

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

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CHAPTER 5

LEO

LEO'S TOUR WAS GOING GREAT UNTIL he learned about the dragon. The archer dude, Will Solace, seemed pretty cool. Everything he showed Leo was so amazing, it should've been illegal. Real Greek warships moored at the beach that sometimes had practice fights with flaming arrows and explosives? Sweet! Arts & crafts sessions where you could make sculptures with chain saws and blowtorches? Leo was like, Sign me up! The woods were stocked with dangerous monsters, and no one should ever go in there alone? Nice! And the camp was overflowing with fine-looking girls. Leo didn't quite understand the whole related-to-the-gods business, but he hoped that didn't mean he was cousins with all these ladies. That would suck. At the very least, he wanted to check out those underwater girls in the lake again. They were definitely worth drowning for. Will showed him the cabins, the dining pavilion, and the sword arena. "Do I get a sword?" Leo asked. Will glanced at him like he found the idea disturbing. "You'll probably make your own, seeing as how you're in Cabin Nine." "Yeah, what's up with that? Vulcan?" "Usually we don't call the gods by their Roman names," Will said. "The original names are Greek. Your dad is Hephaestus." "Festus?" Leo had heard somebody say that before, but he was still dismayed. "Sounds like the god of cowboys." "He-phaestus," Will corrected. "God of blacksmiths and fire." Leo had heard that too, but he was trying not to think about it. The god of fire ... seriously? Considering what had happened to his mom, that seemed like a sick joke. "So the flaming hammer over my head," Leo said. "Good thing, or bad thing?" Will took a while to answer. "You were claimed almost immediately. That's

usually good.” “But that Rainbow Pony dude, Butch—he mentioned a curse.” “Ah ... look, it’s nothing. Since Cabin Nine’s last head counselor died—” “Died? Like, painfully?” “I ought to let your bunkmates tell you about it.” “Yeah, where are my home dawgs? Shouldn’t their

counselor be giving me the VIP tour?” “He, um, can’t. You’ll see why.”

Will forged ahead before Leo could ask anything else. “Curses and death,” Leo said to himself. “This just gets better and better.” He was halfway across the green when he spotted his old babysitter. And she was not the kind of person he expected to see at a demigod camp. Leo

froze in his tracks. “What’s wrong?” Will asked. Tía Callida—Auntie Callida. That’s what she’d called herself, but Leo hadn’t seen her since he was five years old. She was just standing there, in the shadow of a big white cabin at the end of the green, watching him. She wore her black linen widow’s dress, with a black shawl pulled over her hair. Her face hadn’t changed—leathery skin, piercing dark eyes. Her withered hands were like claws. She looked ancient, but no different than Leo remembered. “That old lady ...” Leo said. “What’s she doing here?” Will

tried to follow his gaze. “What old lady?” “Dude, the old lady. The one in black. How many old ladies do you see over there?” Will frowned. “I think you’ve had a long day, Leo. The Mist could still be playing tricks on your mind. How about we head straight to your cabin now?” Leo

wanted to protest, but when he looked back toward the big white cabin, Tía Callida was gone. He was sure she’d been there, almost as if thinking about his mom had summoned Callida back from the past. And that wasn’t good, because Tía Callida had tried to kill him. “Just messing with you, man.” Leo pulled some gears and levers from his pockets and

started fiddling with them to calm his nerves. He couldn’t have everybody at camp thinking he was crazy. At least, not crazier than he really was. “Let’s go see Cabin Nine,” he said. “I’m in the mood for a good curse.” From the outside, the Hephaestus cabin looked like an

oversize RV with shiny metal walls and metal-slatted windows. The entrance was like a bank vault door, circular and several feet thick. It opened with lots of brass gears turning and hydraulic pistons blowing smoke. Leo whistled. "They got a steampunk theme going on, huh?" Inside, the cabin seemed deserted. Steel bunks were folded against the walls like high-tech Murphy beds. Each had a digital control panel, blinking LED lights, glowing gems, and interlocking gears. Leo figured each camper had his own combination lock to release his bed, and there was probably an alcove behind it with storage, maybe some traps to keep out unwanted visitors. At least, that's the way Leo would've designed it. A fire pole came down from the second floor, even though the cabin didn't appear to have a second floor from the outside. A circular staircase led down into some kind of basement. The walls were lined with every kind of power tool Leo could imagine, plus a huge assortment of knives, swords, and other implements of destruction. A large workbench overflowed with scrap metal—screws, bolts, washers, nails, rivets, and a million other machine parts. Leo had a strong urge to shovel them all into his coat pockets. He loved that kind of stuff. But he'd need a hundred more coats to fit it all. Looking around, he could almost imagine he was back in his mom's machine shop. Not the weapons, maybe—but the tools, the piles of scrap, the smell of grease and metal and hot engines. She would've loved this place. He pushed that thought away. He didn't like painful memories. Keep moving—that was his motto. Don't dwell on things. Don't stay in one place too long. It was the only way to stay ahead of the sadness. He picked a long implement from the wall. "A weed whacker? What's the god of fire want with a weed whacker?" A voice in the shadows said, "You'd be surprised." At the back of the room, one of the bunk beds was occupied. A curtain of dark camouflage material retracted, and Leo could see the guy who'd been invisible a second before. It was hard to

tell much about him because he was covered in a body cast. His head was wrapped in gauze except for his face, which was puffy and bruised.

He looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy after a beat-down. "I'm Jake Mason," the guy said. "I'd shake your hand, but ..." "Yeah," Leo said.

"Don't get up." The guy cracked a smile, then winced like it hurt to move his face. Leo wondered what had happened to him, but he was afraid to ask. "Welcome to Cabin Nine," Jake said. "Been almost a year since we had any new kids. I'm head counselor for now." "For now?"

Leo asked. Will Solace cleared his throat. "So where is everybody, Jake?" "Down at the forges," Jake said wistfully. "They're working on ... you know, that problem." "Oh." Will changed the subject. "So, you got a spare bed for Leo?" Jake studied Leo, sizing him up. "You believe in curses, Leo? Or ghosts?" I just saw my evil babysitter Tía Callida, Leo thought. She's got to be dead after all these years. And I can't go a day without remembering my mom in that machine shop fire. Don't talk to me about ghosts, doughboy. But aloud, he said, "Ghosts? Pfft. Nah. I'm cool. A stormspirit chucked me down the Grand Canyon this morning, but you know, all in a day's work, right?" Jake nodded. "That's good. Because I'll give you the best bed in the cabin—Beckendorf's." "Whoa, Jake," Will said. "You sure?" Jake called out: "Bunk 1-A, please." The whole cabin rumbled. A circular section of the floor spiraled open like a camera lens, and a full-size bed popped up. The bronze frame had a built-in game station at the footboard, a stereo system in the headboard, a glass-door refrigerator mounted into the base, and a whole bunch of control panels running down the side. Leo jumped right in and lay back with arms behind his head. "I can handle this." "It retracts into a private room below," Jake said. "Oh, heck, yes," Leo said. "See y'all. I'll be down in the Leo Cave. Which button do I press?" "Hold on," Will Solace protested. "You guys have private underground rooms?" Jake probably would've smiled if it didn't hurt so much. "We

got lots of secrets, Will. You Apollo guys can't have all the fun. Our campers have been excavating the tunnel system under Cabin Nine for almost a century. We still haven't found the end. Anyway, Leo, if you don't mind sleeping in a dead man's bed, it's yours." Suddenly Leo didn't feel like kicking back. He sat up, careful not to touch any of the buttons. "The counselor who died —this was his bed?" "Yeah," Jake said. "Charles Beckendorf." Leo imagined saw blades coming through the mattress, or maybe a grenade sewn inside the pillows. "He didn't, like, die in this bed, did he?" "No," Jake said. "In the Titan War, last summer." "The Titan War," Leo repeated, "which has nothing to do with this very fine bed?" "The Titans," Will said, like Leo was an idiot. "The big powerful guys that ruled the world before the gods. They tried to make a comeback last summer. Their leader, Kronos, built a new palace on top of Mount Tam in California. Their armies came to New York and almost destroyed Mount Olympus. A lot of demigods died trying to stop them." "I'm guessing this wasn't on the news?" Leo said. It seemed like a fair question, but Will shook his head in disbelief. "You didn't hear about Mount St. Helens erupting, or the freak storms across the country, or that building collapsing in St. Louis?" Leo shrugged. Last summer, he'd been on the run from another foster home. Then a truancy officer caught him in New Mexico, and the court sentenced him to the nearest correctional facility—the Wilderness School. "Guess I was busy." "Doesn't matter," Jake said. "You were lucky to miss it. The thing is, Beckendorf was one of the first casualties, and ever since then—" "Your cabin's been cursed," Leo guessed. Jake didn't answer. Then again, the dude was in a body cast. That was an answer. Leo started noticing little things that he hadn't seen before—an explosion mark on the wall, a stain on the floor that might've been oil ... or blood. Broken swords and smashed machines kicked into the corners of the room, maybe out of frustration. The place did feel unlucky. Jake sighed

halfheartedly. “Well, I should get some sleep. I hope you like it here, Leo. It used to be ... really nice.” He closed his eyes, and the camouflage curtain drew itself across the bed. “Come on, Leo,” Will said. “I’ll take you to the forges.” As they were leaving, Leo looked back at his new bed, and he could almost imagine a dead counselor sitting there — another ghost who wasn’t going to leave Leo alone.