

THE HORUS HERESY

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Peace. The word was meaningless to him. As far back as Loken could remember, he had never known any state of being that could equate to the concept as it was now explained to him. The word had served as a talisman once, back when the universe made sense, an ideal for which to strive towards. An end of war and the fulfilment of the task for which he and his brothers had been created. He was of the Legiones Astartes, a warrior born and bred, wrought in the Emperor's gene-labs with forgotten alchemy and unknown science.

What could a being who knew only how to kill understand of peace?

Yet here in the garden, Loken felt something close to it.

Warm sunlight shone in a flickering blue sky, entoptically rendered on the curved inner face of the dome, yet no less pleasing for its artifice. Pictographic clouds drifted in a non-existent breeze, and birdsong chirped from artfully concealed vox-grilles worked into the garden's structure.

The garden was composed of rough ouslite slabs laid like giant flagstones, arranged around a series of square, shallow basins of crystal-clear water. Lilies and bright flowers flourished in rock pools fed by a branch system hived from the brass tower's reservoirs. Ferns and weeping trees caressed the water's edge, and something in their placement stirred a long-buried memory, though one Loken found himself unwilling to examine too closely.

He made his way through the garden, enjoying the quiet and the warm scents of living things. Water gurgled over an ornamented arrangement of smooth rocks, and fell in a spuming waterfall that tumbled into a miniature lake of glitter-gold koi. Curved steps led down to neat rows of planting beds, where the seeds Loken had planted were already beginning to grow.

Clad in a long chiton of unadorned grey over a tan bodyglove with plastek-seals over his armour interface sockets, he was armed only with a few gardening tools hanging from a leather work belt. Loken walked with the heavy steps of a mourner at a memorial, his shoulders broad, but hunched, as though they carried the weight of the world upon them. His features were broad and flat, made blunt by war and drained of joy by betrayal.

Yet as he surveyed the green shoots pushing their way out of the dark soil to

the light above, the thinnest trace of a smile came to his lips. Bred to kill, not to care, it gave Loken a sense of the wonder of creation. By his hand was this universe in miniature flourishing.

His eyes narrowed as he saw one corner of the planting beds green with an altogether unwelcome growth of weeds and enveloped with a spun sugar gleam of gossamer-fine spider webs. Loken unhooked a trowel from his belt, one that was entirely too small for his grip, but which he handled with surprising delicacy. He could have asked for tools better suited to his post-human scale, but the forges of the brass tower were tasked with the production of more important things than mere gardening implements.

Like any warrior, he learned to make do with what he had.

Loken knelt on the corner slab and swept away the spider webs with his hands. Arachnids emerged from hiding at the disturbance, and he flinched at the sight of them. The multi-limbed creatures sparked a memory fragment in Loken: a war of gruelling attrition, hard-fought victories and a glorious time when gods did not make war on one another.

He couldn't place the memory, but that was nothing unusual. The madness that almost consumed him on Isstvan III had left scars that were slow to heal and quick to flare in jagged pain. The spiders contented themselves with baring their fangs then retreating into their subterranean lairs, and Loken felt an irrational hatred of the creatures swell in his heart.

He dug into the soil with vicious jabs, laying the weed-roots on the slab beside him and seeking to drive the spiders out. This section was particularly overgrown with parasitic plant matter, which was in the process of draining the goodness from the soil and choking the life out of the crop growing here. The seeds had been sown before he had found the garden, and had withered once already, but with his patient attention, the garden had bloomed once again, brighter and more vital than ever.

The previous custodian of this biodome had allowed it to grow wild, neglecting the task of prudent weeding and maintenance. He had since learned that Sister Elliana was long dead on Prospero, and no one had taken up her duties in the biodome. An understandable lapse. The maintenance of a space that existed for purely aesthetic reasons would be seen as wasteful.

And in times of war, nothing wasteful could be tolerated.

Loken had found the biodome by chance, staring vacantly through the armourglass window of the orbital shuttle bringing him back to Luna. He had

spent the journey back from the Caliban fiasco in contemplative silence, isolating himself from the crew of the nameless vessel that crept into the Dark Angels domain before slinking away like a thwarted thief.

The abject failure of the mission weighed heavily on Loken, and he had struggled with his part in it through the long, cold nights in the dark heart of the vessel. He was a warrior who had turned his back on war, a man without colours or a Legion to call his own. In the depths of his despair, he had believed himself to be a Legion of one.

Nathaniel Garro had shown him that was no longer the case.

He no longer fought alone, but he cared nothing for the warriors who stood with him. The brotherhood of his former life was no more than a ghost memory now. None of the easy banter he'd shared with Vipus and Torgaddon leavened the times between engagements, only cold hard mission briefings and grim talk of their shadow war.

A shadow war in which he no longer wished any part.

Seated in the back of the shuttle with Iacton Quuze, Loken had felt cramped and claustrophobic, deeply uncomfortable at sharing so confined a space with another refugee from his Legion. Quuze had sensed his discomfort and known enough not to intrude on Loken's solitude. Only as the shuttle banked during its crossing of the Sinus Honoris did Loken notice the glinting diamond of the biodome on the edge of the Mare Tranquillitatis. No sooner had he blink-clicked the selenographic coordinates than the dome was lost to sight as the shuttle spiralled in on its final approach to the Somnus Citadel.

Built on the haunches of the Palus Somni, the fortress of the Silent Sisterhood rose from the uneven, rocky terrain on the north-eastern edge of the great basin. A soaring tower of brass and crystal, its myriad docking bays were arranged one atop the other like the lairs of undersea creatures in a spire of coral. Their scale was impossible to judge, but Loken knew each was large enough to accommodate the sisterhood's nigh-invisible black ships. Unlike the rest of Luna's surface, the surface of the Palus Somni was the shade of bleached tan, its hue different from any of the moon's other plains or mountain regions.

Dorn had been waiting for them.

Already appraised of the mission's outcome by astropathic means, the primarch of the Imperial Fists had, nevertheless, taken time from the dismantling of his father's bejewelled palace to hear the ill-news from Caliban first-hand. Loken had seen Lord Dorn's hope that the imperfect medium of astropathic communication had missed some subtle nuance to Quuze's report, some sign that

the Lion's warriors of Caliban could be counted on to rally to the Emperor's banner.

Dorn would return to Terra none the wiser, and Loken's heart had broken at disappointing him.

Loken remembered the first time he had seen Rogal Dorn, deep in conversation with the Warmaster. He had seemed titanic then, a demi-god built to match the strength and prowess of Horus himself; no small admission for a warrior of the Luna Wolves to make. Clad in golden plate and seemingly carved from the solid core of a mountain, the primarch had made Loken feel like a specimen pinned to an examination table, scrutinised by a being who understood everything about him in a heartbeat.

Dorn was still that demi-god, but Loken saw he was somehow... *diminished*, as though the burden he took upon on his shoulders was growing heavier by infinitesimal fractions every second. Like the trickle of water that over millions of years splits the mountain, Dorn's role as Terra's Praetorian was one that would already have crushed a lesser being.

How long might it take to crush a warrior like Dorn?

That debriefing had been kinder than the first to which he had been subjected. He had been brought to the Somnus Citadel as a broken, wretched thing; a madman Nathaniel Garro had dug out of the ruins of Isstvan III. Loken now understood that he had been closer to death during that interrogation than any other time in his life, though those who wished him gone did not come with blades, bolts or orbital bombardments; they came with doubts and fear and suspicion.

Was he to be trusted? Could anyone - even a Space Marine - have survived what he survived? Had he been left in the ruins by their enemies for Garro to find? Was Garviel Loken a ticking time bomb left by Horus, primed to inveigle himself into the Imperial ranks only to wreak untold havoc in the days to come?

No one knew for certain, but powerful men had spoken for him: Garro and Malcador for certain, and - Loken suspected - Lord Dorn himself. But others - he never knew their identities - declared him a danger, a potential spy or worse. What followed was an indeterminate period of pain and misery, inflicted on his body and the depths of his mind to seek answers to those questions.

That he still lived was not seen as definitive; merely that his interlocutors hadn't found anything damning enough to go against the wishes of the Regent of Terra and the Emperor's golden-armoured Praetorian.

The Caliban mission had been authorised by Lord Dorn and was... what?

Penance? A test of his loyalty? At every stage of that mission, Loken had the sense of a pistol being aimed at his head. He had understood in the way that only men of violence know, that Qruze was to be his executioner had his fealty been proven false.

With statements delivered to Dorn and numerous faceless functionaries, Loken had followed his snapshot coordinates to the biodome, taking the rusting hulk of a Cargo-5 onto the Lunar surface, past ancient ruins of the first colonies to spring up on Terra's moon and a site marked with an eagle banner that commemorated some great achievement of a distant age.

That the dome was still functional was Loken's first surprise. That life still flourished within was his second. Overgrown to the point of needing a slash and burn campaign to return it to any form of order, Loken had felt a measure of calm in the flickering light of the glitching entoptics. Blue skies shimmered above, broken by portions of starlight and tantalising hints of the iron-clad world above. The riotous foliage grown to gigantic size reminded him of a world he had once trod, a place of blistered skies and thick bladed stalks of fibrous material. It was a world that bore a name of violent death, but he found he could no longer remember it.

Loken had taken it upon himself to restore the garden to its former grandeur.

Kill for the living and kill for the dead...

Those had once been the words by which he had lived.

He thought he might even have sworn an oath to that effect once. He'd seen that moment as if from the point of view of an observer, though he didn't know how that could be possible. Had he experienced that moment at all or was it a phantom pseudo-memory?

A name sighed upwards into his consciousness at the thought of that moment - *Keeler* - but it held no meaning for him anymore. Was it a person or a place?

Loken no longer knew and, in truth, no longer cared.

Once a killer, now he would be a custodian of living things.

Spiders crawled from the dark earth, and Loken crushed them where he saw them. Some, the smarter ones, kept out of the light and dug down deeper, but Loken's trowel scooped them from their hiding places and killed them anyway. There would be nests beneath the soil, and he needed to kill the offspring of the spiders too. Anything less than total extermination would simply allow the canker *beneath the surface to grow unseen until it was too late to stop.*

'You know that if you kill all the spiders, you'll just inherit their work, yes?'

said a voice drifting across the koi lake.

Loken looked up, instantly alert. The speaker stood thirty metres away in the shadow of the weeping trees at the lakeside, but his powerful voice had not diminished in the intervening distance.

'Why do you say that?' he asked.

The figure stepped from the shadows to kneel at the water's edge, and Loken saw he had the bulk of a legionary, though not one he recognised. These days, most faces were a blur to him, an assemblage of features that held no meaning, bereft of the visual cues that could differentiate them. He had taught himself mnemonics to recall the people that now mattered in his limited sphere of existence, but this warrior conformed to none of his self-imprinted memes.

And yet there was something maddeningly familiar to this figure.

The entoptics woven into the dome's structure flickered and a perfectly circular reflection of Terra glimmered in the black mirror of the water. Loken felt his hostility at this intrusion into his domain lessen at the sight of the planetary bauble, as though it reminded him of a once perfect moment never to come again.

'Spiders kill the aphids and other pests that devour the plants,' said the man, skipping a flat stone across the lake and grinning broadly as it smacked on a rock on the other side. The reflected image in the water broke into splinters of pale light. 'You might not like the look of them - they're not too pretty after all - but they're waging a war for you even if you can't see it.'

The man's tone was laconic, but Loken saw past it to the dangerous core beneath, though, oddly, he felt no threat from him.

'Do I know you?' asked Loken, rising from his labours and wiping his knees of dirt.

'You don't recognise me?'

Loken hesitated before answering. 'I might if you came closer.'

'I think I'm fine as close as we are for now,' said the man, circling around the pool. He bent to choose another flattened stone from the lakeside and turned it over in his hands. Satisfied with its heft, he skimmed it across the water towards Loken. The stone bounced and skipped across the surface of the lake before striking an angled rock and arcing into the air.

Loken reached up to catch the stone, but it smacked into his palm and bounced away before he could close his fingers over it. The pain was momentary, but it galled him that he'd failed such an easy feat of dexterity. A dirty purple bruise formed on his skin.

'You used to be quicker,' said the man.

'I used to be a lot of things,' replied Loken.

'Very true,' agreed the stranger.

'You know me, but you still haven't told me who you are,' said Loken. 'If you're another of Malcador's "counsellors" then you should turn around and leave. I owed it to Lord Dorn to go to Caliban, but I've no time for the Sigillite's half-truths and subterfuge. I no longer want a part in his schemes within schemes, so he should stop sending his lackeys for me. Though I should be grateful that at least he's sent a legionary this time.'

'He sends mortals to try and understand the mind of a legionary?' said the man, with a shake of the head that conveyed his amusement at such an idea. 'They really don't understand us at all, do they? But to set your mind at ease, I'm not here to summon you and I'm no counsellor, though I've dispensed my share of battlefield wisdom. Bolter *bon-mots*, you might call them.'

The quip seemed to amuse the man and he laughed aloud, though Loken was beginning to tire of the stranger's obtuse answers. He hooked the trowel to his belt and followed the path that led to the steps cut into the rocks by the waterfall.

'Leaving already?' asked the man, moving along a parallel path.

'If you won't even tell me your name then I have no interest in continuing this discussion.'

'Is my name really that important?'

Loken paused at the bottom of the steps. He felt that he *should* know this man's name, and that, yes, it *was* important he know it. It felt as though much depended upon that revelation.

'How can I trust you if I don't know your name?'

'You already know it. Why should I tell you it again?'

'I don't know it,' spat Loken, his hands curling into fists. He was unarmed, but a warrior of the Legions had no need of weapons when it came to killing.

You do,' said the man. 'You've just forgotten it.'

'Then I've forgotten it for a good reason.'

'No,' said the man. 'For all the wrong reasons. It was the only way to survive on Isstvan III, but you're not on Isstvan III anymore. The Warmaster tried to kill us there, but he failed. Well, for one of us at least.'

The entoptics flickered again, and something on the underside of the dome's cupola blew out in a shower of sparks. They rained down onto the water, fading as they fell, and once again the reflected image of Terra appeared on the lake's surface as the skin of the dome became transparent.

You were on Isstvan III?' said Loken as the figure emerged into the glow from the lake's surface.

A cold hand clenched his heart as the man's previously unknowable features resolved into those of a brother from a previous life.

'I still am,' said Tarik Torgaddon.

They sat on the ridge overlooking the lake, two brothers separated by a yawning gulf of regret and mortality, yet Loken felt as if no time at all had passed since last they had spoken. Torgaddon reclined upon an upright flat stone topped with a crescent arch and toyed with a loose thread on his robes that frayed the more he pulled at it.

'How are you here?' asked Loken.

Torgaddon shrugged. 'You tell me.'

'I saw you... I saw you die,' said Loken. 'Little Horus killed you.'

'Aye, I think he did,' said Torgaddon, pulling down the collar of his robes and probing his neck with his other hand. The fingertips came away red, and Torgaddon licked the blood away. 'Still, could be worse.'

Loken wanted to laugh at such a ridiculous statement.

'How,' he said, 'could it be worse?'

'Well, I'm here, aren't I?' said Torgaddon. 'Talking to you.'

'And how exactly is that possible? The dead don't rise from their graves.'

'I seem to recall something of that on Davin's moon,' pointed out Torgaddon.

'I suppose,' agreed Loken. 'In fact I seem to remember hauling your sorry arse out of a swamp as a bunch of dead men were dragging you down.'

'You see? These days, death isn't the handicap it used to be.'

Don't be glib,' said Loken. 'I don't know what caused the dead of the plague moon to fight. A pathogen, or some cerebral parasite maybe.'

'Come on, you don't really believe that,' said Torgaddon. 'You've been reading too many of Sindermann's old books again, haven't you?'

'Maybe I don't believe that, but I know people who had their heads cut off don't get up and start walking around and talking to old friends.'

'I'll admit it's a puzzler,' agreed Torgaddon.

Loken reached out to touch Torgaddon's arm, and the limb he grasped felt as real and as solid as his own. He felt the rough fabric of his brother's sackcloth robes and the steel-trap strength in the musculature beneath. His hands came away black with ash, and he rubbed it clean on the grass.

'Am I still on Isstvan III?' asked Loken. 'Did I die there too? Did Garro kill me,

or am I still alone, still Cerberus?'

'Cerberus?'

Loken shook his head, embarrassed. 'A war name I think I took for myself.'

'Guardian of the underworld,' said Torgaddon. 'Appropriate enough, I suppose.'

'I thought you'd know that.'

'I know just what you know,' said Torgaddon. 'And what you know is... patchy, shall we say?'

Understanding dawned on Loken. 'Ah, so you're a figment of my imagination? Some memory my damaged mind has conjured up.'

'Maybe,' agreed Torgaddon. 'You straight up and down types do like to punish yourselves.'

'Punish?'

Torgaddon nodded and leaned forward. Loken caught the pungent reek of his brother's blood and the choking dust of smashed building parts mixed with the chemical stink of explosives and the burnt metal smell of war. He gasped as he relived the moment of his awakening, trapped beneath thousands of tonnes of debris and wondering how he was still alive.

'Why else would you think of me except to punish yourself?' asked Torgaddon, staring right into the heart of him. 'You let me die. You watched Aximand take my head, and you didn't stop him. He killed your closest battle-brother and you didn't hunt him down and kill him for what he did. How can you call yourself my friend while that treacherous bastard still breathes?'

Loken pushed himself to his feet and walked away from Torgaddon, standing at the edge of the waterfall and staring down into the water forty metres below. The fall might not kill him, but the rocks at the bottom were like the sharpened teeth of a half-submerged leviathan and would certainly break a good many of his bones. How long would it be before anyone came to find him here? Long enough for the water to turn red with his blood? Long enough for him to die?

'I wanted to hunt them all down. I wanted to kill every last one of them,' he said at last. 'But... there was no way off Isstvan. Everyone was dead. I was trapped on a world of death.'

'The dead who rose up, I might point out,' said Torgaddon.

'I... I lost my way for a time,' continued Loken as if he hadn't heard Torgaddon. 'I was so consumed by the need to kill that I lost sight of what it was I needed to kill.'

'Then Garro came and brought you back.'

Loken nodded. 'He convinced me I still had a duty, a debt to pay, but this isn't

the fight I was made for. I can't fight in the shadows, Tarik. If we're going to beat the Warmaster, then it has to be out in the open. He has to be seen to be defeated, so that everyone knows it.'

Torgaddon got up and smoothed down his robes, the fraying thread still hanging from his sleeve.

'You said "*if*" you beat the Warmaster,' said Torgaddon. 'You don't think it can be done?'

'You were a Luna Wolf, Tarik,' said Loken, rubbing a hand across his face as a tremendous wave of weariness swept through him. 'You know as well as I do that he's the most dangerous man in the galaxy. There's a reason Horus was made Warmaster and not any of the others. He's the best at what he does, and what he does is make corpses of his enemies.'

'So that means you *shouldn't* fight him?'

Loken shook his head. 'No, of course he has to be fought.'

'Just not by you?'

'What do you mean?'

Torgaddon ignored Loken's question and spread his arms, turning on the spot to encompass the entirety of the garden.

'What is?'

Torgaddon cocked his head to one side and stared quizzically at him. 'You really don't see it?'

'See what?' said Loken, growing tired of Torgaddon's constant evasion.

'This place? You don't recognise what you've built here?'

'No.'

'Sixty-Three Nineteen?' said Torgaddon as though teasing the memory out, like a timorous animal coaxed from its burrow by soft words and the promise of food. Loken looked down at the garden, now seeing it for what it was: the square shallow basins surrounded by flagstone pathways, the weeping trees and the bright flowers gathered at the water's edge. Memory surged, and he gasped as the full force of it tore into the fractured synapses of his mind.

When he'd first come here, none of this had existed. The enclosed biodome had been a tangled, overgrown mess that looked like it needed a flamer team or a destroyer cadre to tame it. But Loken had rebuilt it, hacking away the fibrous masses of dying flora and dumping it outside the dome. Working in his battle armour for days at a time, he'd fought the unwinnable fight against the rampant overgrowth of weeds and uncontrolled expansion of climbing plants. And he had brought the garden back to life, using a wellborer drill to cut giant flagstones

from the Mare Tranquillitatis and hauling them inside to lay the paths around the pools he'd dug.

Everything that now existed within this dome had been wrought by his hand, and now he saw that, he understood why every little thing was freighted with familiarity.

'The water garden,' said Loken, tears misting his eyes. 'This is where I took the Mournival Oath.'

'And do you remember what you swore?' said Torgaddon, putting a hand on Loken's shoulder. 'You pledged to serve the Emperor above all primarchs. To uphold the truth of the Imperium of Mankind, no matter what evil might assail it. To stand firm against all enemies, alien and domestic.'

'I remember,' said Loken.

'You swore to be true to the Mournival to the end of your life,' said Torgaddon.

'The Mournival is broken,' said Loken. 'Ezekyle and Aximand saw to that.'

'Very well, to the ideals of the Mournival then.'

Loken nodded. 'This was the last moment I felt we were on the verge of something incredible.'

Torgaddon. 'Aye, it was. And now you know that, you know you can't stay here.'

Loken's mind was afire with all that came after that moment: the war on Murder; the blood spilled from misunderstanding upon the homeworld of the Interex; the horror of Davin; the slaughter of the Auretian Technocracy; and the final, monstrous betrayal on Isstvan III. He'd known all this, he'd always known it, but had found a way to keep it locked away in the depths of his mind.

Loken dropped to one knee, overwhelmed by the surge of suppressed memory.

I remember it all,' he whispered. 'I didn't want to. I tried to forget, but it looks like I can't.'

'It's like the dead things at the bottom of the sea,' said Torgaddon. 'Maybe they were tied to anchors or boulders, but somehow things got rotted up and those dead things are floating up to the surface. We never knew they were there all along, but we're seeing them now.'

Loken looked up at Torgaddon, who held out a hand to him.

'You've hidden here and lied to yourself for too long, Garvi. It's time you got back in this war, whether you fight in the shadows or the light of day. Right now, the Imperium has foes in both. You're going to have to go down the hole and see how dark it gets, and I warn you it's going to get very dark indeed before this is over.'

Loken took Torgaddon's hand and let the big man pull him to his feet.

'I told you, I'm not built for this kind of fight,' he said.

'You're built for every kind of fight,' said Torgaddon. 'You know this and you need to stop thinking as if the Imperium is on the back foot. You're a Luna Wolf, and nothing is more dangerous than a cornered wolf.'

'So you think we're cornered?'

'Alright, maybe that wasn't the best expression,' admitted Torgaddon. 'But you know what I mean. Strong enemies know when you're weak. That makes them hungry, and that's when they come for you. So what do you do?'

'Don't let them know you're weak.'

'Or better yet, don't *be* weak,' said Torgaddon. 'Be strong: I remember something the Warmaster said back in the day, you know, back before everything went to shit. He said that man has control of action alone, never the fruits of the action. Take control of your actions, Garvi. Remember that when things look their worst, you can only do what you think is right at the time.'

'Loken heard the clatter of the airlocks on the far side of the dome.

'I have to go now,' said Torgaddon, holding out his hand again.

Loken looked at the proffered hand, but didn't yet take it.

'Are you really here or is this just my mind's way of convincing me to do something I know I have to do?'

'I don't know,' confessed Torgaddon. 'Either explanation sounds unbelievable, but what do I know? I had my head cut off.'

'Don't joke, Tarik,' said Loken. 'Not now.'

'I don't know what to tell you, Garvi,' said Torgaddon, suddenly serious, and the transformation was as unsettling as anything else Loken had experienced recently. 'I don't have a neat explanation all tied up with a bow. I feel real, but I think something terrible happened to me after I died.'

'*After* you died?' said Loken. 'What could be worse than dying?'

'I don't know yet,' said Torgaddon. 'But I think you're the only one who can undo it.'

Loken heard footsteps drawing near, the harsh ring of armoured boots telling him that another legionary was approaching. He looked back along the path, seeing a long, broad-shouldered shadow thrown out over the flagstones, and closed his eyes. He wanted this all to be a dream, but knew it was all too real and all too hideous to be so easily dismissed.

When he opened his eyes, Torgaddon was gone, if he had ever really existed.

Loken let out a breath that felt as if it had been caught in his chest for an

eternity, as a warrior armoured in steeldust war-plate without Legion markings rounded the corner. Iacton Qruze, once known as the half-heard of the Luna Wolves, now one of Malcador's Knights Errant, nodded in respect to Loken and held up a hand in greeting.

Loken returned the gesture and said, 'Qruze, what brings you to the garden?'

'You are summoned,' said Qruze. 'And this time you need to answer.'

'Who summons me?'

'Malcador,' said Qruze, as though there could be no other summoner.

'Then I will come,' said Loken.

'You will?' said Qruze, as though surprised by Loken's answer.

'Yes,' said Loken, bending to lift a flattened stone from the waterfall's edge. 'Give me a moment.'

He hurled the stone out over the lake, smiling in satisfaction as it skipped and bounced over the water, before ricocheting back into the centre of the pool to land in the reflected image of the Solar System's precious third planet.

Qruze watched the stone's trajectory with a curious expression.

'What was that all about?' he asked at last.

'Something Torgaddon and I did on the shores of a water garden's lake one time,' said Loken. 'He could never master it, but I always managed to get stones further than anyone else.'

Qruze nodded, though Loken's answer was plainly meaningless to him.

'What's that on your hand?' asked the half-heard.

Loken looked down and smiled as he saw a bruise turning to yellow in the shape of a gibbous moon on the palm of his hand.

'A reminder,' said Loken.

'A reminder of what?'

'Something I still have to do,' said Loken.