

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 dramatic orange and yellow sky.

RETURN TO PERCY JACKSON'S WORLD

HEROES OF
OLYMPUS
THE LOST HERO

RICK RIORDAN

CHAPTER 3

PIPER

AFTER A MORNING OF STORM SPIRIT'S, goat men, and flying boyfriends, Piper should've been losing her mind. Instead, all she felt was dread. It's starting, she thought. Just like the dream said. She stood in back of the chariot with Leo and Jason, while the bald guy, Butch, handled the reins, and the blond girl, Annabeth, adjusted a bronze navigation device. They rose over the Grand Canyon and headed east, icy wind ripping straight through Piper's jacket. Behind them, more stormclouds were gathering. The chariot lurched and bumped. It had no seat belts and the back was wide open, so Piper wondered if Jason would catch her again if she fell. That had been the most disturbing part of the morning—not that Jason could fly, but that he'd held her in his arms and yet didn't know who she was. All semester she'd worked on a relationship, trying to get Jason to notice her as more than a friend. Finally she'd gotten the big dope to kiss her. The last few weeks had been the best of her life. And then, three nights ago, the dream had ruined everything—that horrible voice, giving her horrible news. She hadn't told anyone about it, not even Jason. Now she didn't even have him. It was like someone had wiped his memory, and she was stuck in the worst “do over” of all time. She wanted to scream. Jason stood right next to her: those sky blue eyes, close-cropped blond hair, that cute little scar on his upper lip. His face was kind and gentle, but always a little sad. And he just stared at the horizon, not even noticing her. Meanwhile, Leo was being annoying, as usual. “This is so cool!” He spit a pegasus feather out of his mouth. “Where are we going?” “A safe place,” Annabeth said. “The only safe place for kids like us. Camp Half-

Blood.” “Half-Blood?” Piper was immediately on guard. She hated that word. She’d been called a half-blood too many times—half Cherokee, half white—and it was never a compliment. “Is that some kind of bad joke?” “She means we’re demigods,” Jason said. “Half god, half mortal.” Annabeth looked back. “You seem to know a lot, Jason. But, yes, demigods. My mom is Athena, goddess of wisdom. Butch here is the son of Iris, the rainbow goddess.” Leo choked. “Your mom is a rainbow goddess?” “Got a problem with that?” Butch said. “No, no,” Leo said. “Rainbows. Very macho.” “Butch is our best equestrian,” Annabeth said. “He gets along great with the pegasi.” “Rainbows, ponies,” Leo muttered. “I’m gonna toss you off this chariot,” Butch warned. “Demigods,” Piper said. “You mean you think you’re ... you think we’re—” Lightning flashed. The chariot shuddered, and Jason yelled, “Left wheel’s on fire!” Piper stepped back. Sure enough, the wheel was burning, white flames lapping up the side of the chariot. The wind roared. Piper glanced behind them and saw dark shapes forming in the clouds, more storm spirits spiraling toward the chariot—except these looked more like horses than angels. She started to say, “Why are they—” “Anemoi come in different shapes,” Annabeth said. “Sometimes human, sometimes stallions, depending on how chaotic they are. Hold on. This is going to get rough.” Butch flicked the reins. The pegasi put on a burst of speed, and the chariot blurred. Piper’s stomach crawled into her throat. Her vision went black, and when it came back to normal, they were in a totally different place. A cold gray ocean stretched out to the left. Snow-covered fields, roads, and forests spread to the right. Directly below them was a green valley, like an island of springtime, rimmed with snowy hills on three sides and water to the north. Piper saw a cluster of buildings like ancient Greek temples, a big blue mansion, ball courts, a lake, and a climbing wall that seemed to be on fire. But before she could really process all she was seeing,

their wheels came off and the chariot dropped out of the sky. Annabeth and Butch tried to maintain control. The pegasi labored to hold the chariot in a flight pattern, but they seemed exhausted from their burst of speed, and bearing the chariot and the weight of five people was just too much. “The lake!” Annabeth yelled. “Aim for the lake!” Piper remembered something her dad had once told her, about hitting water from up high being as bad as hitting cement. And then—BOOM. The biggest shock was the cold. She was underwater, so disoriented that she didn’t know which way was up. She just had time to think: This would be a stupid way to die. Then faces appeared in the green murk—girls with long black hair and glowing yellow eyes. They smiled at her, grabbed her shoulders, and hauled her up. They tossed her, gasping and shivering, onto the shore. Nearby, Butch stood in the lake, cutting the wrecked harnesses off the pegasi. Fortunately, the horses looked okay, but they were flapping their wings and splashing water everywhere. Jason, Leo, and Annabeth were already on shore, surrounded by kids giving them blankets and asking questions. Somebody took Piper by the arms and helped her stand. Apparently kids fell into the lake a lot, because a detail of campers ran up with big bronze leaf blower-looking things and blasted Piper with hot air; and in about two seconds her clothes were dry. There were at least twenty campers milling around—the youngest maybe nine, the oldest college age, eighteen or nineteen—and all of them had orange T-shirts like Annabeth’s. Piper looked back at the water and saw those strange girls just below the surface, their hair floating in the current. They waved like, toodle-oo, and disappeared into the depths. A second later the wreckage of the chariot was tossed from the lake and landed nearby with a wet crunch. “Annabeth!” A guy with a bow and quiver on his back pushed through the crowd. “I said you could borrow the chariot, not destroy it!” “Will, I’m sorry,” Annabeth sighed. “I’ll get it fixed, I

promise.” Will scowled at his broken chariot. Then he sized up Piper, Leo, and Jason. “These are the ones? Way older than thirteen. Why haven’t they been claimed already?” “Claimed?” Leo asked. Before Annabeth could explain, Will said, “Any sign of Percy?” “No,” Annabeth admitted. The campers muttered. Piper had no idea who this guy Percy was, but his disappearance seemed to be a big deal. Another girl stepped forward—tall, Asian, dark hair in ringlets, plenty of jewelry, and perfect makeup. Somehow she managed to make jeans and an orange T-shirt look glamorous. She glanced at Leo, fixed her eyes on Jason like he might be worthy of her attention, then curled her lip at Piper as if she were a week-old burrito that had just been pulled out of a Dumpster. Piper knew this girl’s type. She’d dealt with a lot of girls like this at Wilderness School and every other stupid school her father had sent her to. Piper knew instantly they were going to be enemies. “Well,” the girl said, “I hope they’re worth the trouble.” Leo snorted. “Gee, thanks. What are we, your new pets?” “No kidding,” Jason said. “How about some answers before you start judging us—like, what is this place, why are we here, how long do we have to stay?” Piper had the same questions, but a wave of anxiety washed over her. Worth the trouble. If they only knew about her dream. They had no idea... “Jason,” Annabeth said, “I promise we’ll answer your questions. And Drew”—she frowned at the glamour girl—“all demigods are worth saving. But I’ll admit, the trip didn’t accomplish what I hoped.” “Hey,” Piper said, “we didn’t ask to be brought here.” Drew sniffed. “And nobody wants you, hon. Does your hair always look like a dead badger?” Piper stepped forward, ready to smack her, but Annabeth said, “Piper, stop.” Piper did. She wasn’t a bit scared of Drew, but Annabeth didn’t seem like somebody she wanted for an enemy. “We need to make our new arrivals feel welcome,” Annabeth said, with another pointed look at Drew. “We’ll assign them each a guide, give them a tour of camp.

Hopefully by the campfire tonight, they'll be claimed." "Would somebody tell me what claimed means?" Piper asked. Suddenly there was a collective gasp. The campers backed away. At first Piper thought she'd done something wrong. Then she realized their faces were bathed in a strange red light, as if someone had lit a torch behind her. She turned and almost forgot how to breathe. Floating over Leo's head was a blazing holographic image—a fiery hammer. "That," Annabeth said, "is claiming." "What'd I do?" Leo backed toward the lake. Then he glanced up and yelped. "Is my hair on fire?" He ducked, but the symbol followed him, bobbing and weaving so it looked like he was trying to write something in flames with his head. "This can't be good," Butch muttered. "The curse—" "Butch, shut up," Annabeth said. "Leo, you've just been claimed—" "By a god," Jason interrupted. "That's the symbol of Vulcan, isn't it?" All eyes turned to him. "Jason," Annabeth said carefully, "how did you know that?" "I'm not sure." "Vulcan?" Leo demanded. "I don't even LIKE Star Trek. What are you talking about?" "Vulcan is the Roman name for Hephaestus," Annabeth said, "the god of blacksmiths and fire." The fiery hammer faded, but Leo kept swatting the air like he was afraid it was following him. "The god of what? Who?" Annabeth turned to the guy with the bow. "Will, would you take Leo, give him a tour? Introduce him to his bunk-mates in Cabin Nine." "Sure, Annabeth." "What's Cabin Nine?" Leo asked. "And I'm not a Vulcan!" "Come on, Mr. Spock, I'll explain everything." Will put a hand on his shoulder and steered him off toward the cabins. Annabeth turned her attention back to Jason. Usually Piper didn't like it when other girls checked out her boyfriend, but Annabeth didn't seem to care that he was a good-looking guy. She studied him more like he was a complicated blueprint. Finally she said, "Hold out your arm." Piper saw what she was looking at, and her eyes widened. Jason had taken off his windbreaker after his dip in the lake, leaving his arms bare, and on the

inside of his right forearm was a tattoo. How had Piper never noticed it before? She'd looked at Jason's arms a million times. The tattoo couldn't have just appeared, but it was darkly etched, impossible to miss: a dozen straight lines like a bar code, and over that an eagle with the letters spqr. "I've never seen marks like this," Annabeth said. "Where did you get them?" Jason shook his head. "I'm getting really tired of saying this, but I don't know." The other campers pushed forward, trying to get a look at Jason's tattoo. The marks seemed to bother them a lot —almost like a declaration of war. "They look burned into your skin," Annabeth noticed. "They were," Jason said. Then he winced as if his head was aching. "I mean ... I think so. I don't remember." No one said anything. It was clear the campers saw Annabeth as the leader. They were waiting for her verdict. "He needs to go straight to Chiron," Annabeth decided. "Drew, would you—" "Absolutely." Drew laced her arm through Jason's. "This way, sweetie. I'll introduce you to our director. He's ... an interesting guy." She flashed Piper a smug look and led Jason toward the big blue house on the hill. The crowd began to disperse, until only Annabeth and Piper were left. "Who's Chiron?" Piper asked. "Is Jason in some kind of trouble?" Annabeth hesitated. "Good question, Piper. Come on, I'll give you a tour. We need to talk.