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Lex Trent versus the Gods

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LEX TRENT VERSUS THE GODS

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headline

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1

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PROLOGUE

No one knew the precise date when the Globe had split in half. For many hundreds of years the Lands Above and the Lands Beneath had been nothing more than a metaphorical, symbolical divide. But then, one day, the Gods decided that they had had enough – more than enough, in fact – of their subjects complaining and pestering and whining at them day and night. Being the focus of so much worship can be a tiring business. The Gods needed somewhere that would be quiet – a place they could call their own. And thus, one fateful day, the earth shook and trembled and a great split appeared right across the centre and then the two halves cracked apart like a giant, cosmic, galactic Easter egg. No one alive today could remember the Great Divide, of course, for it had happened many millennia ago now. One might think the planet had never split in half at all had it not been for the ladders . . .

Physicists had happily debated for hours on end how

the split was even possible, for the general consensus seemed to be that the planet had been spherical once but now . . . now it was more like a . . . well, like a dumbbell – those weights that impressive-looking men use to make themselves look even more impressive. A dumbbell that had been stood up vertically. The top weight was the Lands Above, the bottom weight was the Lands Beneath and the bar in the middle was the ladders stretching between the two discs.

If you travelled to a certain place in the centre of the Lands Above, you could look down over the edge and see them – thousands and thousands of ladders stretching away through space, linking the top of the planet to its bottom half – the province of the Gods. It was a breathtaking, awe-inspiring sight. Some of the ladders were solid, built of wood and metal and attached to platforms below. Others were no more than rope ladders, waving lightly in the breeze and dusted with space frost.

Just as physicists had debated the mechanics of the Split itself, philosophers had argued heatedly about the theological significance of *ladders* being used to join the two halves of the planet together. After all, it seemed a most curious choice when the Gods had *forbidden* people to ever attempt the journey down to the Lands Beneath. If they truly didn't want people climbing them then why not use poles or wires or anything other than ladders? It was like giving a fat child a gigantic chocolate lolly and sternly telling him he must never lick it . . .

Some said the Gods had used ladders as a test or a temptation or a trick or some other grandly significant theological, symbolical, philosophical form of gesture. Others said it was just because Ladderworld went into liquidation around that time as a consequence of being supremely dull and so there was a surplus of raw materials readily available.

But – at any rate – no one had ever attempted the forbidden journey. For one thing, it would take hundreds of years to travel from one end to the other and so only with magical help would the person actually reach their destination before they perished from old age. But, in addition, people were afraid, for no one could remember what creatures had gone with the Lands Beneath and what might be waiting down there. It was well known that a griffin guarded the ladders near the top and as for what else there might be . . . the mind filled with horrible visions of sharp-toothed, many-tentacled carnivorous things. Besides which, the Gods lived down there. The people of the Lands Above agreed that there was no point whatsoever in attempting the treacherous journey down the Space Ladders to the Lands Beneath when the only things down there were teeth, tentacles and wrathful Gods waiting for them with lightning bolts. There had to be better things to risk your life for.

But . . . but . . . there were also tales of treasure, because there always are. The most beautiful, breathtaking, golden treasures they had down there. And it is a well-known and universal rule that there will always be – has always

been – one stupid sod whose strength of greed outweighs their common sense and suppresses that all-important instinct of self-preservation.

CHAPTER ONE

LADY LUCK'S THIEF

The thief, the infamous cat burglar – dubbed the Shadowman by the press – buckled on his safety harness and slowly lowered himself through the hole he had just cut into the glass ceiling of the museum . . .

There are some people who are born lucky. They seem to float through life on little golden wings whilst misfortune, hardship and calamity hurry to get out of their hallowed way. One might say that Lex Trent was such a person.

Last year he had started his apprenticeship with a prestigious law firm in the Wither City. The idea was that he studied the law whilst also working in a firm although, as a seventeen year old, the work Lex was able to do had been disappointingly limited. The novelty of filing and fetching coffee and doughnuts for the real lawyers had been practically nonexistent even to begin with. But the lawyers certainly liked Lex for he had a pleasant manner and an open, honest face. He was always ready to help

with a smile and there was no denying that he was a clever, hard-working kid.

Everyone knew that Lex was committed to becoming a real lawyer. He was said to spend every evening of every night cooped up in his accommodation, poring over old law books, soaking up the knowledge they contained, memorising legal rules and precedents. He was going places. The lawyers liked him, the clients liked him and he'd been lucky enough to win the most sought-after apprenticeship in the legal capital of the Globe. The Gods themselves were smiling on him.

But it is a universal law that eventually . . . sooner or later . . . one way or another . . . everyone's luck runs out . . .

The Shadowman was halfway down the rope, suspended from the cavernous glass ceiling, with the floor of the great hall stretching out twenty feet beneath him, when he felt something on his safety harness break with a horrible, nauseating little *snap*. He tried to compensate for it, but within seconds one of the ropes had broken free, falling in a long coil to the ground below. Then another ring stretched and broke under the additional pressure. And then the thing buckled altogether and the thief, despite his mad flailing at the ropes, was unable to stop himself from freefalling the rest of the way.

Lex Trent landed with a crash and a shattering of glass, right on top of one of the large display cabinets. Sparkling glass shards skittered across the vast tiled floor like broken diamonds and alarm bells started to wail loudly.

Lex groaned as he struggled off the broken cabinet, relieved to see that he miraculously didn't seem to have suffered any broken bones or hideous loss of limb, although there were several small pieces of glass sticking into his back, making him rather uncomfortable. As soon as he was on his feet, five guards with dogs all rushed into the room, surrounding him. Lex glanced round at the broken glass at his feet, the remains of the cabinet behind him and his own completely black outfit and realised he probably wasn't going to be able to talk his way out of this. But, because habit is an inbred thing, he looked up at the guards, pointed towards the door on the left and said, 'Um. He went that way.'

Mr Joseph Lucas was the senior partner at the law firm of Lucas, Jones and Schmidt. He was a kindly man and he had come to feel genuine fondness for Lex. He knew that Lex was quite small for his age – not very tall and quite thin – so he'd been alarmed and worried when he received a message from the city guards saying they thought they had Lex Trent in one of their cells and that the circumstances were . . . unusual. It would be altogether best if Mr Lucas came down to the station as soon as he could. So half an hour later, the old lawyer was standing in the foyer, shaking the rain from his coat and being apologised to uncertainly by the inspector on duty.

'I'm sorry to have to call you out at this time of night, sir, but I understand that Lex Trent has no family in the city and—'

'Yes, that's right. Where is he? Is he badly hurt? What happened – was he attacked?'

'Er . . . he . . . '

'Well? Come on, out with it!' the lawyer barked impatiently.

'The boy we have in the cell is claiming to be Lex Trent,' the inspector said carefully. 'But I . . . ' He shook his head and handed the lawyer a sheaf of paper. 'You'd better have a look at the report, Mr Lucas.'

Lex sat on the hard, lumpy bed and tried not to twiddle his thumbs. The guards glaring in at him were making him a little nervous. A cell. So it had come to this, at last.

'I suppose a couple of aspirin would be out of the question?' he tried, without much hope. 'I've got a splitting headache.'

'You *should* be dead falling from that height,' one of the inspectors said, slightly sullenly.

'I've always been a lucky guy,' Lex said, managing a pained grin.

'Ha! That luck's run out now, if I'm any judge!'

Lex glanced round the cell. He could see his bag of equipment on the table outside along with his black balaclava and a stack of the Shadowman calling cards that had been in his pocket. More than enough to convict him. More than enough to send him straight to the hangman's gallows. More than enough to get him a one-way ticket straight to an unmarked grave in the Criminals' Quarter. But giving up, caving in, quitting . . . these were not reac-

tions that Lex was at all familiar with. Something would turn up because it always did. Lex was, after all, one of the lucky people. Because he had a deal with her. A bargain he was sure she would make good on. Mostly.

'There will no doubt be scratches and bruises,' she had said. 'Quite possibly the odd broken bone, if you're careless. But you won't die. I promise you won't die, Lex.'

And it was nice to have that assurance, although Lex had certainly never been fool enough to trust her word completely. But he was sure it would be all right and that he'd get out of this present mess. After all, the Gods were on his side. Or, more accurately, *a* God was on his side . . . the Goddess of Fortune, to be exact.

It had been just over a year ago, right before he came to the Wither City, when he was on the run from an angry mob . . . well, perhaps not a *mob* as such, but a couple of coppers who were really quite irate, anyway. He'd been carrying out a scam that had backfired rather unpleasantly. He'd been caught out and forced to flee. This rarely happened to Lex by that point, for he had worked on the scams during the twelve months since he'd run away from home, refining them and improving them until they were almost perfect. It wasn't his fault – he was a penniless farm boy – he had to do something to survive. If he hadn't learnt how to cheat and lie and swindle then he would most likely have been dead in a ditch before the first month was out.

But then he had discovered that not only could he cheat, but that he was *good* at it. A born natural, in fact.

And it was fun, too – much more fun than sweating away on a farm, getting straw in your hair and blisters on your palms. Lex was born to be a crook and had taken to it like a duck to water.

But the day the jewellers came after him was not a good day, for they wouldn't accept his apologies for trying to sell them a fake ruby brooch. Instead, they were adamant that he was to pay for his crime and so had set the police on him to arrest him for criminal fraud. Prison cells and courtrooms did not sound like a lot of fun to Lex and so he ran – out of the city with the two policemen close behind him. He didn't have enough of a head start to outrun them and so he ducked into the church on the edge of town. It was big and looked like it had once been grand but was now rundown and derelict, obviously belonging to a God who had lost favour with the people and become unpopular. When Lex slipped inside, pulling the door closed behind him, he saw that it was dark and dank and the amount of dust covering the pews and altar made him sneeze loudly.

This startled the woman who had been sobbing on one of the pews near the front. At once she jumped to her feet and whirled round to face him. Lex cursed his bad luck for he had been sure the manky old place would be deserted.

'I'm so sorry to disturb you, ma'am . . . ' Lex began but then trailed off, staring at her. For this was no woman at all but the Goddess of Luck herself. He recognised her from one of the Games he had recently made a lot of

money on. She'd been there in the Box of the Gods, watching the rounds. Standing before him now, she was the spitting image of her statues with her long, white toga, trimmed with gold braid and her fair hair piled rather precariously on top of her head. The only difference was that she seemed to have been using her sleeve in lieu of a tissue and a few strands of blond hair had escaped to hang loosely around her face.

'My Lady,' Lex said, trying to disguise his shock at finding the Goddess in such a state. 'Please forgive me. I had no idea that you were here.'

The Goddess gave a loud, pathetic sniff. 'Doesn't matter,' she said. 'They're going to close the church today anyway.'

Lex glanced round the abandoned place and noticed the life-sized chess pieces for the first time – one knight and one bishop. They were covered in dust like everything else but Lex knew what they really were, or at least, *had* been – people who had refused to participate in the Games and so had been turned into chess pieces as punishment.

'Is this *your* church, my Lady?'

'It was,' she sniffled. 'Before I lost all my followers. They've all taken off to worship the Gods of Wealth or Fame or Beauty instead. I lost my last official worshipper last night . . . ' She trailed off, the faintest glimmer of hope coming into her eyes as her gaze rested on Lex. 'Whose church are *you* in, young man?' she asked.

'Jezra's,' Lex replied proudly. The God of Wit and

Daring was everything Lex had ever wanted to be and he was proud to pledge his special allegiance to him.

The Goddess pulled a face. 'Jezra!' She practically spat the name. 'What can he do for you that I can't? It's not a rhetorical question, boy – give me an answer this instant!'

Lex hesitated then said, 'Well . . . forgive me . . . but he's a little more consistent than . . . you . . . are.'

Everyone knew that Lady Luck was dreadfully flighty and unreliable and most people would sooner try and build a house of cards on a trampoline than put any faith in her. It didn't come as any great shock to Lex that she'd lost all her followers.

'Lex Trent!' came the sudden bellow from outside. 'We know you're in there! Come out this instant – you're only making it worse for yourself!'

'Damn it!' Lex muttered with a scowl.

But the Goddess was already rushing down the aisle towards him, a radiant smile on her face as she grasped his arms and said, 'My dear boy, why didn't you tell me your name was Lex Trent? I've been looking everywhere for you!'

'Er . . . what?' Lex replied, trying to work out why the Goddess of Fortune herself would be looking for a petty crook like him whilst at the same time trying to work out how he was ever going to get out of the church without the two burly policemen outside spotting him.

'Yes, I want to recruit you to my church; I want you as one of my followers! You're a natural, my dear. I heard a few months ago about a little boy who was travelling

across the provinces, swindling, cheating, lying and getting away with it and I knew with luck like that I just had to have you in my church.'

'I am *not* a little boy!' Lex said, shaking her off irritably. 'I'm small for my age, that's all! Anyway, I wouldn't want to join your church even if I wasn't already in Jezra's. You said it yourself – I'm already lucky – so how can you possibly help me?'

'You can never have too much luck, Lex Trent. Especially doing what you do. As your current situation aptly demonstrates.'

As if on cue, one of the policemen outside shouted, 'You've got ten seconds to come out before we come in and drag you out ourselves!'

Lex started walking away from the door towards the back of the church but Lady Luck called after him, 'You can look until you're blue in the face but you won't find it.'

'Won't find what?' Lex said, turning back suspiciously.

'The secret back door,' the Goddess replied with a smirk. 'The only way in or out of this place is through the front entrance. They've got you trapped, Lex. It's a dreary prison cell for you and no mistake. I must say it seems a shame – like putting a beautiful songbird in a tiny little cage. But you don't want to join my church so I guess that's that.'

And then, to Lex's horror, she opened one of the front doors, stuck her head out and called, 'He's in here, officers. Please come and take him away at once.'

'All right, all right!' Lex said, panic stricken. 'I'll join your church as long as you help me out of this mess!'

'You swear to be one of my official followers?' Lady Luck said, eyebrow arched. 'And thereby prevent my church from being closed down?'

'Yes, yes, I swear it!' Lex exclaimed breathlessly, his eyes glued to the door handle that was suddenly moving downwards beneath the policeman's hand on the other side.

'Then that's settled!' she exclaimed, beaming. 'Your new oath overrides the old one you made to Jezra and you are now a member of my church. Well done.'

'What about the policemen—?' Lex began.

But, no sooner had the large wooden door started to open than there was a horrible, tearing sound from the metal hinges. The whole thing came loose and fell forwards onto the two officers outside with a crunch, crushing them to the ground with its weight so that, although they squirmed and struggled, they were trapped like pinned butterflies.

'Well, go on then,' Lady Luck said. 'I'm sure they'll get out eventually. You don't want to still be standing there with your mouth open like that when they do.'

Lex didn't need telling twice. He raced out of the church, quite unable to resist the temptation of jumping onto the fallen door on his way out and running along it, hearing the muffled grunt from beneath with a tremendous sense of smug satisfaction. And from that day on, he and the Goddess of Fortune were a team. Eventually

she got a handful of followers back, but the point was that Lex had saved her church. And in return she gave him a little extra help with his more disreputable activities . . . Or, at least, she *usually* did. But she hadn't come through for him this time and now it seemed that Lex really was in a huge amount of trouble.

The door outside the cell opened and shut and Lex scrambled respectfully to his feet when he saw his employer approaching with the inspector.

'Mr Lucas,' he began, in his best tone of 'sincere reasonableness'. 'I can explain everything.'

'Having just heard the evidence from this officer, Lex, I doubt that very much.'

'It wasn't me, sir.'

'I beg your pardon?'

Lex knew he wouldn't be able to bluster and bluff his way out of this one. But a bit of defensive anger usually went down quite well and it might help to take them off guard. He certainly wasn't going to sit there and *confess* to being the Shadowman if that was what they were expecting.

'I would like to file an official complaint, Mr Lucas,' Lex said, 'for wrongful arrest and detention. Plus the service here has been dreadful. I haven't even been given any aspirin or anything—'

'Lex, are you maintaining that you are *innocent?*' Mr Lucas asked.

Lex allowed his mouth to fall open in stunned surprise for a moment. 'Well, of *course* I . . . Mr Lucas, with respect,

how could you even *think* that I would . . . that I would commit such a heinous act?'

'We found the Shadowman cards *on* him!' the inspector snapped. 'He cut a hole in the ceiling and lowered himself through it on a harness and he—'

'Thank you, Inspector,' Mr Lucas said sharply. 'I should like to speak with my client alone now, if you don't mind. And please be so good as to have someone bring in some aspirin.'

There had been a momentary flicker of doubt there, it was true, but after over an hour, Lex was sure he had Mr Lucas believing him. Because he *wanted* to believe him – for both professional and personal reasons, the lawyer wanted to believe that Lex Trent was in fact an honest, upstanding citizen rather than an infamous cat burglar, a manipulative scoundrel and an opportunistic crook. There was also the fact that Lex didn't look the part. The Shadowman was notorious and daring and thrilling and people probably expected some dashingly handsome thirty year old behind the mask – a gypsy, possibly, with olive skin and dark eyes. They certainly wouldn't be expecting some skinny kid from a city law firm.

'It's true that the black disguise is mine. I was using it to track him,' Lex said again. He had decided to go for the 'plucky-but-incredibly-dim teenager tries to single-handedly capture criminal' routine. 'But then the Shadowman saw me and shoved those calling cards in my pocket before *pushing* me through that hole in the

ceiling! He tried to frame me! It's just . . . Mr Lucas, it's just insane for anyone to say I'm the Shadowman! I mean, I'm *seventeen* – I wouldn't know the first thing about stealing from such a well-guarded museum!'

'All right, Lex,' Mr Lucas said soothingly. 'I'm confident we will be able to sort this whole unfortunate business out. There are no witnesses, there is no motive and there is certainly room for reasonable doubt. We must only be thankful that you were not hurt. I hope you'll remember that criminal apprehension is something much better left to the authorities, my boy.'

'Yes, sir.'

And it might have all been all right then if Mr Montgomery Schmidt hadn't suddenly burst into the room, his eyes shining like a madman's.

'Ah *ha*!' he cried rapturously, pointing a shaking finger at Lex. 'You have him! You have him! You've got him at last! I always knew that boy was no good, right from the very minute I set eyes on him!'

'Montgomery, pray compose yourself,' Mr Lucas said, removing his reading spectacles and dropping them on the papers spread before him on the table. 'What in the name of the Gods is the matter?'

The two lawyers were old friends, as Lex understood it, and had started the law firm together some thirty years ago. And whilst Lex had come to feel something of a mild liking for Mr Lucas, he felt nothing but irritation and frustration towards his partner, Mr Schmidt. For Montgomery Schmidt could *see through* Lex. There weren't

many who could see him for what he was. But Mr Schmidt was one of them.

When Lex first joined the firm, he had intended to skim a little off the top of the extortionate fees the lawyers were paid. It only seemed fair. The firm wouldn't miss it. Although it was true that Lex didn't need it. But money wasn't the point. He had plenty of money as a result of two years spent betting shrewdly on Games, picking pockets and devising and carrying out mastermind scams. He therefore had more than enough money to survive comfortably in the Wither City, even without the wage the law firm paid him. He didn't steal and thieve in the interests of survival. He did it because he could. And it gave him a thrill.

It wasn't like he'd ever genuinely wanted to be a lawyer, anyway. In fact, just the very idea of anyone actually *wanting* to be a lawyer made him shudder all over. It was something he struggled to believe. Such a desire went against the natural order of things. But a knowledge of the law was useful – very useful – to a crook like Lex. So when, shortly after making a bargain with Lady Luck, he had strolled into a tavern in a new town and just happened to meet a boy his own age travelling alone on his way to the Wither City – the legal capital of the Globe – having obtained a letter of introduction to secure him a most feted apprenticeship at Lucas, Jones and Schmidt, Lex had lost no time in pinching it from him while he slept and making his way to the Wither City where he then presented himself as the new intern. As luck would have

it, Lex had studied law for a brief time before he had left home so he had a grasp on the basics. And it hadn't been a very difficult thing to doctor the letter of introduction so that the name read Lex Trent rather than Harold Gibbons. Poor Harold – really, with such a name, how could he be anything *but* one of life's losers? When he trailed into the city a week later, he was brusquely turned away by the doormen because they knew full well that only genuine law students with introductions from genuine law schools could become interns and this boy had nothing – nothing but a pathetic and entirely unoriginal sob story about how he *had* had one, but it had been stolen from him.

It was a mixture of greed and ambition on Lex's part. He wanted to better himself even if he wanted to better himself as a criminal rather than as a human being. And what could possibly be more invincible than a crook with a full working knowledge of the law? Besides which, the firm was in itself a good place to practise scams. When paying for consultations, clients often paid Lex at the front desk in Withian dollars. It had been an easy enough thing for him to overcharge them a little and pocket the difference. But for some ungodly reason, Schmidt had taken it upon himself to *check* what Lex was doing at the desk. He had realised after questioning his own clients that Lex had overcharged some of them. When he challenged Lex about it, Lex had of course vigorously denied that it had been anything other than purely accidental. But he had had to act pretty fast to replace the money in

the safe so that the extra was accounted for when Schmidt doggedly started counting it.

Even then, despite finding that the figures added up, Mr Schmidt had been all eager to press the matter, but Mr Lucas had pulled rank as the senior partner and proclaimed that of course it had been an easily-made, innocent mistake; the money would be returned to the clients and there was to be no more said about it. No, it was not Mr Lucas who was the problem, it was his overly zealous friend who had been watching Lex like a hawk ever since, eagerly waiting for a chance to catch him out, to trip him up, to bring ruin crashing down about his head. Now was undoubtedly the time for some serious damage control.

'Mr Schmidt, I assure you I am entirely blameless,' Lex began. 'I was only trying to help but—'

'Oh, save it for the jury!' the lawyer snapped.

'Montgomery!' Mr Lucas exclaimed, standing up. 'A word with you outside, please.'

Feeling a little apprehensive, Lex remained behind in his cell whilst the two lawyers stepped out of the room. He could see them arguing heatedly through the tiny window in the cell door and could just catch snatches of what they were saying. The two men were very close and it was a rare thing for them to quarrel. Lex distinctly heard Mr Lucas, the silly old twit, saying patiently, 'Just an over-enthusiastic boy, Monty . . . ' and, 'certainly not capable of such criminal mastery . . . '

Lex grinned, although the grin faded somewhat at Mr

Schmidt's outraged response: 'clear sign of a disturbed mind . . . ' and, 'told you before, Joseph, that boy is no good . . . ' and, '*prison* sentence like he deserves . . . '

Lex silently cursed him and his bitter tongue. After the overcharging affair, Lex had looked grave and apologised to Mr Schmidt himself with an earnest expression of humble sincerity. The sharp-eyed lawyer hadn't bought it then and he wasn't buying it now, blast him. But, luckily for Lex, Mr Lucas was buying it. And, as the senior partner, it was his opinion that would ultimately count.

After a while, Mr Schmidt stormed off and Mr Lucas returned to tell Lex that he was free to go. 'I've persuaded the guards to allow you to leave. The trial's next week. I'm sure I don't have to remind you, Lex, of the gravity of the situation. I'm taking full responsibility for your not being kept in here. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly, sir. And thank you. I won't let you down.'