

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 a bright sun setting behind clouds.

RETURN TO PERCY JACKSON'S WORLD

HEROES OF  
**OLYMPUS**  
THE LOST HERO

RICK RIORDAN

## CHAPTER 4

### PIPER

PIPER SOON REALIZED ANNABETH'S HEART wasn't in the tour. She talked about all this amazing stuff the camp offered —magic archery, pegasus riding, the lava wall, fighting monsters —but she showed no excitement, as if her mind were elsewhere. She pointed out the open-air dining pavilion that overlooked Long Island Sound. (Yes, Long Island, New York; they'd traveled that far on the chariot.) Annabeth explained how Camp Half-Blood was mostly a summer camp, but some kids stayed here year-round, and they'd added so many campers it was always crowded now, even in winter. Piper wondered who ran the camp, and how they'd known Piper and her friends belonged here. She wondered if she'd have to stay full-time, or if she'd be any good at the activities. Could you flunk out of monster fighting? A million questions bubbled in her head, but given Annabeth's mood, she decided to keep quiet. As they climbed a hill at the edge of camp, Piper turned and got an amazing view of the valley—a big stretch of woods to the northwest, a beautiful beach, the creek, the canoe lake, lush green fields, and the whole layout of the cabins—a bizarre assortment of buildings arranged like a Greek omega, Ω, with a loop of cabins around a central green, and two wings sticking out the bottom on either side. Piper counted twenty cabins in all. One glowed golden, another silver. One had grass on the roof. Another was bright red with barbed wire trenches. One cabin was black with fiery green torches out front. All of it seemed like a different world from the snowy hills and fields outside. "The valley is protected from mortal eyes," Annabeth said. "As you can see, the weather is controlled, too. Each cabin represents a Greek god—a place

for that god's children to live." She looked at Piper like she was trying to judge how Piper was handling the news. "You're saying Mom was a goddess." Annabeth nodded. "You're taking this awfully calmly." Piper couldn't tell her why. She couldn't admit that this just confirmed some weird feelings she'd had for years, arguments she'd had with her father about why there were no photos of Mom in the house, and why Dad would never tell her exactly how or why her mom had left them. But mostly, the dream had warned her this was coming. Soon they will find you, demigod, that voice had rumbled. When they do, follow our directions. Cooperate, and your father might live. Piper took a shaky breath. "I guess after this morning, it's a little easier to believe. So who's my mom?" "We should know soon," Annabeth said. "You're what —fifteen? Gods are supposed to claim you when you're thirteen. That was the deal." "The deal?" "They made a promise last summer ... well, long story...but they promised not to ignore their demigod children anymore, to claim them by the time they turn thirteen. Sometimes it takes a little longer, but you saw how fast Leo was claimed once he got here. Should happen for you soon. Tonight at the campfire, I bet we'll get a sign." Piper wondered if she'd have a big flaming hammer over her head, or with her luck, something even more embarrassing. A flaming wombat, maybe. Whoever her mother was, Piper had no reason to think she'd be proud to claim a kleptomaniac daughter with massive problems. "Why thirteen?" "The older you get," Annabeth said, "the more monsters notice you, try to kill you. 'Round thirteen is usually when it starts. That's why we send protectors into the schools to find you guys, get you to camp before it's too late." "Like Coach Hedge?" Annabeth nodded. "He's—he was a satyr: half man, half goat. Satyrs work for the camp, finding demigods, protecting them, bringing them in when the time is right." Piper had no trouble believing Coach Hedge was half goat. She'd seen the guy eat. She'd never liked

the coach much, but she couldn't believe he'd sacrificed himself to save them. "What happened to him?" she asked. "When we went up into the clouds, did he ... is he gone for good?" "Hard to say." Annabeth's expression was pained. "Stormspirits ... difficult to battle. Even our best weapons, Celestial bronze, will pass right through them unless you can catch them by surprise." "Jason's sword just turned them to dust," Piper remembered. "He was lucky, then. If you hit a monster just right, you can dissolve them, send their essence back to Tartarus." "Tartarus?" "A huge abyss in the Underworld, where the worst monsters come from. Kind of like a bottomless pit of evil. Anyway, once monsters dissolve, it usually takes months, even years before they can re-form again. But since this storm spirit Dylan got away—well, I don't know why he'd keep Hedge alive. Hedge was a protector, though. He knew the risks. Satyrs don't have mortal souls. He'll be reincarnated as a tree or a flower or something." Piper tried to imagine Coach Hedge as a clump of very angry pansies. That made her feel even worse. She gazed at the cabins below, and an uneasy feeling settled over her. Hedge had died to get her here safely. Her mom's cabin was down there somewhere, which meant she had brothers and sisters, more people she'd have to betray. Do what we tell you, the voice had said. Or the consequences will be painful. She tucked her hands under her arms, trying to stop them from shaking. "It'll be okay," Annabeth promised. "You have friends here. We've all been through a lot of weird stuff. We know what you're going through." I doubt that, Piper thought. "I've been kicked out of five different schools the past five years," she said. "My dad's running out of places to put me." "Only five?" Annabeth didn't sound like she was teasing. "Piper, we've all been labeled troublemakers. I ran away from home when I was seven." "Seriously?" "Oh, yeah. Most of us are diagnosed with attention deficit disorder or dyslexia, or both—" "Leo's ADHD," Piper said. "Right. It's because we're hardwired for

battle. Restless, impulsive—we don't fit in with regular kids. You should hear how much trouble Percy—" Her face darkened. "Anyway, demigods get a bad rep. How'd you get in trouble?" Usually when someone asked that question, Piper started a fight, or changed the subject, or caused some kind of distraction. But for some reason she found herself telling the truth. "I steal stuff," she said. "Well, not really steal ..." "Is your family poor?" Piper laughed bitterly. "Not even. I did it ... I don't know why. For attention, I guess. My dad never had time for me unless I got in trouble." Annabeth nodded. "I can relate. But you said you didn't really steal? What do you mean?" "Well ... nobody ever believes me. The police, teachers—even the people I took stuff from: they're so embarrassed, they'll deny what happened. But the truth is, I don't steal anything. I just ask people for things. And they give me stuff. Even a BMW convertible. I just asked. And the dealer said, 'Sure. Take it.' Later, he realized what he'd done, I guess. Then the police came after me." Piper waited. She was used to people calling her a liar, but when she looked up, Annabeth just nodded. "Interesting. If your dad were the god, I'd say you're a child of Hermes, god of thieves. He can be pretty convincing. But your dad is mortal..." "Very," Piper agreed. Annabeth shook her head, apparently mystified. "I don't know, then. With luck, your mom will claim you tonight." Piper almost hoped it wouldn't happen. If her mom were a goddess, would she know about that dream? Would she know what Piper had been asked to do? Piper wondered if Olympian gods ever blasted their kids with lightning for being evil, or grounded them in the Underworld. Annabeth was studying her. Piper decided she was going to have to be careful what she said from now on. Annabeth was obviously pretty smart. If anyone could figure out Piper's secret ... "Come on," Annabeth said at last. "There's something else I need to check." They hiked a little farther until they reached a cave near the top of the hill. Bones and old swords

littered the ground. Torches flanked the entrance, which was covered in a velvet curtain embroidered with snakes. It looked like the set for some kind of twisted puppet show. "What's in there?" Piper asked. Annabeth poked her head inside, then sighed and closed the curtains. "Nothing, right now. A friend's place. I've been expecting her for a few days, but so far, nothing." "Your friend lives in a cave?" Annabeth almost managed a smile. "Actually, her family has a luxury condo in Queens, and she goes to a finishing school in Connecticut. But when she's here at camp, yeah, she lives in the cave. She's our oracle, tells the future. I was hoping she could help me—" "Find Percy," Piper guessed. All the energy drained out of Annabeth, like she'd been holding it together for as long as she could. She sat down on a rock, and her expression was so full of pain, Piper felt like a voyeur. She forced herself to look away. Her eyes drifted to the crest of the hill, where a single pine tree dominated the skyline. Something glittered in its lowest branch—like a fuzzy gold bath mat. No ... not a bath mat. It was a sheep's fleece. Okay, Piper thought. Greek camp. They've got a replica of the Golden Fleece. Then she noticed the base of the tree. At first she thought it was wrapped in a pile of massive purple cables. But the cables had reptilian scales, clawed feet, and a snakelike head with yellow eyes and smoking nostrils. "That's—a dragon," she stammered. "That's the actual Golden Fleece?" Annabeth nodded, but it was clear she wasn't really listening. Her shoulders drooped. She rubbed her face and took a shaky breath. "Sorry. A little tired." "You look ready to drop," Piper said. "How long have been searching for your boyfriend?" "Three days, six hours, and about twelve minutes." "And you've got no idea what happened to him?" Annabeth shook her head miserably. "We were so excited because we both started winter break early. We met up at camp on Tuesday, figured we had three weeks together. It was going to be great. Then after the campfire, he—he kissed me good



night, went back to his cabin, and in the morning, he was gone. We searched the whole camp. We contacted his mom. We've tried to reach him every way we know how. Nothing. He just disappeared." Piper was thinking: Three days ago. The same night she'd had her dream. "How long were you guys together?" "Since August," Annabeth said. "August eighteenth." "Almost exactly when I met Jason," Piper said. "But we've only been together a few weeks." Annabeth winced. "Piper ... about that. Maybe you should sit down." Piper knew where this was going. Panic started building inside her, like her lungs were filling with water. "Look, I know Jason thought—he thought he just appeared at our school today. But that's not true. I've known him for four months." "Piper," Annabeth said sadly. "It's the Mist." "Missed ... what?" "M-i-s-t. It's a kind of veil separating the mortal world from the magic world. Mortal minds—they can't process strange stuff like gods and monsters, so the Mist bends reality. It makes mortals see things in a way they can understand—like their eyes might just skip over this valley completely, or they might look at that dragon and see a pile of cables." Piper swallowed. "No. You said yourself I'm not a regular mortal. I'm a demigod." "Even demigods can be affected. I've seen it lots of times. Monsters infiltrate some place like a school, pass themselves off as human, and everyone thinks they remember that person. They believe he's always been around. The Mist can change memories, even create memories of things that never happened—" "But Jason's not a monster!" Piper insisted. "He's a human guy, or demigod, or whatever you want to call him. My memories aren't fake. They're so real. The time we set Coach Hedge's pants on fire. The time Jason and I watched a meteor shower on the dorm roof and I finally got the stupid guy to kiss me...." She found herself rambling, telling Annabeth about her whole semester at Wilderness School. She'd liked Jason from the first week they'd met. He was so nice to her, and so patient, he could even

put up with hyperactive Leo and his stupid jokes. He'd accepted her for herself and didn't judge her because of the stupid things she'd done.

They'd spent hours talking, looking at the stars, and eventually—finally—holding hands. All that couldn't be fake. Annabeth pursed her lips. "Piper, your memories are a lot sharper than most. I'll admit that, and I don't know why that is. But if you know him so well—" "I do!" "Then where is he from?" Piper felt like she'd been hit between the eyes. "He must have told me, but—" "Did you ever notice his tattoo before today? Did he ever tell you anything about his parents, or his friends, or his last school?" "I—I don't know, but—" "Piper, what's his last name?" Her mind went blank. She didn't know Jason's last name. How could that be? She started to cry. She felt like a total fool, but she sat down on the rock next to Annabeth and just fell to pieces. It was too much. Did everything that was good in her stupid, miserable life have to be taken away? Yes, the dream had told her. Yes, unless you do exactly what we say. "Hey," Annabeth said. "We'll figure it out. Jason's here now. Who knows? Maybe it'll work out with you guys for real." Not likely, Piper thought. Not if the dream had told her the truth. But she couldn't say that. She brushed a tear from her cheek. "You brought me up here so no one would see me blubbering, huh?" Annabeth shrugged. "I figured it would be hard for you. I know what it's like to lose your boyfriend." "But I still can't believe ... I know we had something. And now it's just gone, like he doesn't even recognize me. If he really did just show up today, then why? How'd he get there? Why can't he remember anything?" "Good questions," Annabeth said. "Hopefully Chiron can figure that out. But for now, we need to get you settled. You ready to go back down?" Piper gazed at the crazy assortment of cabins in the valley. Her new home, a family who supposedly understood her—but soon they'd be just another bunch of people she'd disappointed, just another place she'd been kicked out of. You'll betray



them for us, the voice had warned. Or you'll lose everything. She didn't have a choice. "Yeah," she lied. "I'm ready." On the central green, a group of campers was playing basketball. They were incredible shots. Nothing bounced off the rim. Three-pointers went in automatically. "Apollo's cabin," Annabeth explained. "Bunch of showoffs with missile weapons—arrows, basketballs." They walked past a central fire pit, where two guys were hacking at each other with swords. "Real blades?" Piper noted. "Isn't that dangerous?" "That's sort of the point," Annabeth said. "Uh, sorry. Bad pun. That's my cabin over there. Number Six." She nodded to a gray building with a carved owl over the door. Through the open doorway, Piper could see bookshelves, weapon displays, and one of those computerized SMART Boards they have in classrooms. Two girls were drawing a map that looked like a battle diagram. "Speaking of blades," Annabeth said, "come here." She led Piper around the side of the cabin, to a big metal shed that looked like it was meant for gardening tools. Annabeth unlocked it, and inside were not gardening tools, unless you wanted to make war on your tomato plants. The shed was lined with all sorts of weapons—from swords to spears to clubs like Coach Hedge's. "Every demigod needs a weapon," Annabeth said. "Hephaestus makes the best, but we have a pretty good selection, too. Athena's all about strategy—matching the right weapon to the right person. Let's see ..." Piper didn't feel much like shopping for deadly objects, but she knew Annabeth was trying to do something nice for her. Annabeth handed her a massive sword, which Piper could hardly lift. "No," they both said at once. Annabeth rummaged a little farther in the shed and brought out something else. "A shotgun?" Piper asked. "Mossberg 500." Annabeth checked the pump action like it was no big deal. "Don't worry. It doesn't hurt humans. It's modified to shoot Celestial bronze, so it only kills monsters." "Um, I don't think that's my style," Piper said. "Mmm,

yeah,” Annabeth agreed. “Too flashy.” She put the shotgun back and started poking through a rack of crossbows when something in the corner of the shed caught Piper’s eye. “What is that?” she said. “A knife?” Annabeth dug it out and blew the dust off the scabbard. It looked like it hadn’t seen the light of day in centuries. “I don’t know, Piper.” Annabeth sounded uneasy. “I don’t think you want this one. Swords are usually better.”

“You use a knife.” Piper pointed to the one strapped to Annabeth’s belt. “Yeah, but ...” Annabeth shrugged. “Well, take a look if you want.”

The sheath was worn black leather, bound in bronze. Nothing fancy, nothing flashy. The polished wood handle fit beautifully in Piper’s hand. When she unsheathed it, she found a triangular blade eighteen inches long—bronze gleaming like it had been polished yesterday. The edges were deadly sharp. Her reflection in the blade caught her by surprise. She looked older, more serious, not as scared as she felt. “It suits you,” Annabeth admitted. “That kind of blade is called a parazonium. It was mostly ceremonial, carried by highranking officers in the Greek armies.

It showed you were a person of power and wealth, but in a fight, it could protect you just fine.” “I like it,” Piper said. “Why didn’t you think it was right?” Annabeth exhaled. “That blade has a long story. Most people would be afraid to claim it. Its first owner ... well, things didn’t turn out too well for her. Her name was Helen.” Piper let that sink in.

“Wait, you mean the Helen? Helen of Troy?” Annabeth nodded. Suddenly Piper felt like she should be handling the dagger with surgical gloves. “And it’s just sitting in your toolshed?” “We’re surrounded by Ancient Greek stuff,” Annabeth said. “This isn’t a museum. Weapons like that—they’re meant to be used. They’re our heritage as demigods. That was a wedding present from Menelaus, Helen’s first husband. She named the dagger Katoptris.” “Meaning?” “Mirror,” Annabeth said. “Looking glass. Probably because that’s the only thing Helen used it for.

I don't think it's ever seen battle." Piper looked at the blade again. For a moment, her own image stared up at her, but then the reflection changed. She saw flames, and a grotesque face like something carved from bedrock. She heard the same laughter as in her dream. She saw her dad in chains, tied to a post in front of a roaring bonfire. She dropped the blade. "Piper?" Annabeth shouted to the Apollo kids on the court, "Medic! I need some help over here!" "No, it's—it's okay," Piper managed. "You sure?" "Yeah. I just ..." She had to control herself.

With trembling fingers, she picked up the dagger. "I just got overwhelmed. So much happening today. But ... I want to keep the dagger, if that's okay." Annabeth hesitated. Then she waved off the Apollo kids. "Okay, if you're sure. You turned really pale, there. I thought you were having a seizure or something." "I'm fine," Piper promised, though her heart was still racing. "Is there ... um, a phone at camp? Can I call my dad?" Annabeth's gray eyes were almost as unnerving as the dagger blade. She seemed to be calculating a million possibilities, trying to read Piper's thoughts. "We aren't allowed phones," she said. "Most demigods, if they use a cell phone, it's like sending up a signal, letting monsters know where you are. But ... I've got one." She slipped it out of her pocket. "Kind of against the rules, but if it can be our secret ..." Piper took it gratefully, trying not to let her hands shake. She stepped away from Annabeth and turned to face the commons area. She called her dad's private line, even though she knew what would happen. Voice mail. She'd been trying for three days, ever since the dream. Wilderness School only allowed phone privileges once a day, but she'd called every evening, and gotten nowhere. Reluctantly she dialed the other number. Her dad's personal assistant answered immediately. "Mr. McLean's office." "Jane," Piper said, gritting her teeth. "Where's my dad?" Jane was silent for a moment, probably wondering if she could get away with hanging up. "Piper, I

thought you weren't supposed to call from school." "Maybe I'm not at school," Piper said. "Maybe I ran away to live among the woodland creatures." "Mmm." Jane didn't sound concerned. "Well, I'll tell him you called." "Where is he?" "Out." "You don't know, do you?" Piper lowered her voice, hoping Annabeth was too nice to eavesdrop. "When are you going to call the police, Jane? He could be in trouble." "Piper, we are not going to turn this into a media circus. I'm sure he's fine. He does take off occasionally. He always comes back." "So it's true. You don't know—" "I have to go, Piper," Jane snapped. "Enjoy school." The line went dead. Piper cursed. She walked back to Annabeth and handed her the phone. "No luck?" Annabeth asked. Piper didn't answer. She didn't trust herself not to start crying again. Annabeth glanced at the phone display and hesitated. "Your last name is McLean? Sorry, it's not my business. But that sounds really familiar." "Common name." "Yeah, I guess. What does your dad do?" "He's got a degree in the arts," Piper said automatically. "He's a Cherokee artist." Her standard response. Not a lie, just not the whole truth. Most people, when they heard that, figured her dad sold Indian souvenirs at a roadside stand on a reservation. Sitting Bull bobble-heads, wampum necklaces, Big Chief tablets—that kind of thing. "Oh." Annabeth didn't look convinced, but she put the phone away. "You feeling okay? Want to keep going?" Piper fastened her new dagger to her belt and promised herself that later, when she was alone, she'd figure out how it worked. "Sure," she said. "I want to see everything." All the cabins were cool, but none of them struck Piper as hers. No burning signs—wombats or otherwise—appeared over her head. Cabin Eight was entirely silver and glowed like moonlight. "Artemis?" Piper guessed. "You know Greek mythology," Annabeth said. "I did some reading when my dad was working on a project last year." "I thought he did Cherokee art." Piper bit back a curse. "Oh, right. But—you know, he does other stuff too." Piper

thought she'd blown it: McLean, Greek mythology. Thankfully, Annabeth didn't seem to make the connection. "Anyway," Annabeth continued, "Artemis is goddess of the moon, goddess of hunting. But no campers. Artemis was an eternal maiden, so she doesn't have any kids." "Oh." That kind of bummed Piper out. She'd always liked the stories of Artemis, and figured she would make a cool mom. "Well, there are the Hunters of Artemis," Annabeth amended. "They visit sometimes. They're not the children of Artemis, but they're her handmaidens—this band of immortal teenage girls who adventure together and hunt monsters and stuff." Piper perked up. "That sounds cool. They get to be immortal?" "Unless they die in combat, or break their vows. Did I mention they have to swear off boys? No dating—ever. For eternity." "Oh," Piper said. "Never mind." Annabeth laughed. For a moment she looked almost happy, and Piper thought she'd be a cool friend to hang out with in better times. Forget it, Piper reminded herself. You're not going to make any friends here. Not once they find out. They passed the next cabin, Number Ten, which was decorated like a Barbie house with lace curtains, a pink door, and potted carnations in the windows. They walked by the doorway, and the smell of perfume almost made Piper gag. "Gah, is that where supermodels go to die?" Annabeth smirked. "Aphrodite's cabin. Goddess of love. Drew is the head counselor." "Figures," Piper grumbled. "They're not all bad," Annabeth said. "The last head counselor we had was great." "What happened to her?" Annabeth's expression darkened. "We should keep moving." They looked at the other cabins, but Piper just got more depressed. She wondered if she could be the daughter of Demeter, the farming goddess. Then again, Piper killed every plant she ever touched. Athena was cool. Or maybe Hecate, the magic goddess. But it didn't really matter. Even here, where everyone was supposed to find a lost parent, she knew she would still end up the unwanted kid. She was not

looking forward to the campfire tonight. “We started with the twelve Olympian gods,” Annabeth explained. “Male gods on the left, female on the right. Then last year, we added a whole bunch of new cabins for the other gods who didn’t have thrones on Olympus—Hecate, Hades, Iris—

” “What are the two big ones on the end?” Piper asked. Annabeth frowned. “Zeus and Hera. King and queen of the gods.” Piper headed that way, and Annabeth followed, though she didn’t act very excited. The Zeus cabin reminded Piper of a bank. It was white marble with big columns out front and polished bronze doors emblazoned with lightning bolts. Hera’s cabin was smaller but done in the same style, except the doors were carved with peacock feather designs, shimmering in different colors. Unlike the other cabins, which were all noisy and open and full of activity, the Zeus and Hera cabins looked closed and silent. “Are they empty?” Piper asked. Annabeth nodded. “Zeus went a long time without having any children. Well, mostly. Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, the eldest brothers among the gods—they’re called the Big Three. Their kids are really powerful, really dangerous. For the last seventy years or so, they tried to avoid having demigod children.” “Tried to avoid it?” “Sometimes they ... um, cheated. I’ve got a friend, Thalia Grace, who’s the daughter of Zeus. But she gave up camp life and became a Hunter of Artemis. My boyfriend, Percy, he’s a son of Poseidon. And there’s a kid who shows up sometimes, Nico—son of Hades. Except for them, there are no demigod children of the Big Three gods. At least, not that we know of.” “And Hera?” Piper looked at the peacock-decorated doors. The cabin bothered her, though she wasn’t sure why. “Goddess of marriage.” Annabeth’s tone was carefully controlled, like she was trying to avoid cursing. “She doesn’t have kids with anyone but Zeus. So, yeah, no demigods. The cabin’s just honorary.” “You don’t like her,” Piper noticed. “We have a long history,” Annabeth admitted. “I thought we’d made peace, but when

Percy disappeared ... I got this weird dream vision from her.” “Telling you to come get us,” Piper said. “But you thought Percy would be there.” “It’s probably better I don’t talk about it,” Annabeth said. “I’ve got nothing good to say about Hera right now.” Piper looked down the base of the doors. “So who goes in here?” “No one. The cabin is just honorary, like I said. No one goes in.” “Someone does.” Piper pointed at a footprint on the dusty threshold. On instinct, she pushed the doors and they swung open easily. Annabeth stepped back. “Um, Piper, I don’t think we should—” “We’re supposed to do dangerous stuff, right?” And Piper walked inside. Hera’s cabin was not someplace Piper would want to live. It was as cold as a freezer, with a circle of white columns around a central statue of the goddess, ten feet tall, seated on a throne in flowing golden robes. Piper had always thought of Greek statues as white with blank eyes, but this one was brightly painted so it looked almost human—except huge. Hera’s piercing eyes seemed to follow Piper. At the goddess’s feet, a fire burned in a bronze brazier. Piper wondered who tended it if the cabin was always empty. A stone hawk sat on Hera’s shoulder, and in her hand was a staff topped with a lotus flower. The goddess’s hair was done in black plaits. Her face smiled, but the eyes were cold and calculating, as if she were saying: Mother knows best. Now don’t cross me or I will have to step on you.

There was nothing else in the cabin—no beds, no furniture, no bathroom, no windows, nothing that anyone could actually use to live. For a goddess of home and marriage, Hera’s place reminded Piper of a tomb. No, this wasn’t her mom. At least Piper was sure of that. She hadn’t come in here because she felt a good connection, but because her sense of dread was stronger here. Her dream—that horrible ultimatum she’d been handed—had something to do with this cabin. She froze. They weren’t alone. Behind the statue, at a little altar in the back, stood a figure covered in a black shawl. Only her hands were



visible, palms up. She seemed to be chanting something like a spell or a prayer. Annabeth gasped. "Rachel?" The other girl turned. She dropped her shawl, revealing a mane of curly red hair and a freckled face that didn't go with the seriousness of the cabin or the black shawl at all. She looked about seventeen, a totally normal teen in a green blouse and tattered jeans covered with marker doodles. Despite the cold floor, she was barefoot. "Hey!" She ran to give Annabeth a hug. "I'm so sorry! I came as fast as I could." They talked for a few minutes about Annabeth's boyfriend and how there was no news, et cetera, until finally Annabeth remembered Piper, who was standing there feeling uncomfortable. "I'm being rude," Annabeth apologized. "Rachel, this is Piper, one of the half-bloods we rescued today. Piper, this is Rachel Elizabeth Dare, our oracle." "The friend who lives in the cave," Piper guessed. Rachel grinned. "That's me." "So you're an oracle?" Piper asked. "You can tell the future?" "More like the future mugs me from time to time," Rachel said. "I speak prophecies. The oracle's spirit kind of hijacks me every once in a while and speaks important stuff that doesn't make any sense to anybody. But yeah, the prophecies tell the future." "Oh." Piper shifted from foot to foot. "That's cool." Rachel laughed. "Don't worry. Everybody finds it a little creepy. Even me. But usually I'm harmless." "You're a demigod?" "Nope," Rachel said. "Just mortal." "Then what are you ..." Piper waved her hand around the room. Rachel's smile faded. She glanced at Annabeth, then back at Piper. "Just a hunch. Something about this cabin and Percy's disappearance. They're connected somehow. I've learned to follow my hunches, especially the last month, since the gods went silent." "Went silent?" Piper asked. Rachel frowned at Annabeth. "You haven't told her yet?" "I was getting to that," Annabeth said. "Piper, for the last month ... well, it's normal for the gods not to talk to their children very much, but usually we can count on some messages now and then. Some of us

can even visit Olympus. I spent practically all semester at the Empire State Building.” “Excuse me?” “The entrance to Mount Olympus these days.” “Oh,” Piper said. “Sure, why not?” “Annabeth was redesigning Olympus after it was damaged in the Titan War,” Rachel explained. “She’s an amazing architect. You should see the salad bar—” “Anyway,” Annabeth said, “starting about a month ago, Olympus fell silent. The entrance closed, and no one could get in. Nobody knows why. It’s like the gods have sealed themselves off. Even my mom won’t answer my prayers, and our camp director, Dionysus, was recalled.” “Your camp director was the god of ... wine?” “Yeah, it’s a—” “Long story,” Piper guessed. “Right. Go on.” “That’s it, really,” Annabeth said. “Demigods still get claimed, but nothing else. No messages. No visits. No sign the gods are even listening. It’s like something has happened—something really bad. Then Percy disappeared.” “And Jason showed up on our field trip,” Piper supplied. “With no memory.” “Who’s Jason?” Rachel asked. “My—” Piper stopped herself before she could say “boyfriend,” but the effort made her chest hurt. “My friend. But Annabeth, you said Hera sent you a dream vision.” “Right,” Annabeth said. “The first communication from a god in a month, and it’s Hera, the least helpful goddess, and she contacts me, her least favorite demigod. She tells me I’ll find out what happened to Percy if I go to the Grand Canyon skywalk and look for a guy with one shoe. Instead, I find you guys, and the guy with one shoe is Jason. It doesn’t make sense.” “Something bad is happening,” Rachel agreed. She looked at Piper, and Piper felt an overwhelming desire to tell them about her dream, to confess that she knew what was happening—at least part of the story. And the bad stuff was only beginning. “Guys,” she said. “I—I need to—” Before she could continue, Rachel’s body stiffened. Her eyes began to glow with a greenish light, and she grabbed Piper by the shoulders. Piper tried to back away, but Rachel’s hands were like steel clamps. Free me, she

said. But it wasn't Rachel's voice. It sounded like an older woman, speaking from somewhere far away, down a long, echoing pipe. Free me, Piper McLean, or the earth shall swallow us. It must be by the solstice. The room started spinning. Annabeth tried to separate Piper from Rachel, but it was no use. Green smoke enveloped them, and Piper was no longer sure if she was awake or dreaming. The giant statue of the goddess seemed to rise from its throne. It leaned over Piper, its eyes boring into her. The statue's mouth opened, its breath like horribly thick perfume. It spoke in the same echoing voice: Our enemies stir. The fiery one is only the first. Bow to his will, and their king shall rise, dooming us all. FREE ME! Piper's knees buckled, and everything went black.