

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 through the air, with a glowing eagle emblem above him. The background is a cityscape at dusk with a bright sun setting behind clouds.

RETURN TO PERCY JACKSON'S WORLD

HEROES OF
OLYMPUS
THE LOST HERO

RICK RIORDAN

CHAPTER 6

LEO

“HOW DID HE DIE?” LEO ASKED. “I mean Beckendorf.” Will Solace trudged ahead. “Explosion. Beckendorf and Percy Jackson blew up a cruise ship full of monsters. Beckendorf didn’t make it out.” There was that name again—Percy Jackson, Annabeth’s missing boyfriend. That guy must’ve been into everything around here, Leo thought. “So Beckendorf was pretty popular?” Leo asked. “I mean —before he blew up?” “He was awesome,” Will agreed. “It was hard on the whole camp when he died. Jake—he became head counselor in the middle of the war. Same as I did, actually. Jake did his best, but he never wanted to be leader. He just likes building stuff. Then after the war, things started to go wrong. Cabin Nine’s chariots blew up. Their automatons went haywire. Their inventions started to malfunction. It was like a curse, and eventually people started calling it that—the Curse of Cabin Nine. Then Jake had his accident—” “Which had something to do with the problem he mentioned,” Leo guessed. “They’re working on it,” Will said without enthusiasm. “And here we are.” The forge looked like a steam-powered locomotive had smashed into the Greek Parthenon and they had fused together. White marble columns lined the soot-stained walls. Chimneys pumped smoke over an elaborate gable carved with a bunch of gods and monsters. The building sat at the edge of a stream, with several waterwheels turning a series of bronze gears. Leo heard machinery grinding inside, fires roaring, and hammers ringing on anvils. They stepped through the doorway, and a dozen guys and girls who’d been working on various projects all froze. The noise died down to the roar of the forge and the click-clickclick of gears and levers. “Sup, guys,”

Will said. "This is your new brother, Leo—um, what's your last name?"

"Valdez." Leo looked around at the other campers. Was he really related to all of them? His cousins came from some big families, but he'd always just had his mom—until she died. Kids came up and started shaking hands and introducing themselves. Their names blurred together: Shane, Christopher, Nyssa, Harley (yeah, like the motorcycle). Leo knew he'd never keep everybody straight. Too many of them. Too overwhelming. None of them looked like the others—all different face types, skin tone, hair color, height. You'd never think, Hey, look, it's the Hephaestus Bunch! But they all had powerful hands, rough with calluses and stained with engine grease. Even little Harley, who couldn't have been more than eight, looked like he could go six rounds with Chuck Norris without breaking a sweat. And all the kids shared a sad kind of seriousness. Their shoulders slumped like life had beaten them down pretty hard. Several looked like they'd been physically beaten up, too. Leo counted two arm slings, one pair of crutches, an eye patch, six Ace bandages, and about seven thousand Band-Aids. "Well, all right!" Leo said. "I hear this is the party cabin!" Nobody laughed. They all just stared at him. Will Solace patted Leo's shoulder. "I'll leave you guys to get acquainted. Somebody show Leo to dinner when it's time?" "I got it," one of the girls said. Nyssa, Leo remembered. She wore camo pants, a tank top that showed off her buffarms, and a red bandanna over a mop of dark hair. Except for the smiley-face Band-Aid on her chin, she looked like one of those female action heroes, like any second she was going to grab a machine gun and start mowing down evil aliens. "Cool," Leo said. "I always wanted a sister who could beat me up." Nyssa didn't smile. "Come on, joker boy. I'll show you around." * * * Leo was no stranger to workshops. He'd grown up around grease monkeys and power tools. His mom used to joke that his first pacifier was a lug wrench. But he'd never seen any place like the camp forge. One guy

was working on a battle-ax. He kept testing the blade on a slab of concrete. Each time he swung, the ax cut into the slab like it was warm cheese, but the guy looked unsatisfied and went back to honing the edge. “What’s he planning to kill with that thing?” Leo asked Nyssa. “A battleship?” “You never know. Even with Celestial bronze—” “That’s the metal?” She nodded. “Mined from Mount Olympus itself. Extremely rare. Anyway, it usually disintegrates monsters on contact, but big powerful ones have notoriously tough hides. Drakons, for instances—” “You mean dragons?” “Similar species. You’ll learn the difference in monsterfighting class.” “Monster-fighting class. Yeah, I already got my black belt in that.” She didn’t crack a smile. Leo hoped she wasn’t this serious all the time. His dad’s side of the family had to have some sense of humor, right? They passed a couple of guys making a bronze windup toy. At least that’s what it looked like. It was a six-inch-tall centaur—half man, half horse—armed with a miniature bow. One of the campers cranked the centaur’s tail, and it whirred to life. It galloped across the table, yelling, “Die, mosquito! Die, mosquito!” and shooting everything in sight. Apparently this had happened before, because everybody knew to hit the floor except Leo. Six needle-sized arrows embedded themselves in his shirt before a camper grabbed a hammer and smashed the centaur to pieces. “Stupid curse!” The camper waved his hammer at the sky. “I just want a magic bug killer! Is that too much to ask?” “Ouch,” Leo said. Nyssa pulled the needles out of his shirt. “Ah, you’re fine. Let’s move on before they rebuild it.” Leo rubbed his chest as they walked. “That sort of thing happen a lot?” “Lately,” Nyssa said, “everything we build turns to junk.” “The curse?” Nyssa frowned. “I don’t believe in curses. But something’s wrong. And if we don’t figure out the dragon problem, it’s gonna get even worse.” “The dragon problem?” Leo hoped she was talking about a miniature dragon, maybe one that killed cockroaches, but he got the feeling he wasn’t going to

be so lucky. Nyssa took him over to a big wall map that a couple of girls were studying. The map showed the camp—a semicircle of land with Long Island Sound on the north shore, the woods to the west, the cabins to the east, and a ring of hills to the south. “It’s got to be in the hills,” the first girl said. “We looked in the hills,” the second argued. “The woods are a better hiding place.” “But we already set traps—” “Hold up,” Leo said. “You guys lost a dragon? A real fullsize dragon?” “It’s a bronze dragon,” Nyssa said. “But yes, it’s a life-size automaton. Hephaestus cabin built it years ago. Then it was lost in the woods until a few summers back, when Beckendorf found it in pieces and rebuilt it. It’s been helping protect the camp, but, um, it’s a little unpredictable.” “Unpredictable,” Leo said. “It goes haywire and smashes down cabins, sets people on fire, tries to eat the satyrs.” “That’s pretty unpredictable.” Nyssa nodded. “Beckendorf was the only one who could control it. Then he died, and the dragon just got worse and worse. Finally it went berserk and ran off. Occasionally it shows up, demolishes something, and runs away again. Everyone expects us to find it and destroy it—” “Destroy it?” Leo was appalled. “You’ve got a life-size bronze dragon, and you want to destroy it?” “It breathes fire,” Nyssa explained. “It’s deadly and out of control.” “But it’s a dragon! Dude, that’s so awesome. Can’t you try talking to it, controlling it?” “We tried. Jake Mason tried. You saw how well that worked.” Leo thought about Jake, wrapped in a body cast, lying alone on his bunk. “Still—” “There’s no other option.” Nyssa turned to the other girls. “Let’s try more traps in the woods—here, here, and here. Bait them with thirty-weight motor oil.” “The dragon drinks that?” Leo asked. “Yeah.” Nyssa sighed regretfully. “He used to like it with a little Tabasco sauce, right before bed. If he springs a trap, we can come in with acid sprayers—should melt through his hide. Then we get metal cutters and ... and finish the job.” They all looked sad. Leo realized they didn’t want

to kill the dragon any more than he did. "Guys," he said. "There has to be another way." Nyssa looked doubtful, but a few other campers stopped what they were working on and drifted over to hear the conversation. "Like what?" one asked. "The thing breathes fire. We can't even get close." Fire, Leo thought. Oh, man, the things he could tell them about fire... But he had to be careful, even if these were his brothers and sisters. Especially if he had to live with them. "Well ..." He hesitated. "Hephaestus is the god of fire, right? So don't any of you have like fire resistance or something?" Nobody acted as if it was a crazy question, which was a relief, but Nyssa shook her head gravely. "That's a Cyclops ability, Leo. Demigod children of Hephaestus ... we're just good with our hands. We're builders, craftsmen, weaponsmiths—stuff like that." Leo's shoulders slumped. "Oh." A guy in back said, "Well, a long time ago—" "Yeah, okay," Nyssa conceded. "A long time ago some children of Hephaestus were born with power over fire. But that ability was very, very rare. And always dangerous. No demigod like that has been born in centuries. The last one ..." She looked at one of the other kids for help. "Sixteen sixty-six," the girl offered. "Guy named Thomas Faynor. He started the Great Fire of London, destroyed most of the city." "Right," Nyssa said. "When a child of Hephaestus like that appears, it usually means something catastrophic is about to happen. And we don't need any more catastrophes." Leo tried to keep his face clear of emotion, which wasn't his strong suit. "I guess I see your point. Too bad, though. If you could resist flames, you could get close to the dragon." "Then it would kill you with its claws and fangs," Nyssa said. "Or simply step on you. No, we've got to destroy it. Trust me, if anyone could figure out another answer ..." She didn't finish, but Leo got the message. This was the cabin's big test. If they could do something only Beckendorf could do, if they could subdue the dragon without killing it, then maybe their curse would be lifted. But they were

stumped for ideas. Any camper who figured out how would be a hero. A conch horn blew in the distance. Campers started putting up their tools and projects. Leo hadn't realized it was getting so late, but he looked through the windows and saw the sun going down. His ADHD did that to him sometimes. If he was bored, a fifty-minute class seemed like six hours. If he was interested in something, like touring a demigod camp, hours slipped away and bam—the day was over. "Dinner," Nyssa said.

"Come on, Leo." "Up at the pavilion, right?" he asked. She nodded. "You guys go ahead," Leo said. "Can you ... give me a second?" Nyssa hesitated. Then her expression softened. "Sure. It's a lot to process. I remember my first day. Come up when you're ready. Just don't touch anything. Almost every project in here can kill you if you're not careful."

"No touching," Leo promised. His cabinmates filed out of the forge. Soon Leo was alone with the sounds of the bellows, the waterwheels, and small machines clicking and whirring. He stared at the map of camp—the locations where his newfound siblings were going to put traps to catch a dragon. It was wrong. Plain wrong. Very rare, he thought. And always dangerous. He held out his hand and studied his fingers. They were long and thin, not callused like the other Hephaestus campers'. Leo had never been the biggest or the strongest kid. He'd survived in tough neighborhoods, tough schools, tough foster homes by using his wits. He was the class clown, the court jester, because he'd learned early that if you cracked jokes and pretended you weren't scared, you usually didn't get beat up. Even the baddest gangster kids would tolerate you, keep you around for laughs. Plus, humor was a good way to hide the pain. And if that didn't work, there was always Plan B. Run away. Over and over. There was a Plan C, but he'd promised himself never to use it again. He felt an urge to try it now—something he hadn't done since the accident, since his mom's death. He extended his fingers and felt them tingle, like they were waking up—pins and

needles. Then flames flickered to life, curls of red-hot fire dancing across his palm. ASSOONAS JASON SAW THE HOUSE, he knew he wa