before he could stop it.

He sat in the dining hall, frowning at his barely-touched plate. Nico was skipping out on dinner. The voice inside his head was already telling him to stop being such a prat and go find his boyfriend and apologize. Really, what else had Will expected? Nico always hated Christmas and anything related to the holiday.

Still… Christmas was important to Will. It was about family and giving and sharing, and Will considered Nico to be family. He wanted to exchange presents with him and share the holidays together like a real couple. There were so many sore topics that they had to tread over in their relationship already. He didn’t want Christmas – a day full of joy and cheer – to be another one of them.

He sighed for the ninth time since he sat down and shut his eyes, hands folding on his lap.

_Uh, hey, Dad. Sorry if this is a bad time or Zeus is making you clean up Olympus or whatever. It’s just… okay, I don’t ask for a lot but I could really use some advice. Like love advice. …Hello? Anyone hearing this?_

“You don’t need to shout so loudly, William. I can hear you pray even in di Angelo’s dreams.”

Will started violently, knocking aside his goblet full of Kool-Aid and staining his pants. He groaned. “You scared me,” Will muttered, grabbing a napkin.

“I have a tendency of doing that today, it seems.” Apollo nodded. “Anyways, William, what d’you need? I’m sort of in the middle of something here.”

“It’s Will,” he corrected. “And I… I need advice.” Will looked down at the floor to hide his grimace. Asking his father for love advice was his last resort, lowest of the low. Apollo rarely gave straight answers and more than often Will left their conversations feeling twice as confused as before. But, with everyone in New Rome not wanting to take sides and possibly have Nico’s wrath to pay for it, Will was out of options. Thankfully, Apollo seemed to take his disposition as begging.

He lit up and clapped Will on the shoulder. “My boy! It’s about time you realize your father’s gift! What’s the trouble?”

“It’s Nico,” Will sighed. “We got in a fight.”

Apollo nodded. “I heard, yes.”
Will huffed. “Does everyone know?”

“William, I’m certain half of the Underworld heard you two.”

“Will,” he amended again. “Oh, gods, does Hades know? Am I going to run into zombies or something if I try to go home?”

Apollo chuckled. “Right now, Hades’s attention is pretty focused on me. He’s rather angry with me, and I’m only trying to help.”

Will frowned suspiciously. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing! Now, about this fight…”

His shoulders slumped. “Yeah. I got upset at him for not wanting to celebrate Christmas together. But, I mean, he’s always hated the holiday, and now no one knows where he’s at, and I keep picturing him alone and cold and I’m going insane!”

Apollo patted his shoulder. “If it makes you feel any better, I believe Nico di Angelo is feeling regretful as well.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You’re all he talks about. It’s almost annoying.”


“Bonding trip!” Apollo exclaimed in what was supposed to be a reassuring voice. “I’m just giving him some pointers!”

Will glared. “What do you mean? And why did you go to Nico before me?”

Apollo laughed. “Don’t be jealous, William! After all, I’m putting myself through this for your benefit.”

Will started to look around the hall. “Where is he? What did you do to him? He’d better be all right!”

“Relax, relax! He’s fine, He’s just taking a stroll down memory lane at the moment.” Apollo flicked his sunglasses up, revealing his sky-blue eyes.

“Explain. Please,” he added grudgingly.

“Touchy. Well, you know how your beau likes to tinker around with dreams, right? I called in a few favors and Hypnos hooked me up. Nico is asleep right now – someplace safe, don’t worry.”

Will understood. But it did nothing to dispel the bitter taste in his mouth. “I don’t think I like the thought of you being in my boyfriend’s dreams.”

Apollo chuckled. “He’s a bit too young for my tastes, Billy Boy.”

Will groaned and hid his face in his hands. “He’s okay, right? What dreams are you showing him?”

“The ones he needs to see.” Apollo smiled and lowered his sunglasses. “I have to go. Your troublesome boyfriend is calling.”

“Dad, go easy on him. Please?”
Apollo’s laugh echoed against the hall as he faded out of sight. “But of course!”

Will blinked at the empty chair his father had just been occupying. He had a bad feeling about all of this. His father’s attempts to help usually just gave Will a large headache that even his own healing abilities couldn’t dull. Nonetheless, he started to rub at his temples in hopes of soothing the throbbing ache. He groaned, face landing onto the table.

“I’m sorry, Nico.”

Will, I’m gonna kill your dad.

It was all Nico could think as Apollo led him through a seemingly endless corridor. Nico didn’t recognize the place. Its ceilings were so tall Nico couldn’t see the tops. It was as though someone had stretched them like a distorted painting. Apollo had poofed them in there then quickly disappeared with a promise to be right back. At once, Nico started trying to find a way out or to wake himself up. Pinching, slapping, hitting his head against the wall. Nothing worked. He searched for an exit but no matter how long he walked, or in what direction, he always ended up right back where he started.

When Apollo suddenly popped up beside him twenty minutes later, he found Nico sitting on the ground, out of breath. “Did you fit in a quick workout?” Apollo teased. “I’m sure my son will appreciate that.”

“There’s no way out of this place,” Nico wheezed, ignoring his jab.

Apollo raised his eyebrows. "Isn't there?"

“What?”

“I just spoke to – what does your mortal slang call it now? – your bae?” Nico groaned. “He was pretty concerned.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That we’d gone fishing,” Apollo chuckled. “For some reason that only made him worry even more.”

Nico sighed and leaned his head against the wall. “I’m a Scrooge and I should get over myself. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Closer,” Apollo nodded, “but no dice. I also want you to mean it.”

Nico scowled. He just wanted to go back to New Rome. He wanted to find Will. How much time had passed anyways? It felt like forever. His internal clock was absolutely shot.

“Ready to continue?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really.”

“Then lead the way.”
Nico would never get used to the dizzying after-effects of however Apollo shifted them through time. His head felt like lead, throbbing in time with his quick heartbeat. He almost didn’t want to open his eyes. Slowly, carefully, he peeked one open and then the other. When he saw the scene around him, he almost wanted to cry in relief.

He was standing on the snowy street in New Rome, in the center square of the town. All around him were the familiar Romanesque buildings with wreaths and banners hung. Blinking lights of all colors were strung around the tree in the middle of the square along with large, thick ornaments and tokens of every god throughout the branches. It was empty, which was strange, as it wasn’t particularly late. Usually, it didn’t matter what time of day it was. New Rome was always loud and bustling. Still, the relief Nico felt was paralyzing.

He turned from side to side warily but Apollo was nowhere in sight.

He was back? Had someone knocked Apollo off his high horse and pulled him free? Or had something gone wrong? He didn’t care. He was just glad to have that over with.

He started walking in the direction of the small guest cabin, where hopefully Will would be, waiting. He thought about just shadow-travelling in but Will was pissed enough. He didn’t need another strike against him.

As he turned the corner to the street where his cabin was, he got the sense that something was wrong. Ahead of him, the street was flickering, dark and shapeless. Just like how the streets in Venice looked in Nico’s past memory. A bad feeling rose in his gut but he squashed it down.

“Where am I?” he called out. “What now?”

“Figured it out pretty quick.” Apollo shoved his hands in his pockets, suddenly right beside Nico as if he’d been there the whole time. Maybe he had been the whole time. “Christmas of what will be! Three years into the future! Scene One! Lights!” He clapped and the sky brightened. “Camera!” He held up a finger-camera, angling it over Nico’s face and squinting. “And action!”

Nico frowned. “It’s past, present, future.”

“I’m taking it in a new direction!” Apollo said loftily. “We’re running out of time.”

“Fine.” He crossed his arms. “Where is everyone?”

“Probably inside, enjoying the holiday with their families and loved ones. Percy and Annabeth are finishing their last year of college, planning to get married in the Spring. Jason is still building shrines and Piper is with him. They’re in Portugal right now. Frank and Hazel are still here, celebrating. No one has heard from you in years.”

Nico looked at him. “What?”

“You ran off. Like you’d wanted to before. Disappeared.”

“Where’s Will?”

Apollo smiled sadly. “Not here.”

“What do you mean?”

The sun god hummed. The sound was pitched and a bit sad. “There’s really nothing keeping him here. Not since you two went Splitsville.”
Nico’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Mmhm. A few years back, Will got tired of waiting. He was ready for a major commitment—marriage, kids, dog, the whole package. Your interests didn’t line up.”

Nico stared at Will’s father incredulously. That was absurd. Nico wanted those same things. Not now but… one day. He wouldn’t deprive Will of that. “That wouldn’t happen.”

Apollo shrugged. “It did. Or, it will. It went beyond wanting to spend Christmas as a couple. Will wanted to go on dates, wanted to have family dinners, wanted some sort of reassurance that you really cared. You kept blowing him off.” Apollo glanced at him. “Sound familiar?”

Guilt filled his gut. It had happened a few times. Will got the night off from the infirmary and wanted to take Nico out, away from camp, to an actual dinner, or wanted to go on a picnic in the strawberry fields. Nico complained that leaving camp was too much trouble than it was worth, that they didn’t need to spend money, or that he didn’t want satyrs and sprites dropping in on them. There was always an excuse but, when it came right down to it… Nico was just… “I’m not good at this,” he finished aloud, staring anything but the god beside him.

“What aren’t you good at?” Apollo’s tone was level as if he already knew the answer.

Nico scowled. “The sappy stuff. I don’t know how to act on dates. I hate pet names. I don’t like public displays of affection. I always say the wrong things. I can’t apologize even when I know I’m wrong. I just—” He hung his head. “I don’t know why Will even bothers with me.”

Apollo smiled. “Why do you think he bothers with you?”

Nico thought long and hard, but he simply couldn’t find one thing. He shrugged. “He likes to heal stuff?”

Apollo flicked his forehead and made a loud, buzzing noise. “Wrong! Guess again.”

Nico rubbed his head. “Uh… I can fight pretty well, I guess.”

Apollo rolled his eyes. “You make him happy! Plain and simple! Do you know how many times he prayed to me to give him the guts to ask you out? He went on and on and on about how funny and brave you were.”

“M-me?”

“Of course! He’s crazy for you.” Apollo placed his hands on his hips. “And I know it isn’t just one-sided. You’ve got it in you, kid. You don’t need to be afraid of being yourself. It’s what made Will fall for you in the first place. So what’s stopping you?”

Nico heaved a long sigh. The only thing he hated more than meddling gods was when said gods were making solid points. He had always been self-conscious, had always had that underlying fear that one day Will would realize that Nico was nothing special, or people would hurt him simply for being in a relationship with a son of Hades.

But Will didn’t care. He liked Nico for Nico, and that was all he could really ask for. It would be nice, too, to go out on real dates and show off a bit, to tell the world that Will was his and he was Will’s and anyone that had a problem with that could take a dip in the Lethe river.

“Where’s Will now?” Nico asked. “Can I see him?”
He had to know. Was Will happier without him? Was Nico really holding him back or could Nico still have a shot?

Apollo smiled and snapped his fingers and scene changed.

…

Nico was in a small room, which was lit by a sole desk lamp. His breath caught in his throat when he saw a beautifully familiar figure slumped in the chair, fast asleep surrounded by a mountain of textbooks and papers. He stepped forward, hand outreached as if to run through the messy, flat blonde locks, but froze. Will looked… awful. There were bags under his eyes. His face was unshaven. His hair was dirty. His clothes were rumpled and wrinkled. “Will?” he whispered.

“After you guys broke up, Will went to Seattle alone. He didn’t date again. He just threw himself into his work. No one ever told him to slow down and relax.”

Nico rested his hand on Will’s head, but it went right through. Will stirred in his sleep slightly and let out a little sigh.

“You help him just as much as he helps you,” Apollo said. “Like I said before, it isn’t one-sided.”

Nico glanced at the sun god. Since when did he actually make sense? Had Nico really been that oblivious?

“I have one more thing to show you.”

Nico hesitated. “And after that you’ll take me back?”

“Scout’s honor.”

Nico took one last look over at Will, who mumbled something unintelligible in his sleep. It sounded very close to Nico’s name. Nico’s chest tightened. He wouldn’t let this future happen. He wouldn’t let Will spend Christmas alone, miserable and exhausted.

He took a step back and nodded. “Hurry up, then. I’m ready.”

Apollo beamed approvingly. He placed a hand on Nico’s shoulder and everything began to change once again.

…

Once the spinning stopped, Nico found himself in the very same room. It was brightly lit and much more organized. Will was sitting upright at the desk, working diligently on something. He was wearing one of those eye-sores of a sweater with gaudy reindeer plastered along the front. A slightly too-big Santa hat sat on his head, dipped to side. Along the wall, there were several pictures. Upon a closer look, Nico realized that they were all of them – Will and Nico – together. Some of them had their friends; Nico spotted Percy, Jason, Hazel and Frank, Annabeth and Reyna, Lou Ellen and Cecil, and the majority of the Apollo cabin.

“Will, they’re here. Get your workaholic butt out here.”

Will turned at the same time Nico and Apollo did and promptly broke into laughter. “You look so cute!”

Once again, Nico barely recognized himself.
A slightly-taller Nico di Angelo stood in the doorway, arms crossed and frowning. He had on a matching sweater depicting Santa in his sleigh with two reindeer drawing it. If Will was to stand next to him, the picture of Santa and all nine reindeer – including Rudolph – would be complete. “Shut it,” his future-self huffed with no bite. “Hazel and Frank just arrived. Everyone else will be here soon.”

“All right, I’m coming.” Will stood up and walked over to him, resting his hands on his shoulders. “You all right?”

Nico broke into a smile. “Yeah. I’m fine. Just get out there, will you? Hazel’s already asking me about wedding stuff and I told her you were planning all of that.”

Wedding stuff? “Whose wedding?” he whispered to Apollo, who chuckled.

“I told you,” he sang back. “God of Prophecy. There are two different futures waiting for you. One that’s dark and one that is, well, take a look.”

Will pushed a quick little kiss to Nico’s lips and the real Nico had to bite back a smile. He didn’t respond. He was busy watching himself as Will wrapped an arm around him.

“Oh boy. I better start making up some stuff up about dates and flowers, huh?”

Nico snorted. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

They walked out of the room, Will flicking the light off behind him and letting the door shut.

“Well,” Apollo clapped his hands together, “have you decided what you’re going to do now?”

“Yeah.” Nico straightened up. “Take me back. I have a promise to keep.”

The room lit up along with Apollo’s smile. "And that, Nico di Angelo, is what I wanted to hear.”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter!
Nico blinked at the sudden brightness the snow brought. This time he knew he was back in New Rome, in his own time. People were bustling hurriedly down either side of the street, holding onto bags and packages as they finished up their last minute shopping. Nico took in a deep breath and let it out. It was good to be back.

"As much as I love traditions," Apollo said beside him, "I'd hate to have to do this again next year so take good care of my son, will you?"

Nico huffed. "Trust me, I have no interest of any more 'bonding trips' with you."

Apollo feigned offense. "And here I thought we really connected back there! Is this what I get for helping my future son-in-law?"

Nico scowled. "Stop saying that!" He peered suspiciously at him. "Wait… I'm not going to find any rings in my stockings, am I?"

Apollo let out a hearty laugh at the suggestion. "Not this year, unfortunately. You kids still have a few years to go. You're only seventeen, after all."

Nico glared. "So what was all of that about then?"

"A few years feels like a few days when you've lived as long as I've had." Apollo hummed. "But it's your life, son of Hades. When the time comes, you will still have the power to choose. Just remember yourself and you'll do fine."

Nico rolled his eyes.

"And one more thing!"

"There's more?"

Apollo chuckled. "Merry Christmas!"

And then he was gone.

Nico took a moment to look at the Christmas tree sitting the center of the square and felt a wave of contentment. Sure, the droned-out and overplayed Christmas music and the gaudy decorations still annoyed him, and the groups of kids pelting snow at each other were being too loud, and the overall joy and cheer sort of made him a bit ill, but it wasn't so bad anymore. Not when he had people to look like idiots with.

_In order to please the ones you love, you will always have to do things you don't like. Even if it makes you a fool._

"I'm not saying thank you," he muttered, hoping that Apollo could hear him, but grinned to himself and started to walk briskly toward his little cabin.

When he got there, he was surprised to see his sister in the living room. "Nico!" she gasped. "You're back!"
"Hazel?" Nico kicked off his shoes to avoid tracking snow inside. "What're you doing here?"

"Oh, uh… Will sent me." She raised a familiar green costume. It was the one Will had wanted him to wear. "He asked if I would fill in since you—wait a minute, where did you go? Everyone was really worried!"

"Sorry," Nico said, and he meant it. He walked over and pushed a kiss to her cheek. "I'll explain some other time but for now…" He took the costume from her and gave a long, suffering sigh. "I have to go humiliate myself."

Hazel smiled and patted his cheek. "That's so sweet. Will will be ecstatic. He really wanted to spend Christmas with you."

Nico nodded. "Yeah. I know."

"We all really want you to be here," she added. "It just wouldn't be the same."

Nico gave her a grateful smile. "…Thanks, Hazel."

She hummed. "No problem, brother mine. I'll go, uh, check on Frank. Last I checked on him Percy was trying to convince him that he could keep him hydrated if he morphed into a squid or something."

"Octopus," Nico amended. "You'd better run then."

"See you tonight," she said, "and, don't worry, Will isn't the type to force you into anything. He just wants to have a laugh with you."

"I know that now," Nico assured her. "Still doesn't mean I have to like it."

Hazel snorted. "Fair enough. Merry Christmas, Nico."

Nico smiled. "Merry Christmas, sis."

…

Will walked into his cabin with a yawn, stretching out until his spine gave a merciful pop. "Hazel?" he called. "Are you almost ready? I was thinking we could—" He tripped over a pair of boots in front of the doorway and nearly face-planted. He straightened up, annoyed. Nico always left his shoes in the worst places.

He froze.

Nico's shoes.

"Nico?" he called, searching the small cabin. "Nico, you here?"

"Back here," Nico's faint voice shouted from the bedroom. "Be out in a minute!"

Relief swarmed through him, warming him from the tips of his fingers to the depths of his toes. He half-ran into their shared bedroom and found that the adjoined bathroom door was closed. The light was on, peeking through the door, and Will let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. He approached softly, wondering if Nico was still angry or if he was even angrier at Will for his father having kidnapped him. He knocked carefully. "Nico?"

"Dammit." Nico cursed from inside and there was a bang – like he'd hit his head – quickly preceded
by another curse. The doorknob turned and it slowly swung open. Will's jaw dropped.

Nico was staring fixatedly at the floor, cheeks bright red. He was wearing the tight green elf costume with all its ruffles and bells. The slightly darker tights clung to his legs in a way that was practically unfair. The hat kept slipping off and Nico grumbled as he straightened it. "Well?" he hissed, daring him to make a cheeky remark. "Why aren't you in your costume? We'll be late."

Will gawked at his boyfriend for a few moments before breaking into a fit of laughter. "Oh m-my gods!" he choked, holding his sides. "Y-you look so adorable!"

Nico flushed a deep red and smacked Will's shoulder hard. "Idiot. I'm doing this for you so I don't wanna hear it!"

Will struggled to contain his amusement, biting his lips and covering his mouth. "Sorry, sorry! It's just… this is why I wanted you to have it fitted first! It looks… ridiculous on you."

Nico scowled. "Great. Thanks."

"Oh, wait until you see me in my Santa suit. I look horrible." Will grinned and eyed his boyfriend up and down. "Those tights, though. To be honest, I'm a bit reluctant to let you walk around in public like that." He gave a low whistle and motioned for Nico to do a spin but got another smack instead. Will laughed as he rubbed his shoulder. "Tell you what, just wear the jacket and hat and maybe the scarf."

Nico looked up at him through his eyelashes, seeming confused. "What?"

"Yeah." Will sighed. "I shouldn't have tried to make you do something you really didn't want to do. I'm sorry."

Nico shook his head. "No, I get it. I mean, I know you weren't doing this to be a jerk or anything. I'm sorry, too. I don't mind celebrating Christmas if I'm with you guys. It's just… been a long time since I've had a good one."

Will smiled. "We can change that, you know."

"Yeah." Nico smiled back and Will felt like he was invincible. "A-and this is about more than just Christmas. I-if you really want to do something then you should tell me. Like, date stuff. And… gods, you know I even rehearsed what I was going to say to you and I still sound like an idiot."

Will pulled Nico into a hug. "Nah," he murmured, "you're not an idiot. Dense, yes, but not an idiot." He kissed Nico's forehead. "Thank you."

Nico returned the hug. "I should thank you. I… I really… you know."

"Yeah." Will tightened his hold and somehow did understand. "I do. And me too."

…

The whole thing wasn't as bad as Nico had imagined. It was made much better due to the fact that he had actual pants. Will looked absolutely ridiculous donned in red and a fake beard. He had a pillow stuffed under his shirt to make himself look 'jollier'. He wasn't alone, however. Nico was sure he must have looked quite the sight with his pointed hat and fake ears and bright green overcoat with its red trimmings and tight collar while having normal pants tucked into his boots. Separately, they would have looked insane. But, together… well, Nico didn't think he minded whenever Will shot him that hundred-watt smile.
Will, true to his word, made them stop and ask a group of kids what they wanted for Christmas. Nico wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or hide when Will crouched down and put on a fake low, raspy voice as he talked to the small kids staring wide-eyed at him.

"Are you really Santa?" one of the younger kids asked skeptically.

"Of course I am!" Will proclaimed in his old man voice.

"Who're you?" A little girl pointed at Nico.

"I'm an elf." Nico jerked his thumb at Will. "I'm here to make sure Santa doesn't hurt himself."

The kids giggled at that and Nico was surprised at how good that felt. Especially when Will pouted in mock offense.

"Don't listen to him," Will turned back to the kids. "He's getting coal this year." Nico rolled his eyes. "Anyways, what do you all want for Christmas?"

"A sword!"

"A new bow!"

"I want a charm that'll make my teacher forget about homework!"

"A really sharp axe!"

Will's smile became strained. "Those all sound kinda dangerous." His voice slipped a bit. "Why don't I get you guys a football or stuffed animals or something like that?"

A boy with short black hair shook his head. "My dad is Mars! And he promised me the sharpest axe ever!"

Will gaped at the kids for a moment. When he spoke again, it was in his normal voice. "B-but you could hurt yourselves!" He started to flail. "You should be more careful! Weapons aren't toys! Do you know how many demigods injure themselves on a yearly average?"

The boy pointed accusingly at him. "You're not Santa!"

Nico wasn't even trying to hide his laughter as the kids swarmed Will, playfully knocking him over into the snow and shouting. Will squawked and held out a hand. "Nico! Help!"

"Who, me?" Nico pointed to himself. "Sorry, I'm one of Santa's elves. I don't help imposters."

In the end, Nico did help Will from the kids. His beard had fallen off and his hat was askew, suit all twisted and wet from the snow. Nico put a supporting arm around him as they made their way back to the cabin.

"Traitor!" Will sniffled.

"You were the one that told me not to break character."

"In a life or death situation you can!"

Nico snorted. "That was hardly a life or death situation. And you even said 'no matter what!'"

Will laughed. "Whatever. Man, I'm tired."
"You ran around like a madman all morning and got mauled by five angry children. I'm surprised you're still able to hold yourself up."

"I had fun, though."

Nico could feel Will's eyes on him, gauging his expression. He squeezed Will's hand. "Yeah. Me too."

…

That night, Nico and Will joined in on the festivities in the dining pavilion. Percy, Jason, Annabeth, Piper, Frank, Hazel, and Reyna were all there along with the rest of Camp Jupiter. Will was right at home with his Roman siblings, talking about medicine and music and other things that just went over Nico's head. He preferred to talk to Reyna about battle tactics.

Dinner had been like nothing Nico had ever experience. He had Will on one side and Hazel and Frank on the other with Reyna, Jason, and Piper across from him and Percy and Annabeth along the side. They laughed and joked and reminisced, passed around dish after dish of all sorts of food. Nico wasn't sure he ever felt so welcome anywhere in his life.

"Present time!" Percy announced once they couldn't stomach another bite. Nico didn't feel like moving – Will's arm was wrapped snug around him and he was about to slip into what Will referred to as a "food coma" – but Percy was off like a little kid towards the large pile of gifts at the front of the hall.

Annabeth sighed and lowered her glass. "He'll open every single one if we don't go."

There was a murmur of agreement and they all managed to shuffle down to the other end where Percy was waiting impatiently for them.

Nico was surprised by the amount of gifts he received – one from Jason, one from Percy and Annabeth, one from Hazel and Frank, one from Reyna, and a separate one from Piper. A few from the other campers at Camp Jupiter made its way onto his pile. Will handed him another with a big smile. "Open mine first?" he pleaded.

Nico did and immediately closed the box again. "Will!" he hissed. "I can't open this in public!"

"It's nothing to be ashamed of!" Will protested. He leaned in and whispered, "We can use it tonight if you still want me to hold up my end of our deal."

Nico was pretty sure he couldn't blush any darker. "…Fine," he muttered. "But, seriously, if anyone found out—"

"So what? If everyone found out then they wouldn't freak out if they walked in the Hades cabin and saw—"

"Oh my gods, Will, shut up. Shut up right now."

Will laughed and kissed his nose.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hazel said, "but open mine next! It's for both of you!"

Desperate for a distraction, Nico tore open the wrapping paper and held out a very familiar-looking ugly Christmas sweater. It had Santa in his sleigh, being drawn by two reindeer. Will held up a matching one with the rest of the reindeer – Rudolph included.
Nico's eyes widened and his lips parted.

"You have to promise to wear them whenever we come up to see you guys for Christmas sometime!" Hazel exclaimed with a mischievous wink. "Frank and I have ugly ones, too."

"Thanks, Hazel," Nico managed to say, still marveling that he was actually holding the sweater he'd seen in Apollo's game. Strangely, happiness started to bubble up inside him until he had to fight to keep the smile off of his face. If Apollo had gotten the sweaters right then what else could be? He glanced at Will and finally let the smile crack through.

He couldn't wait to find out.

…

By the time they'd gotten back to the cabin, it was late and they were exhausted. Nico was ready to collapse into bed, but Will had other ideas. "So," he drawled as he hung up his coat, "about that thing…"

Nico shook his head in exasperation. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"Well, you get so happy whenever we do it!"

"Did you even bring your stuff?"

"Of course I did!"

Nico sighed and looked at the box Will had gotten him. He opened it again and spilled the contents onto the coffee table. Countless Mythomagic cards from every series and every character fell out, glittering tauntingly at him. He looked up at Will's smug expression. "I still don't get why you won't let anyone know you still like this game."

Nico scoffed. "It's embarrassing! Ghost King, son of Hades, still plays a kid's game."

Will sat down across from Nico and picked up a random card. "I think it's sweet. No one would give you crap for it, either."

"That's not the point."

"Isn't it?"

Nico sighed, defeated. "Just… just go get your cards, gods damn you."

Will laughed but first pulled Nico close to push a chaste kiss to his lips. "Merry Christmas," he whispered.

Nico would deny the goofy grin that spread across his face for the rest of his days. "Bah humbug," he teased and leaned in to kiss his boyfriend again.

Chapter End Notes

AND YOU THOUGHT THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING DIRTY!
MWAHAHA!
Happy Holidays and Merry Christmas to everyone! <3 I’m off to eat ham and brownies until I can’t move. Addio! :3

End Notes

There are four parts to this story! One will be uploaded each day counting down to Christmas. Because there aren’t enough Solangelo X-mas stories already. X3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!