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CROOKED
LETTER

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CROOKED
LETTER

Sean Williams



Published 2008 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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12 11 10 09 08 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williams, Sean, 1967-

The crooked letter / Sean Williams.

p. cm.

Originally published: Sydney, Australia : Voyager, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2004.

ISBN 978-1-59102-644-0 (paperback: alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-59102-438-5 (hardcover: alk. paper)

I. Title.

PR9619.3.W5667C76 2006

823'.914—dc22

2005038059

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

For NICK LINKE,
in honour of all the insight, patience,
small betrayals, and great love that characterise
an enduring friendship.

And the fetta pears.

Understand that the daktyloi have no creation myth, no gods bringing forth the world from darkness and separating human from beast. Those are human stories, and this is not a human story you are about to hear.

The elohim do, however, tell of a time when the realms were as one. All beings lived under the same sky and on the same land. Their lives came and went to similar rhythms. They spoke words all could understand.

Then Ymir, the first dei, took his shadow and gave it breath, and, naming it the Molek, set it free in the world to bring disharmony. This the Molek did well. It spread disease; it sowed dissent; it turned neighbours into enemies and set the strong against the weak.

Ymir's subjects did not understand the necessity for such suffering. They saw pain where there had once been peace, unrest where there had once been unity. The Molek rampaged unchecked, and it seemed to them as though Ymir had come to love and cherish pain over life itself.

Some of Ymir's subjects allied themselves with the Molek, seeking advancement among the chaos. Others stayed resolutely at Ymir's side, even though the dei seemed utterly indifferent to their fate. War ensued, fierce and protracted. Many lives were lost. Ymir and the Molek, maker and creation, fought long and hard. What one had, the other had also, in equal and opposite measure.

Total victory was never possible.

All felt betrayed, in time, by those to whom they had offered fealty.

Finally, when all the combatants were spent, a great silence fell across the universe. Not the silence of death or emptiness, but the silence of an indrawn breath before someone speaks.

And so the story continues. The names may change, the rules may change, the nature of the battlefield itself may change—but the story is the same. Sometimes the light shines. Other times the shadow falls.

Ymir's legacy, the elohim came to understand, is not death and mayhem, but change itself.

THE BOOK OF TOWERS, FRAGMENTS 152–58

BEFORE

THE KNIFE

“Great works require great sacrifice.”

THE BOOK OF TOWERS, EXEGESIS 13:13

Hadrian forced his eyes open. The world shimmered in front of him. Seth was an indistinct shape moving arrow-straight between leafless trees, out of the frigid park. Hadrian made a sound like a growl and got his legs working. His balance was shot. Staggering a little at first, then with more determination, he resumed his chase. Pain fuelled his anger, and anger fuelled his strength. Exhalations exploded from him in clouds. He didn't know what he planned to do once he caught up with his brother, but that he did catch up was vitally important. The rest of his life faded into the background as this single instant loomed in significance. His hands curled into claws. The taste of blood mingled with the iciness of the city on his exposed teeth, setting them on edge. His breathing sounded like a long, sustained roar in his ears.

Buildings rose around him, growing taller and darker as though glaciers were sliding vertically from trampled soil. His determination grew. Seth was acting like he was to blame—and that was so ludicrous it almost didn't bear challenging. But he had to challenge it, or his brother would have things his way again. Hadrian had spent his entire life in the shadow of someone who didn't play by the rules. The time had come to stand up for himself.

Seth vanished precipitously down a flight of steps. Hadrian was

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about to follow when a hand grabbed his coat from behind. He jerked to a halt, startled, and rounded to push his assailant away.

“Hadrian. Jesus!” It was Ellis. He lowered his hands at the fright in her hazel eyes. “What the hell’s going on? Have you two been fighting?”

“He went down there.” All thoughts had been focussed on catching his brother, but her presence penetrated his obsession. His words were muffled, nasal. He realised for the first time how he must look to others, with blood all down his face and T-shirt, running like a madman or a murderer on some horrible mission. He felt like a monster.

“Jesus.” There was no sympathy in her stare, just alarm. She took his arm, not to comfort him but to contain him. He was shaking. His eyes felt swollen, full of hot tears. “He hit you! Did you hit him? Do you want to hit him?”

“I—” What had seemed so clear a moment ago was falling apart like gossamer. He shook his head in confusion. “I don’t know.”

“Fucking boys.” She softened slightly. “I should get you to the hotel, clean you up. He’ll come back when he’s ready.” Her stare shifted to something behind him, and her face tightened. “No, let’s keep moving. Down there.” She tugged him in the direction Hadrian had gone. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” He was far from sure of it. “Do you think we’re being followed again?” he asked, although behind him he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

She pulled him down the stairs. His legs threatened to buckle, and he kept up as best he could. Fluorescent lights cast surreal shadows as they hurried underground. Signs in foreign languages slid by. An escalator whirred at the end of a long tiled tunnel, and they took it deeper into the earth, to a subway. There, the air was dank and thick with fumes. People converged on either side of a row of turnstiles, jostling, blank faced. Hadrian tightened his coat around himself to hide the blood on his T-shirt, but his nose was still bleeding. Some of the commuters noticed and their faces came alive for a moment with surprise.

Ellis moved him quickly through the crowd, pushing through open turnstiles against the flow to avoid buying a ticket, ignoring complaints levelled in their wake. A train waited impatiently at the platform, doors open, half-full. She shouldered her way to the first of the seven carriages and bundled Hadrian in ahead of her. He didn't protest. There was nowhere else Seth could have gone but onto the train. Hadrian felt his brother nearby, tugging at him like a caught thread.

Ellis took him into the carriage without really watching where she was going. Her attention was outside, on the people on the platform. Hadrian scanned the passengers in the carriage and, once certain that Seth wasn't among them, lost interest. His reflection in a window was frightening: skin washed white under fluorescent light, mouth and chin splattered with blood; stubbled scalp gleaming as though covered in oil; eyes wide and full of desperation.

Everything had gone wrong. It seemed inconceivable that, in the space of a few hours, so much could change. But it had. The world had shattered into a million pieces, and he didn't know if he could ever put it back together again . . .

The doors hissed shut. The floor moved beneath him.

"I have to find Seth."

"All right, all right." Ellis looked bedraggled and weary. Her long brown hair, normally so sleek and tidy, was greasy and tangled. People were staring at them, these bloody creatures from another world. Hadrian wondered what they would do if he jumped on a seat and mooned them; for a wild moment, he was seriously tempted.

Ellis's hand was a rope pulling him back to the real world. He clutched it and fought another flood of tears as she led him up the aisle. She was still with him. That was something. They reached the end of the first carriage and passed through sliding doors and a loud clamour of metal wheels on rails into the second. They weren't a focus of attention here; the commuters in this section hadn't witnessed their sudden arrival, and Hadrian had managed to clean up some of the blood with

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his shirt. Newspapers stayed up, eyes down. He and Ellis might not have existed.

There was no sign of Seth in the second carriage, or the third. The moment they entered the fourth, Hadrian saw him immediately. His brother was standing in a relatively clear space by the doors at the far end, steadying himself with one hand against the swaying of the train.

Hadrian pushed past Ellis to get at him. Defiance was no longer his sole objective. He just wanted to be closer, as though by reducing the physical separation he could make inroads on the mental gulf between them.

Seth looked up with red eyes and visibly winced. He turned away and opened the doors to the fifth carriage. Hadrian lunged after him, stopping the door sliding shut with one hand and grabbing at his brother's coat with the other. Seth tried to shrug him off, but Hadrian scrambled with him into the next swaying carriage.

"I told you to fuck off, Hade."

"You can't get rid of me that easily."

"Why are you doing this to me? What do you want?"

"I want—" *Ellie*. His throat closed on the word.

She was between them, forcing them apart. "Will you two calm down? You're acting like a couple of kids."

"I'm sorry," said Hadrian, looking at her then down at his feet, genuinely appalled at the way things were turning out. "This isn't the way it's supposed to go."

"No?" Seth's sarcasm was harsh. "This is the way it always goes. If we're acting like kids it's because you're dragging us down to your level."

"Me? Are you serious?" Hadrian faced Seth's accusing stare. He could feel his cheeks reddening. "You're the one who gets us into this shit. You never think. You just stumble from one disaster to the next."

"I wouldn't call El a disaster," said Seth.

"She will be, the way you're handling it."

"And you could do better, I suppose?"

“If you’d given me the chance!”

“I’m right here, you know. Jesus!” Ellis pushed them back into the gap between the cars. Seth’s hate-filled stare didn’t leave Hadrian’s as the clanking, roaring sound enclosed them.

“At least I get something done.” Seth had to shout to be heard. “If I hadn’t let you tag along, you’d still be sitting at home on your arse, jerking off over some deep and meaningful crap.”

“You *let* me tag along?” Hadrian pushed aside the finger stabbing at his chest. Although he and his brother were the same height, he felt as though Seth was bearing down on him, trying to intimidate him into submission. “I’m always cleaning up after you, picking up your pieces. You wouldn’t have lasted a week out here without me.”

“And you’re handling things so beautifully, Hadrian. When I saw you with her—”

“What? You stopped to ask yourself what she was doing with me, if what you have is so bloody good?”

“Fuck you, brother.” Seth shoved him. “She’s only with us at all because of me.”

“Don’t ‘brother’ me.” Hadrian shoved back, ignoring Ellis’s attempts to keep them separated. “There’s nothing you can give her that I can’t!”

“She saw me first!”

“Right!” Ellis backed out of the way, and the two brothers came together, startled. She raised her hands, absolving herself. “That’s it. I’ve had enough. You can beat each other senseless and spend the rest of your holidays in hospital for all I care.”

She turned away and crossed back into the carriage they had left. Hadrian gaped after her, startled out of his anger. He felt Seth against him, an exact mirror image of surprise and hurt.

“Ellie, wait!”

“Come back!”

Both of them went to follow her at the same time.

“Stanna!”

The voice came from behind them, over the roaring of the train. Hadrian turned and grabbed his brother’s arm. Standing with them in the gap between the carriages was the elderly Swede Seth had confronted in Prague: the same pale skin, and hair so translucent it almost wasn’t there; the same air of formality, as though on his way to the opera. His white gloves looked totally out of place in the noisy, smelly darkness.

“Who are you?” asked Hadrian, his sense of unreality deepening. “What are you doing here?”

“Tiden har kommit, Seth och Hadrian Castillo.”

“Stay out of this,” said Seth. The use of their names made Hadrian’s flesh creep. How did he know them? How long had he been following them? “It’s none of your business.”

The Swede’s grey eyes regarded them coolly. “Tiden har kommitt.”

“You can say that as often as you like but I’m still not going to understand it.”

“Your time,” said the man in heavily accented English, “has come.”

The door behind them opened, and Ellis burst back out of the carriage.

“Oh, my god,” she said, seeing the man confronting them.

“Håll dem.” Three people had crowded after Ellis into the swaying space between the carriages. One grabbed Hadrian’s arms from behind him and wrenched them so he couldn’t move. When he tried to break free, it felt as though his shoulders were being torn apart. Seth cried out in pain as he was similarly restrained. Ellis kicked back and managed to slip away. With a cry, she pushed past the Swede and into the next carriage.

“Stopp henne! Genast!” The Swede’s voice cut through the train’s thundering with a commanding edge. Ellis’s assailant, a severe-looking woman in a crisp grey business outfit, went in immediate pursuit.

“What is this?” gasped Seth, bent almost double by the man who held him—well dressed, expressionless. “Who are you people?”

The Swede ignored him. He gestured, and Seth was forced to his knees. The person holding Hadrian grunted and Hadrian was driven down, too.

“We haven’t done anything wrong!” Hadrian gasped.

“Nej.” The Swede shook his head and slid a knife from beneath his coat. The twenty-centimetre blade was lethally straight, glistening in the dim light. The train jerked on its tracks, and the man steadied himself against Hadrian’s captor with his empty hand.

Hadrian was unable to wrench his eyes away from the tip of the blade, bobbing just centimetres from his chin. It was mesmerisingly sharp.

“Sluta det nu,” said the Swede. A look that might have been regret passed across his marble features. “Sluta det nu.”

“Don’t,” breathed Seth, then, louder: “Don’t you touch him!”

The blade swung aside. Hadrian caught a glimpse of the Swede’s thumb and hand as it went, gripping the black pommel tight. He wasn’t wearing gloves. He had no fingernails.

“Du, då,” the Swede told Seth.

The blade pulled back.

“Det gör ingen skillnad till Yod!”

On the final syllable, the Swede buried the dagger in Seth’s chest, right up to the pommel. Seth’s eyes widened. A noise came from his throat that didn’t sound human. His back arched.

Hadrian howled wordlessly, filled with primal horror. The old man pulled the knife out of his brother’s chest and a torrent of blood poured from the wound, splashing all of them. Hadrian had never seen so much blood before. His whole vision seemed to turn red. He twisted with desperate strength in the grasp of his captor and almost pulled free. One arm flailed at the Swede, who batted it away as one would a child. Hands grappled with him, reeled him in, contained him. He kicked, stamped, writhed, lunged, to no avail.

Beside him, Seth sagged and fell limply into the spreading pool of

his own blood. One hand landed palm down and clutched at the floor, as though trying to hang on.

“No, no, no.” Ellis sobbed in horror from the doorway of the fourth carriage, where she was firmly held by her pursuer. Her face twisted into a mask of anguish. “Seth, no!”

The Swede, slick with gore, turned to Hadrian. Hadrian twisted to one side, then the other. A hand went around his throat, pulling him back, exposing his belly. Ellis screamed. He tried to call her name, but his windpipe was closed tight. He couldn’t make a sound, couldn’t breathe. The moment crystallised around him. The train was rocking on its bogies. He could *feel* Seth dying on the floor beside him, life’s blood ebbing through the cracks. There was a window leading into the car behind them. Light shone through from another world. He imagined the other passengers just metres away, their heads down, consumed by whatever mundane thoughts sustained them on their journey home.

There would be no going home for Seth and Hadrian. The Swede nodded and turned away, a look of satisfaction on his face. Something tore in Hadrian, as though his life had been ripped in two. Had he been stabbed too? He wondered if he was dying at that very moment, blissfully unaware of his life’s essence gouting from his suddenly numb body.

Seth!

The last thing he saw, as darkness fell, was Ellis being dragged away from him and his twin brother, and the doors of the carriage closing between them.