

The poster features a large, golden, mechanical dragon-like creature with a red eye and sharp teeth, flying over a city at sunset. A young man is shown falling or flying through the air in the foreground. The background is a cityscape with lights reflecting on the water, under a bright, glowing sun.

RETURN TO PERCY JACKSON'S WORLD

HEROES OF
OLYMPUS
THE LOST HERO

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CHAPTER 10

PIPER

THE WHOLECAMPFIREIDEAFREAKED PIPEROUT. It made her think of that huge purple bonfire in the dreams, and her father tied to a stake. What she got instead was almost as terrifying: a sing-along. The amphitheater steps were carved into the side of a hill, facing a stone-lined fire pit. Fifty or sixty kids filled the rows, clustered into groups under various banners. Piper spotted Jason in the front next to Annabeth. Leo was nearby, sitting with a bunch of burly-looking campers under a steel gray banner emblazoned with a hammer. Standing in front of the fire, half a dozen campers with guitars and strange, old-fashioned harps—lyres?—were jumping around, leading a song about pieces of armor, something about how their grandma got dressed for war. Everybody was singing with them and making gestures for the pieces of armor and joking around. It was quite possibly the weirdest thing Piper had ever seen—one of those campfire songs that would've been completely embarrassing in daylight; but in the dark, with everybody participating, it was kind of corny and fun. As the energy level got higher, the flames did too, turning from red to orange to gold. Finally the song ended with a lot of rowdy applause. A guy on a horse trotted up. At least in the flickering light, Piper thought it was a guy on a horse. Then she realized it was a centaur—his bottom half a white stallion, his top half a middle-aged guy with curly hair and a trimmed beard. He brandished a spear impaled with toasted marshmallows.

"Very nice! And a special welcome to our new arrivals. I am Chiron, camp activities director, and I'm happy you have all arrived here alive and with most of your limbs attached. In a moment, I promise we'll get to the s'mores, but first—"

"What about capture the flag?" somebody yelled. Grumbling broke out among some kids in armor, sitting under a red banner with the emblem of a boar's head.

"Yes," the centaur said. "I know the Ares cabin is anxious to return to the woods for our regular games." "And kill people!" one of them shouted. "However,"

Chiron said, "until the dragon is brought under control, that won't be possible. Cabin Nine, anything to report on that?" He turned to Leo's group. Leo winked at Piper and shot her with a finger gun. The girl next to him stood uncomfortably.

She wore an army jacket a lot like Leo's, with her hair covered in a red bandanna.

"We're working on it." More grumbling. "How, Nyssa?" an Ares kid demanded.

"Really hard," the girl said. Nyssa sat down to a lot of yelling and complaining, which caused the fire to sputter chaotically. Chiron stamped his hoof against the fire pit stones—bang, bang, bang—and the campers fell silent. "We will have to be patient," Chiron said. "In the meantime, we have more pressing matters to discuss." "Percy?" someone asked. The fire dimmed even further, but Piper didn't need the mood flames to sense the crowd's anxiety. Chiron gestured to

Annabeth. She took a deep breath and stood. "I didn't find Percy," she announced. Her voice caught a little when she said his name. "He wasn't at the Grand Canyon like I thought. But we're not giving up. We've got teams everywhere. Grover, Tyson, Nico, the Hunters of Artemis —everyone's out looking. We will find him. Chiron's talking about something different. A new quest." "It's the Great Prophecy, isn't it?" a girl called out. Everyone turned. The voice had come from a group in back, sitting under a rose-colored banner with a dove emblem. They'd been chatting among themselves and not paying much attention until their leader stood up: Drew. Everyone else looked surprised.

Apparently Drew didn't address the crowd very often. "Drew?" Annabeth said. "What do you mean?" "Well, come on." Drew spread her hands like the truth was obvious. "Olympus is closed. Percy's disappeared. Hera sends you a vision and you come back with three new demigods in one day. I mean, something weird is going on. The Great Prophecy has started, right?" Piper whispered to Rachel, "What's she talking about —the Great Prophecy?" Then she realized everyone else was looking at Rachel, too. "Well?" Drew called down. "You're the oracle. Has it started or not?" Rachel's eyes looked scary in the firelight. Piper was afraid she might clench up and start channeling a freaky peacock goddess again, but she stepped forward calmly and addressed the camp. "Yes," she said. "The Great Prophecy has begun." Pandemonium broke out. Piper caught Jason's eye. He mouthed, You all right? She nodded and managed a smile, but then looked away.

It was too painful seeing him and not being with him. When the talking finally subsided, Rachel took another step toward the audience, and fifty-plus demigods leaned away from her, as if one skinny redheaded mortal was more intimidating than all of them put together. "For those of you who have not heard it," Rachel said, "the Great Prophecy was my first prediction. It arrived in August. It goes like this: "Seven half-bloods shall answer the call. To storm or fire the world must

fall—" Jason shot to his feet. His eyes looked wild, like he'd just been tasered. Even Rachel seemed caught off guard. "J-Jason?" she said. "What's—" "Ut cum spiritu postrema sacramentum dejuremus," he chanted. "Et hostes ornamenta addent ad ianuam necem." An uneasy silence settled on the group. Piper could see from their faces that several of them were trying to translate the lines. She could tell it was Latin, but she wasn't sure why her hopefully future boyfriend was suddenly chanting like a Catholic priest. "You just ... finished the prophecy," Rachel stammered. "—An oath to keep with a final breath/And foes bear arms to the Doors of Death. How did you—" "I know those lines." Jason winced and put his hands to his temples. "I don't know how, but I know that prophecy." "In Latin, no less," Drew called out. "Handsome and smart." There was some giggling from the Aphrodite cabin. God, what a bunch of losers, Piper thought. But it didn't do much to break the tension. The campfire was burning a chaotic, nervous shade of green. Jason sat down, looking embarrassed, but Annabeth put a hand on his shoulder and muttered something reassuring. Piper felt a pang of jealousy. It should have been her next to him, comforting him. Rachel Dare still looked a little shaken. She glanced back at Chiron for guidance, but the centaur stood grim and silent, as if he were watching a play he couldn't interrupt—a tragedy that ended with a lot of people dead onstage. "Well," Rachel said, trying to regain her composure. "So, yeah, that's the Great Prophecy. We hoped it might not happen for years, but I fear it's starting now. I can't give you proof. It's just a feeling. And like Drew said, some weird stuff is happening. The seven demigods, whoever they are, have not been gathered yet. I get the feeling some are here tonight. Some are not here." The campers began to stir and mutter, looking at each other nervously, until a drowsy voice in the crowd called out, "I'm here! Oh ... were you calling roll?" "Go back to sleep, Clovis," someone yelled, and a lot of people laughed. "Anyway," Rachel continued, "we don't know what the Great Prophecy means. We don't know what challenge the demigods will face, but since the first Great Prophecy predicted the Titan War, we can guess the second Great Prophecy will predict something at least that bad." "Or worse," Chiron murmured. Maybe he didn't mean everyone to overhear, but they did. The campfire immediately turned dark purple, the same color as Piper's dream. "What we do know," Rachel said, "is that the first phase has begun. A major problem has arisen, and we need a quest to solve it. Hera, the queen of the gods, has been taken." Shocked silence. Then fifty demigods started talking at once. Chiron pounded his hoof again, but

Rachel still had to wait before she could get back their attention. She told them about the incident on the Grand Canyon skywalk—how Gleeson Hedge had sacrificed himself when the storm spirits attacked, and the spirits had warned it was only the beginning. They apparently served some great mistress who would destroy all demigods. Then Rachel told them about Piper passing out in Hera's cabin. Piper tried to keep a calm expression, even when she noticed Drew in the back row, pantomiming a faint, and her friends giggling. Finally Rachel told them about Jason's vision in the living room of the Big House. The message Hera had delivered there was so similar that Piper got a chill. The only difference: Hera had warned Piper not to betray her: Bow to his will, and their king shall rise, dooming us all. Hera knew about the giant's threat. But if that was true, why hadn't she warned Jason, and exposed Piper as an enemy agent? "Jason," Rachel said. "Um ... do you remember your last name?" He looked self-conscious, but he shook his head. "We'll just call you Jason, then," Rachel said. "It's clear Hera herself has issued you a quest." Rachel paused, as if giving Jason a chance to protest his destiny. Everyone's eyes were on him; there was so much pressure, Piper thought she would've buckled in his position. Yet he looked brave and determined. He set his jaw and nodded. "I agree." "You must save Hera to prevent a great evil," Rachel continued. "Some sort of king from rising. For reasons we don't yet understand, it must happen by the winter solstice, only four days from now." "That's the council day of the gods," Annabeth said. "If the gods don't already know Hera's gone, they will definitely notice her absence by then. They'll probably break out fighting, accusing each other of taking her. That's what they usually do." "The winter solstice," Chiron spoke up, "is also the time of greatest darkness. The gods gather that day, as mortals always have, because there is strength in numbers. The solstice is a day when evil magic is strong. Ancient magic, older than the gods. It is a day when things ... stir." The way he said it, stirring sounded absolutely sinister —like it should be a first-degree felony, not something you did to cookie dough. "Okay," Annabeth said, glaring at the centaur. "Thank you, Captain Sunshine. Whatever's going on, I agree with Rachel. Jason has been chosen to lead this quest, so—" "Why hasn't he been claimed?" somebody yelled from the Ares cabin. "If he's so important—" "He has been claimed," Chiron announced. "Long ago. Jason, give them a demonstration." At first, Jason didn't seem to understand. He stepped forward nervously, but Piper couldn't help thinking how amazing he looked with his blond hair glowing in the

firelight, his regal features like a Roman statue's. He glanced at Piper, and she nodded encouragingly. She mimicked flipping a coin. Jason reached into his pocket. His coin flashed in the air, and when he caught it in his hand, he was holding a lance—a rod of gold about seven feet long, with a spear tip at one end.

The other demigods gasped. Rachel and Annabeth stepped back to avoid the point, which looked sharp as an ice pick. "Wasn't that ..." Annabeth hesitated. "I thought you had a sword." "Um, it came up tails, I think," Jason said. "Same coin, long-range weapon form." "Dude, I want one!" yelled somebody from Ares cabin.

"Better than Clarisse's electric spear, Lamer!" one of his brothers agreed.

"Electric," Jason murmured, like that was a good idea. "Back away." Annabeth and Rachel got the message. Jason raised his javelin, and thunder broke open the sky. Every hair on Piper's arms stood straight up. Lightning arced down through the golden spear point and hit the campfire with the force of an artillery shell.

When the smoke cleared, and the ringing in Piper's ears subsided, the entire camp sat frozen in shock, half blind, covered in ashes, staring at the place where the fire had been. Cinders rained down everywhere. A burning log had impaled itself a few inches from the sleeping kid Clovis, who hadn't even stirred. Jason lowered his lance. "Um ... sorry." Chiron brushed some burning coals out of his beard. He grimaced as if his worst fears had been confirmed. "A little overkill, perhaps, but you've made your point. And I believe we know who your father is." "Jupiter," Jason said. "I mean Zeus. Lord of the Sky." Piper couldn't help smiling. It made perfect sense. The most powerful god, the father of all the greatest heroes in the ancient myths—no one else could possibly be Jason's dad. Apparently, the

rest of the camp wasn't so sure. Everything broke into chaos, with dozens of people asking questions until Annabeth raised her arms. "Hold it!" she said. "How can he be the son of Zeus? The Big Three ... their pact not to have mortal kids ...

how could we not have known about him sooner?" Chiron didn't answer, but Piper got the feeling he knew. And the truth was not good. "The important thing," Rachel said, "is that Jason's here now. He has a quest to fulfill, which means he will need his own prophecy." She closed her eyes and swooned. Two campers rushed forward and caught her. A third ran to the side of the amphitheater and grabbed a bronze three-legged stool, like they'd been trained for this duty. They eased Rachel onto the stool in front of the ruined hearth. Without the fire, the night was dark, but green mist started swirling around Rachel's feet. When she opened her eyes, they were glowing. Emerald smoke issued from her mouth. The

voice that came out was raspy and ancient—the sound a snake would make if it could talk: “Child of lightning, beware the earth, The giants’ revenge the seven shall birth, The forge and dove shall break the cage, And death unleash through Hera’s rage.” On the last word, Rachel collapsed, but her helpers were waiting to catch her. They carried her away from the hearth and laid her in the corner to rest. “Is that normal?” Piper asked. Then she realized she’d spoken into the silence, and everyone was looking at her. “I mean... does she spew green smoke a lot?” “Gods, you’re dense!” Drew sneered. “She just issued a prophecy—Jason’s prophecy to save Hera! Why don’t you just—” “Drew,” Annabeth snapped. “Piper asked a fair question. Something about that prophecy definitely isn’t normal. If breaking Hera’s cage unleashes her rage and causes a bunch of death ... why would we free her? It might be a trap, or—or maybe Hera will turn on her rescuers. She’s never been kind to heroes.” Jason rose. “I don’t have much choice. Hera took my memory. I need it back. Besides, we can’t just not help the queen of the heavens if she’s in trouble.” A girl from Hephaestus cabin stood up—Nyssa, the one with the red bandanna. “Maybe. But you should listen to Annabeth. Hera can be vengeful. She threw her own son—our dad—down a mountain just because he was ugly.” “Real ugly,” snickered someone from Aphrodite. “Shut up!” Nyssa growled. “Anyway, we’ve also got to think —why beware the earth? And what’s the giants’ revenge? What are we dealing with here that’s powerful enough to kidnap the queen of the heavens?” No one answered, but Piper noticed Annabeth and Chiron having a silent exchange. Piper thought it went something like: Annabeth: The giants’ revenge ... no, it can’t be. Chiron: Don’t speak of it here. Don’t scare them. Annabeth: You’re kidding me! We can’t be that unlucky. Chiron: Later, child. If you told them everything, they would be too terrified to proceed. Piper knew it was crazy to think she could read their expressions so well—two people she barely knew. But she was absolutely positive she understood them, and it scared the jujubes out of her. Annabeth took a deep breath. “It’s Jason’s quest,” she announced, “so it’s Jason’s choice. Obviously, he’s the child of lightning. According to tradition, he may choose any two companions.” Someone from the Hermes cabin yelled, “Well, you, obviously, Annabeth. You’ve got the most experience.” “No, Travis,” Annabeth said, helping Hera. “First off, I’m Every time I’ve tried, she’s deceived me, or it’s come back to bite me later. Forget it. No way. Secondly, I’m leaving first thing in the morning to find Percy.” “It’s connected,” Piper blurted out, not sure how she

got the courage. "You know that's true, don't you? This whole business, your boyfriend's disappearance—it's all connected." "How?" demanded Drew. "If you're so smart, how?" Piper tried to form an answer, but she couldn't. Annabeth saved her. "You may be right, Piper. If this is connected, I'll find out from the other end—by searching for Percy. As I said, I'm not about to rush off to rescue Hera, even if her disappearance sets the rest of the Olympians fighting again. But there's another reason I can't go. The prophecy says otherwise." "It says who I pick," Jason agreed. "The forge and dove shall break the cage. The forge is the symbol of Vul —Hephaestus." Under the Cabin Nine banner, Nyssa's shoulders slumped, like she'd just been given a heavy anvil to carry. "If you have to beware the earth," she said, "you should avoid traveling overland. You'll need air transport." Piper was about to call out that Jason could fly. But then she thought better of it. That was for Jason to tell them, and he wasn't volunteering the information. Maybe he figured he'd freaked them out enough for one night. "The flying chariot's broken," Nyssa continued, "and the pegasi, we're using them to search for Percy. But maybe Hephaestus cabin can help figure out something else to help. With Jake incapacitated, I'm senior camper. I can volunteer for the quest." She didn't sound enthusiastic. Then Leo stood up. He'd been so quiet, Piper had almost forgotten he was there, which was totally not like Leo. "It's me," he said. His cabinmates stirred. Several tried to pull him back to his seat, but Leo resisted. "No, it's me. I know it is. I've got an idea for the transportation problem. Let me try. I can fix this!" Jason studied him for a moment. Piper was sure he was going to tell Leo no. Then he smiled. "We started this together, Leo. Seems only right you come along. You find us a ride, you're in." "Yes!" Leo pumped his fist. "It'll be dangerous," Nyssa warned him. "Hardship, monsters, terrible suffering. Possibly none of you will come back alive." "Oh." Suddenly Leo didn't look so excited. Then he remembered everyone was watching. "I mean ... Oh, cool! Suffering? I love suffering! Let's do this." Annabeth nodded. "Then, Jason, you only need to choose the third quest member. The dove—" "Oh, absolutely!" Drew was on her feet and flashing Jason a smile. "The dove is Aphrodite. Everybody knows that. I am totally yours." Piper's hands clenched. She stepped forward. "No." Drew rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Dumpster girl. Back off." "I had the vision of Hera; not you. I have to do this." "Anyone can have a vision," Drew said. "You were just at the right place at the right time." She turned to Jason. "Look, fighting is all fine, I suppose. And people who build things ..." She looked at Leo in disdain.

“Well, I suppose someone has to get their hands dirty. But you need charm on your side. I can be very persuasive. I could help a lot.” The campers started murmuring about how Drew was pretty persuasive. Piper could see Drew winning them over. Even Chiron was scratching his beard, like Drew’s participation suddenly made sense to him. “Well ...” Annabeth said. “Given the wording of the prophecy—” “No!” Piper’s own voice sounded strange in her ears—more insistent, richer in tone. “I’m supposed to go.” Then the weirdest thing happened. Everyone started nodding, muttering that hmm, Piper’s point of view made sense too. Drew looked around, incredulous. Even some of her own campers were nodding. “Get over it!” Drew snapped at the crowd. “What can Piper do?” Piper tried to respond, but her confidence started to wane. What could she offer? She wasn’t a fighter, or a planner, or a fixer. She had no skills except getting into trouble and occasionally convincing people to do stupid things. Plus, she was a liar. She needed to go on this quest for reasons that went way beyond Jason—and if she did go, she’d end up betraying everyone there. She heard that voice from the dream: Do our bidding, and you may walk away alive. How could she make a choice like that—between helping her father and helping Jason? “Well,” Drew said smugly, “I guess that settles it.” Suddenly there was collective gasp. Everyone stared at Piper like she’d just exploded. She wondered what she’d done wrong. Then she realized there was a reddish glow around her. “What?” she demanded.

She looked above her, but there was no burning symbol like the one that appeared over Leo. Then she looked down and yelped. Her clothes ... what in the world was she wearing? She despised dresses. She didn’t own a dress. But now she was adorned in a beautiful white sleeveless gown that went down to her ankles, with a V-neck so low it was totally embarrassing. Delicate gold armbands circled her biceps. An intricate necklace of amber, coral, and gold flowers glittered on her chest, and her hair ... “Oh, god,” she said. “What’s happened?” A stunned Annabeth pointed at Piper’s dagger, which was now oiled and gleaming, hanging at her side on a golden cord. Piper didn’t want to draw it. She was afraid of what she would see. But her curiosity won out. She unsheathed Katoptris and stared at her reflection in the polished metal blade. Her hair was perfect: lush and long and chocolate brown, braided with gold ribbons down one side so it fell across her shoulder. She even wore makeup, better than Piper would ever know how to do herself—subtle touches that made her lips cherry red and brought out all the different colors in her eyes. She was...she was... “Beautiful,” Jason exclaimed.

“Piper, you ... you’re a knockout.” Under different circumstances, that would’ve been the happiest moment of her life. But now everyone was staring at her like she was a freak. Drew’s face was full of horror and revulsion. “No!” she cried. “Not possible!” “This isn’t me,” Piper protested. “I—don’t understand.” Chiron the centaur folded his front legs and bowed to her, and all the campers followed his example. “Hail, Piper McLean,” Chiron announced gravely, as if he were speaking at her funeral. “Daughter of Aphrodite, lady o