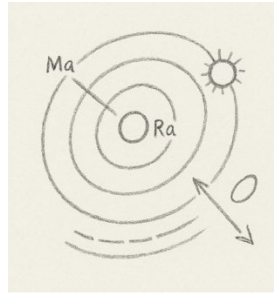


Interstellar

by Neil S. Roberts



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Prologue: The Waterless Silence

Proxima Centauri b turned slowly beneath a cold red sun, its dusky seas pulling tight against its heavier gravity, holding what little water remained in deep, crushing trenches. For the creatures who had once ruled its oceans in singing schools and crystal—lit cities, the silence was now a sentence.

The planet's slow death was not from war, not from plague, but from hydrogen escaping into space and their oxygen becoming locked in crystal crusts. Their grandest machines had slowed down, corroded, and one by one, dimmed until failure. The “Great Dome of Hydros”, once the pulsating heart of their high oceans, now sat collapsed like a broken lung. The light, as well as the life force of their world, was fading

In this fading light, they turned their gaze outward. For centuries, they had studied the sky and in particular they had watched a green and blue radiant world, the third of several planets circling yellow star, to them it was a source of beauty, wrapped in swirling clouds, its mass of oceans gleaming impossibly bright, and possibly teeming with life. There were land masses too, that potentially could be home to lifeforms greater than just bacteria. They named this planet Verdantis, for its green—blue vitality, but to the Proximans, it was more than a world. It may well prove to be their salvation.

But to reach this world would take sacrifice, many lives because distance was the greatest barrier. Even traveling at a tenth the speed of light, which would be at the very extreme of their technical capabilities and previous untested, would consume lives. Compared to beings on many planets they had extended longevity, though even being long—lived it was clear that few who ventured to Verdantis would be able return. Some would age and die in either outbound or return journeys, and others would die building what must carry them.

Still, the calculation was clear: Earth had water, and they had none, somehow they needed to be able to ship vast amounts of water back to Proxima.

So began the turning of minds toward a single purpose, and within the vaulted chambers of the Deep Council, voices prepared to speak.

Chapter 1: The Council of Necessity

The Deep Council chamber hummed low with pressure and light. An oval of silvered basalt circled the advisors, each suspended in fluid—cradles, their suits glinting like scaled armour. While above them, translucent strata filtered the pale sun, glowing with ancient equations.

Advisor Ouralon initiated the flow.

“We have reached convergence,” she said, her speech undulating through the shared auditory mesh. “Our analysis confirms Verdantis remains rich in hydrogen—bound oceans, it has an orbiting moon and tidal variation, we have observed seasonal and polar ice, and free vapor in the atmosphere.”

A murmur of affirmations pulsed through the chamber.

“The interstellar vessel is feasible,” — added Duroth—Kei, the construction firmly in his mind. He had a broad, massive, plated form with integrated data—spines, and his manner was always blunt, but highly practical,

although he came across as slightly arrogant. He was the Lead Engineer and the Interstellar ship architect and had devoted thousands of hours on design and construction planning of the vessel and there was not much he didn't know about every part of it. — “If built in orbit, fuelled by Helium—three and the remnants of our upper mantle deposits, we can achieve point—one light velocity.”

“Return?” asked Advisor Iluun, voice quieter.

Iluun was older than most council members and known as an Elder Advisor. The years had been hard and now Iluun looked aged and thinner, with faded shell markings that rippled with ancient pigments. With eyes set deep and always partially lidded, they conveyed thought before speech, which matched a personality that was reflective, cautious, and yet reverent of history. Although Iluum spoke rarely but it was always done with weight, which caused others to listen to the words, and he was known for upholding ethical continuity and long—memory perspectives. To many, Iluun acted as the council's conscience, constantly

evaluating long—term moral consequences. He was important because of his opposition to rash decisions, reminding others of their ancient values and from the perspective of most council members he symbolised the weight of their species’ collective past.

Duroth—Kei paused. “Initial journeys may allow return. Our longevity permits up to three round trips per life—span, assuming optimal vessel integrity. However, fuel and major resource constraints mean only a finite number of full missions, perhaps five in total.”

“And the final?” Iluun pressed. “Journey number six, to come back home?”

“The final return journey must be unmanned, but the outbound journey before it will not. Those who make the final voyage to Verdantis will be marooned there. Life—support mass, for a return from that distant outpost would be unsustainable. They will live, if at all, on a world that is not theirs, possibly in a hostile living environment and with no way back.”

“Then it ‘is’ exile,” said Ouralon. “The first may return, but the last will not; they will leave only a memory of themselves with us.”

Their ruler, known only as the Voice of the Trench, had not yet spoken. Suspended above them, vast and ancient, the Voice shimmered in hues of indigo and black. Its carapace, hard like the upper shell of a tortoise, bore the markings of ten ocean epochs, spanning thousands if not millions of years.

At last, it spoke. “If we do nothing, we perish. If we go, we may fail. But even failure may leave something behind on Verdantis, a beacon, a monument, maybe something shaped with intent, built to outlast language, crafted to endure the erosion of time itself. A message not to their current kind on Verdantis, but to whoever might come after them, saying simply: we were here, and we tried.”

The council fell into stillness. Not silence. Their world was already too full of that.

“I interpret your stillness and lack of dissent to be agreement, so the mission will proceed.” Said: The Voice of the Trench

Yet not all minds settled with ease. A voice from the outer ring spoke, it was a younger member, grey—plated and narrow—shelled, known as Jhalar, he was well known for voicing the political and ethical risks they faced. Although visibly younger than others, they knew he was thoughtful, and although defiant, he had the idealistic nature of youth.

“There is no guarantee they will permit us to take any of their water,” he said. “Assuming they are sentient, and advanced, might they see us as invaders?”

Advisor Iluun nodded solemnly. “That is the great unknown. Our readings suggest Verdantis is biospheric, but we have no certainty of culture. It may be unguarded or defended.”

“We speak of survival,” countered Duroth—Kei. “If the choice is to act, or to vanish, we must risk even the hostility of others.”

But Ouralon’s voice had softened. Her gaze flickered across the chamber toward another cradle one that held the form of Vael. He was slim, fin—fringed, and bio—adapted for long—range mobility, and although quiet he was deeply committed, idealistic, and often

torn between duty to his people and his love for T'Riah.

Vael had spoken little during the session, but now his signal opened. "I have volunteered for the first crew."

There was a subtle shift in bioelectric pulses. The council received it not as surprise, but as inevitability.

Across the chamber, Advisor T'Riah's crest dimmed with tension. She sent only one phrase: "I will not go without you."

Ouralon tilted toward them both. "You are bound together?"

"Yes," said T'Riah. "But I cannot live a half—century waiting in silence, not knowing where you are, beyond light, maybe dead, maybe not. If you leave, I must leave also. Or you could stay"

Vael hesitated. "And yet if I do not go, we all may vanish."

The chamber held their words, not as drama, but as part of their thinking and solemn considerations of risk and costs. They could see that the science was cold but the cost, as always, was going to be measured in lives, and loves.