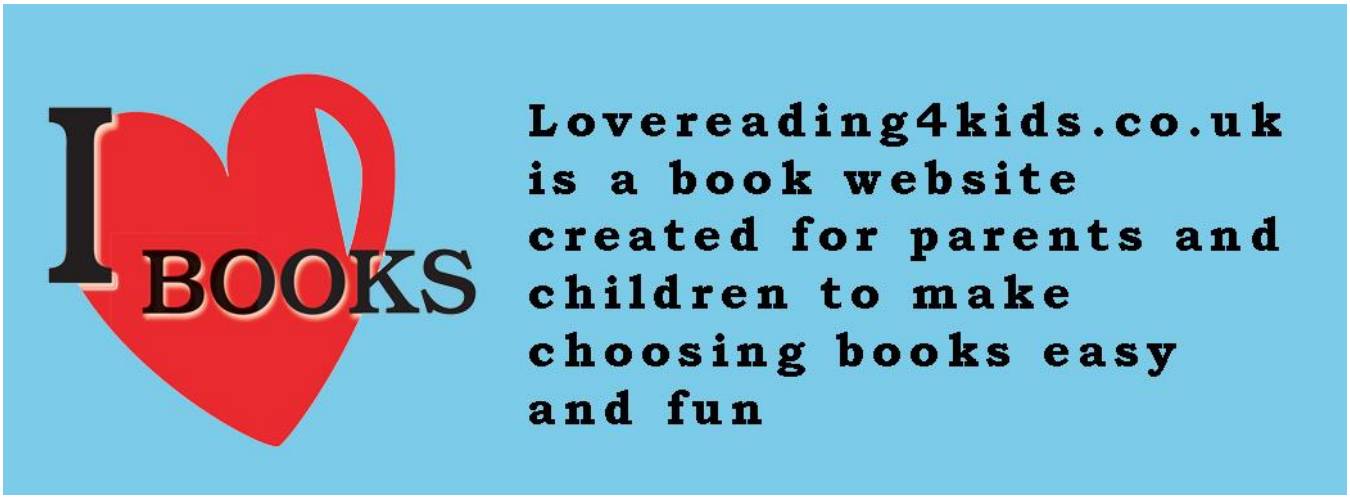


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Rick Riordan

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Lester (Apollo)
Still human; thanks for asking
Gods, I hate my life

WHEN OUR DRAGON declared war on Indiana, I knew it was going to be a bad day.

We'd been travelling west for six weeks, and Festus had never shown such hostility towards a state. New Jersey he ignored. Pennsylvania he seemed to enjoy, despite our battle with the Cyclopes of Pittsburgh. Ohio he tolerated, even after our encounter with Potina, the Roman goddess of childhood drinks, who pursued us in the form of a giant red pitcher emblazoned with a smiley face.

Yet, for some reason, Festus decided he did not like Indiana. He landed on the cupola of the Indiana Statehouse, flapped his metallic wings and blew a cone of fire that incinerated the state flag right off the flagpole.

'Whoa, buddy!' Leo Valdez pulled the dragon's reins. 'We've talked about this. No blowtorching public monuments!'

Behind him on the dragon's spine, Calypso gripped Festus's scales for balance. 'Could we *please* get to the ground? *Gently* this time?'

For a formerly immortal sorceress who once controlled

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air spirits, Calypso was not a fan of flying. Cold wind blew her chestnut hair into my face, making me blink and spit.

That's right, dear reader.

I, the most important passenger, the youth who had once been the glorious god Apollo, was forced to sit in the back of the dragon. Oh, the indignities I had suffered since Zeus stripped me of my divine powers! It wasn't enough that I was now a sixteen-year-old mortal with the ghastly alias Lester Papadopoulos. It wasn't enough that I had to toil upon the earth doing (ugh) heroic quests until I could find a way back into my father's good graces, or that I had a case of acne that simply *would not* respond to over-the-counter zit medicine. Despite my New York State junior driver's licence, Leo Valdez didn't trust me to operate his aerial bronze steed!

Festus's claws scrabbled for a hold on the green copper dome, which was much too small for a dragon his size. I had a flashback to the time I installed a life-size statue of the muse Calliope on my sun chariot and the extra weight of the hood ornament made me nosedive into China and create the Gobi Desert.

Leo glanced back, his face streaked with soot. 'Apollo, you sense anything?'

'Why is it *my* job to sense things? Just because I used to be a god of prophecy –'

'You're the one who's been having visions,' Calypso reminded me. 'You said your friend Meg would be here.'

Just hearing Meg's name gave me a twinge of pain. 'That doesn't mean I can pinpoint her location with my mind! Zeus has revoked my access to GPS!'

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'GPS?' Calypso asked.

'Godly positioning system.'

'That's not a real thing!'

'Guys, cool it.' Leo patted the dragon's neck. 'Apollo, just try, will you? Does this look like the city you dreamed about or not?'

I scanned the horizon.

Indiana was flat country – highways crisscrossing scrubby brown plains, shadows of winter clouds floating above urban sprawl. Around us rose a meagre cluster of downtown high-rises – stacks of stone and glass like layered wedges of black and white liquorice. (Not the yummy kind of liquorice, either; the nasty variety that sits for aeons in your stepmother's candy bowl on the coffee table. And, no, Hera, why would I be talking about you?)

After falling to earth in New York City, I found Indianapolis desolate and uninspiring, as if one proper New York neighbourhood – Midtown, perhaps – had been stretched out to encompass the entire area of Manhattan, then relieved of two-thirds of its population and vigorously power-washed.

I could think of no reason why an evil triumvirate of Ancient Roman emperors would take interest in such a location. Nor could I imagine why Meg McCaffrey would be sent here to capture me. Yet my visions had been clear. I had seen this skyline. I had heard my old enemy Nero give orders to Meg: *Go west. Capture Apollo before he can find the next Oracle. If you cannot bring him to me alive, kill him.*

The truly sad thing about this? Meg was one of my better friends. She also happened to be my demigod master,

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thanks to Zeus's twisted sense of humour. As long as I remained mortal, Meg could order me to do anything, even kill myself . . . No. Better not to think of such possibilities.

I shifted in my metal seat. After so many weeks of travel, I was tired and saddle sore. I wanted to find a safe place to rest. *This* was not such a city. Something about the landscape below made me as restless as Festus.

Alas, I was sure this was where we were meant to be. Despite the danger, if I had a chance of seeing Meg McCaffrey again, of prising her away from her villainous stepfather's grasp, I had to try.

'This is the spot,' I said. 'Before this dome collapses under us, I suggest we get to the ground.'

Calypso grumbled in ancient Minoan, 'I already *said* that.'

'Well, excuse me, sorceress!' I replied in the same language. 'Perhaps if *you* had helpful visions, I'd listen to you more often!'

Calypso called me a few names that reminded me how colourful the Minoan language had been before it went extinct.

'Hey, you two,' Leo said. 'No ancient dialects. Spanish or English, please. Or Machine.'

Festus creaked in agreement.

'It's okay, boy,' Leo said. 'I'm sure they didn't mean to exclude us. Now let's fly down to street level, huh?'

Festus's ruby eyes glowed. His metal teeth spun like drill bits. I imagined him thinking, *Illinois is sounding pretty good right about now*.

But he flapped his wings and leaped from the dome. We

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hurtled downward, landing in front of the statehouse with enough force to crack the sidewalk. My eyeballs jiggled like water balloons.

Festus whipped his head from side to side, steam curling from his nostrils.

I saw no immediate threats. Cars drove leisurely down West Washington Street. Pedestrians strolled by: a middle-aged woman in a flowery dress, a heavy-set policeman carrying a paper coffee cup labelled CAFÉ PATACHOU, a clean-cut man in a blue seersucker suit.

The man in blue waved politely as he passed. 'Morning.'

''Sup, dude,' Leo called.

Calypso tilted her head. 'Why was he so friendly? Does he not *see* that we're sitting atop a fifty-ton metal dragon?'

Leo grinned. 'It's the Mist, babe – messes with mortal eyes. Makes monsters look like stray dogs. Makes swords look like umbrellas. Makes me look even more handsome than usual!'

Calypso jabbed her thumbs into Leo's kidneys.

'Ow!' he complained.

'I know what the Mist is, *Leonidas* –'

'Hey, I told you never to call me that.'

'– but the Mist must be very strong here if it can hide a monster of Festus's size at such close range. Apollo, don't you find that a little odd?'

I studied the passing pedestrians.

True, I had seen places where the Mist was particularly heavy. At Troy, the sky above the battlefield had been so thick with gods you couldn't turn your chariot without running into another deity, yet the Trojans and Greeks saw

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only hints of our presence. At Three Mile Island in 1979, the mortals somehow failed to realize that their partial nuclear meltdown was caused by an epic chainsaw fight between Ares and Hephaestus. (As I recall, Hephaestus had insulted Ares's bell-bottom jeans.)

Still, I did not think heavy Mist was the problem here. Something about these locals bothered me. Their faces were too placid. Their dazed smiles reminded me of ancient Athenians just before the Dionysus Festival – everyone in a good mood, distracted, thinking about the drunken riots and debauchery to come.

'We should get out of the public eye,' I suggested. 'Perhaps –'

Festus stumbled, shaking like a wet dog. From inside his chest came a noise like a loose bicycle chain.

'Aw, not again,' Leo said. 'Everybody off!'

Calypso and I quickly dismounted.

Leo ran in front of Festus and held out his arms in a classic dragon-wrangler's stance. 'Hey, buddy, it's fine! I'm just going to switch you off for a while, okay? A little downtime to –'

Festus projectile-vomited a column of flames that engulfed Leo. Fortunately, Valdez was fireproof. His clothes were not. From what Leo had told me, he could generally prevent his outfits from burning up simply by concentrating. If he were caught by surprise, however, it didn't always work.

When the flames dissipated, Leo stood before us wearing nothing but his asbestos boxer shorts, his magical tool belt, and a pair of smoking, partially melted sneakers.

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'Dang it!' he complained. 'Festus, it's cold out here!'

The dragon stumbled. Leo lunged and flipped the lever behind the dragon's left foreleg. Festus began to collapse. His wings, limbs, neck and tail contracted into his body, his bronze plates overlapping and folding inward. In a matter of seconds, our robotic friend had been reduced to a large bronze suitcase.

That should have been physically impossible, of course, but like any decent god, demigod or engineer, Leo Valdez refused to be stopped by the laws of physics.

He scowled at his new piece of luggage. 'Man . . . I *thought* I fixed his gyro-capacitor. Guess we're stuck here until I can find a machine shop.'

Calypso grimaced. Her pink ski jacket glistened with condensation from our flight through the clouds. 'And if we find such a shop how long will it take to repair Festus?'

Leo shrugged. 'Twelve hours? Fifteen?' He pushed a button on the side of the suitcase. A handle popped up. 'Also, if we see a men's clothing store, that might be good.'

I imagined walking into a T.K. Maxx, Leo in boxer shorts and melted sneakers, rolling a bronze suitcase behind him. I did not relish the idea.

Then, from the direction of the sidewalk, a voice called, 'Hello!'

The woman in the flowery dress had returned. At least she *looked* like the same woman. Either that or lots of ladies in Indianapolis wore purple-and-yellow honeysuckle-pattern dresses and had 1950s bouffant hairstyles.

She smiled vacantly. 'Beautiful morning!'

It was in fact a miserable morning – cold and cloudy

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with a smell of impending snow – but I felt it would be rude to ignore her completely.

I gave her a little parade wave – the sort of gesture I used to give my worshippers when they came to grovel at my altar. To me, the message was clear enough: *I see you, puny mortal; now run along. The gods are talking.*

The woman did not take the hint. She strolled forward and planted herself in front of us. She wasn't particularly large, but something about her proportions seemed off. Her shoulders were too wide for her head. Her chest and belly protruded in a lumpy mass, as if she'd stuffed a sack of mangos down the front of her dress. With her spindly arms and legs, she reminded me of some sort of giant beetle. If she ever tipped over, I doubted she could easily get back up.

'Oh my!' She gripped her purse with both hands. 'Aren't you children *cute*!'

Her lipstick and eye shadow were both a violent shade of purple. I wondered if she was getting enough oxygen to her brain.

'Madam,' I said, 'we are not children.' I could have added that I was over four thousand years old, and Calypso was even older, but I decided not to get into that. 'Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a suitcase to repair and my friend is in dire need of a pair of jeans.'

I tried to step around her. She blocked my path.

'You can't go yet, dear! We haven't welcomed you to Indiana!' From her purse, she drew a smartphone. The screen glowed as if a call were already in progress.

'It's him, all right,' she said into the phone. 'Everybody, come on over. Apollo is here!'

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My lungs shrivelled in my chest.

In the old days, I would have expected to be recognized as soon as I arrived in a town. *Of course* the locals would rush to welcome me. They would sing and dance and throw flowers. They would immediately begin constructing a new temple.

But as Lester Papadopoulos I did not warrant such treatment. I looked nothing like my former glorious self. The idea that the Indianans might recognize me despite my tangled hair, acne and flab was both insulting and terrifying. What if they erected a statue of me in my present form – a giant golden Lester in the centre of their city? The other gods would never let me hear the end of it!

'Madam,' I said, 'I'm afraid you have mistaken me –'

'Don't be modest!' The woman tossed her phone and purse aside. She grabbed my forearm with the strength of a weightlifter. 'Our master will be delighted to have you in custody. And please call me Nanette.'

Calypso charged. Either she wished to defend me (unlikely), or she was not a fan of the name Nanette. She punched the woman in the face.

This by itself did not surprise me. Having lost her immortal powers, Calypso was in the process of trying to master other skills. So far, she'd failed at swords, polearms, shurikens, whips and improvisational comedy. (I sympathized with her frustration.) Today, she'd decided to try fisticuffs.

What surprised me was the loud *CRACK* her fist made against Nanette's face – the sound of finger bones breaking.

'Ow!' Calypso stumbled away, clutching her hand.

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Nanette's head slid backwards. She released me to try to grab her own face, but it was too late. Her head toppled off her shoulders. It clanged against the tarmac and rolled sideways, the eyes still blinking, the purple lips twitching. Its base was smooth stainless steel. Attached to it were ragged strips of duct tape stuck with hair and bobby pins.

'Holy Hephaestus!' Leo ran to Calypso's side. 'Lady, you broke my girlfriend's hand with your face. What *are* you, an automaton?'

'No, dear,' said decapitated Nanette. Her muffled voice didn't come from the stainless-steel head on the sidewalk. It emanated from somewhere inside her dress. Just above her collar, where her neck used to be, an outcropping of fine blonde hair was tangled with bobby pins. 'And, I must say, hitting me wasn't very polite.'

Belatedly, I realized the metal head had been a disguise. Just as satyrs covered their hooves with human shoes, this creature passed for mortal by pretending to have a human face. Its voice came from its gut area, which meant . . .

My knees trembled.

'A *blemmyae*,' I said.

Nanette chuckled. Her bulging midsection writhed under the honeysuckle cloth. She ripped open her blouse – something a polite Midwesterner would never think of doing – and revealed her true face.

Where a woman's brassiere would have been, two enormous bulging eyes blinked at me. From her sternum protruded a large shiny nose. Across her abdomen curled a hideous mouth – glistening orange lips, teeth like a spread of blank white playing cards.

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'Yes, dear,' the face said. 'And I'm arresting you in the name of the Triumvirate!'

Up and down Washington Street, pleasant-looking pedestrians turned and began marching in our direction.

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