

THE FIFTEENTH PLANET

WRITTEN BY

MARLEY ELEVEN BURY

ON EVERY WORLD, ORBITING EVERY STAR, there are fires crackling, storms raging, the languages of a billion, billion tongues. Whether it be from brutal wars, gorgeous music, tears of sorrow or cries of joy, sound rings out across the vast realms of the cosmos—all except one. Far beyond the Rutheran Nebula, in a system where an ancient star has shrunk deep within itself: There is the Fifteenth Planet. She has no name, for no life may speak in her presence. Speech, radio, holograms; even telepathic thought... none make a sound once their wielder enters the planet's orbit.

It is impossible and yet, it is true.

Only one sound can be heard here, echoing across its solemn lands: The Songs of The Ice. For the Fifteenth Planet is a world of frozen lakes and icy tundra, snow-capped forests with trees that never whisper in its silent winds. Throughout this realm of endless winter, distortions in the ice pierce the veil of silence: Where underwater pressure meets the surface and lonely echoes forever fill the air. Some find serenity in the glacial chorus, proclaiming it the purest of nature's melodies; freed from the burden of coexistence with its fellow sounds. Their presence defies the planet's nature and defines it, music eternal in the heart of silence and these songs have so many names.

The Fifteenth Planet will never hear them.

Unsettling, enigmatic, yet this world is anything but devoid of beauty. Across its polar hemispheres, oceans of ice stretch for thousands of miles, reaching out to the great continents of the planet's centre. On a clear night, moonlight glitters off the twisting mountains of Ruthan, beacons of blood-red in the morning mists and this austere wonder is alluring to many. Animals are not amongst those charmed and throughout the ages, not a single creature has been found upon its surface. Insects, herbivores, predators; even titan beasts, all have been brought here, all respond the same way. First, they fall still, becoming docile; even in creatures for whom that is not their way. Then they whine in silence, their eyes pleading for help, for mercy; to escape.

If removed, the creature will eventually return to its normal behaviours. If not, within

twenty-four hours their brains begin to shutdown; regardless of what measures are taken to save them. After forty-eight hours, all are dead, overwhelmed by constant fear that shatters their minds. Beyond what is known as The Consciousness Barrier, races of higher intelligence do not experience this phenomenon. Perhaps creatures of instinct do not have the capacity to understand this world's existence.

Perhaps they understand it too well.

The planet's vegetation is alive, yet does not wither or renew itself; abandoned by life and forgotten by death. Once, it was believed that the planet's gravity may distort time, slowing it down to an imperceivable crawl, yet this has long been disproved. The ice shifts, the cracks grow and fade and so, time has not forsaken this world; yet it is no more a master there than any other universal constant.

Only silence rules.

In aeons passed, great fleets of explorers, then warriors, tried to tame it. Weapons of light and fire were brought to make their mark, terraforming sought to alter its nature and the Worldbreaker devices of ten-thousand interstellar empires were turned against it. They would scar their fractions of land or sea, begin the transformation or make their way towards the planet's surface. Yet always in silence, for the eternal gift, the endless curse, the silence everlasting, was unbreakable. Then, the weapons would begin to freeze, storms of snow would swallow the changers and the breakers were torn apart in the atmosphere; no matter their power. After each failure, the commanders beyond the world's grip would reach out with every form of communication; believing that something within or of this world was ensuring its defence.

No response ever comes.

Millions of years ago, the planet faced its greatest challenger, for The Star King of Vakaeros abhorred this realm. Tormented by nightmarish visions of its power, he foresaw a time when the grip of silence would break free from the planet, poisoning its dwarf star and unleashing

cold-light to bathe the nearby star systems. Then, it would never stop, spreading through constellations and galaxies, nebulas and dimensions, every race quieted until the universe itself fell silent. The Star King would scream of the Living Entropy, destined to destroy all and proclaimed himself The Great Saviour.

First, a great armada came forth at his command. Enough strength was gathered in orbit to raze entire interstellar empires and with the fury of the celestial heavens, they rained fire upon this icy world. Yet as the superheated plasma of a thousand warfleets entered the atmosphere, they were swallowed within a storm that covered the entire planet like a protective shield. The Star King's assault lasted for fifty rotations of The Fifteenth Planet around its white dwarf star and the storm lingered just as long. When the guns finally fell silent, the storm relented and the Star King saw that his bombardment had done nothing.

The Fifteenth Planet defied him.

Next, his armies came to the surface; clad in armour that amplified their strength a hundred fold. Each had enough firepower to obliterate mountain ranges in minutes. Fifty-thousand legions, ten-thousand UTE Tank Brigades and the entire 1st Vakaerian Royal Air Army; that had served with such distinction in the Wars of Undaris Nine.

The Star King stood atop the bridge of his Leviathan Class Starship, known to history as The VKS Scythemaster; looking down on the planet. Adding to his already considerable strength, The Star King was an immensely powerful telepath and each of his soldiers on the planet were linked to his mind. Though his orders were silenced, their intent was not so easily suppressed and that was enough to guide the armies. Each had moved into staging areas across the great lakes, forests and frozen seas of the Fifteenth Planet and with a single thought, would be sent forth to make war; silent and devastating, against this frozen world.

Yet this time, the planet struck first.

It began with a tremor, then shaking; followed by screaming, as the bridge crew of the VKS Scythemaster turned in horror to their King, collapsed on his knees in growing despair. Soon,

they knew why as the bio-monitors tracking his forces; millions of red dots across enormous monitor screens, began to disappear. A few at first, then more and soon, they were vanishing in waves. Soldier, tank, aircraft; none lasted any longer than the other, disappearing so quickly it was as if they had never existed. It took less than a minute for the last of the signals to fade and when it did, one of the crew dared to ask their screaming king what he could sense. The question pried their monarch loose from the grip of terror, long enough to utter one word:

‘Silence’.

Footage from their orbiting satellites soon revealed that the planet had been wiped clean, returned to its natural state with no trace of the Star King’s forces in men or machinery. If something had attacked them, their cameras would have shown a massacre, yet they saw nothing; blocked by storms so powerful that even the best sensors could reveal nothing on the other side. By every known law of reality, it was completely impossible.

Yet what are rules to a world that cannot hear them?

On the edge of madness, the Star King called forth the ultimate weapon of his people: The Cosmos Manipulator. Powerful enough to bend gravity and space to The Star King’s will on an almost unfathomable scale, it had been used to customise star systems for their empire and was key to their power over the past ten-thousand years of their ascendancy.

Now, it would be sacrificed.

Sealing the device within the heart of the VKS Scythemaster, the ship was set on a collision course with The Fifteenth Planet, while the fusion cores of the Cosmos Manipulator were deliberately overloaded. Though the Star King was almost killed in the effort, his plan succeeded and the immense weight of the Cosmos Manipulator’s collapse became so dense, so destructive, that one of the Great Equalisers was born.

The Star King of Vakaeros had created a black hole.

As the Fifteenth Planet is of silence, they were and remain today, masters of oblivion. Nothing can escape them and though the pride of his empire was lost in its creation, The Star

King celebrated, for his greatest enemy was vanquished. The Fifteenth Planet had crossed the Event Horizon and none may return from that abyss.

For one thousand years, this was a truth as fundamental as any other.

That was until the child of Vakaeros began to move beyond the boundaries of the system and all the races of the universe learned a new kind of fear: The heart of silence remained. For the first and only time in recorded history, the power of absolute oblivion had been defeated and in his final days, the Star King learned of this terrible truth. The despair that followed would unleash a madness that bathed the empire of Vakaeros in blood. His reign would end in fire.

The Fifteenth Planet lived on.