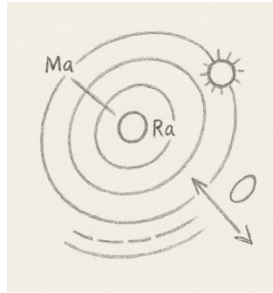


Interstellar

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, deep trenches. For the creatures who had once ruled its oceans in singing schools and crystal-lit cities, the silence was now almost like a death sentence.

The planet's slow death was not caused by war or some form of plague; it had been caused by hydrogen escaping into space and its oxygen becoming locked in crystal crusts, no longer free in the air, but trapped in the geology and ice layers. 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 inexorably.

It was in this fading light that they turned their gaze outward. For centuries, they had studied the sky, searching the void for worlds that might have been awakened and seeded long ago by what the Proximans once called the Genesis Engine. More recently, their attention had fallen upon a green, white, and blue radiant world: the third of several planets circling a yellow star. To them, it was a source of beauty - wrapped in swirling clouds, its vast oceans gleaming impossibly bright, and perhaps already teeming with life. There were also land masses that potentially could be home to life forms greater than just bacteria. They had named this planet Verdantis, for its green-blue vitality. But to the Proximans, it was more than a world, because it may well prove to be their only salvation.

It was going to be complicated to reach this world, and it would probably require the sacrifice of many lives of good Proximans because distance and time were the greatest barriers of all. They had calculated that even travelling at a tenth of the speed of light, which would be at the very extreme of their technical capabilities and was previously untested, would consume lives. Compared to

beings on many planets, the Proximans had extended longevity, though even being long-lived, it was clear that few who ventured to Verdantis would be able to 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: Verdantis had water, and Proxima had almost 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 with pressure and light. In what was an oval of silvered basalt that circled the advisors, each was suspended in fluid-cradles, their suits glinting like scaled armour. While above them, translucent strata filtered the pale sun, the shield glowing with ancient equations.

Advisor Ouralon initiated the flow of discussion. She was tall, graceful by Proximan standards, with an air of authority. Her scaled skin glowed with soft blue bioluminescence along her neck and limbs. She had an almost regal bearing, often wearing silver-toned plates with epaulettes and insignia that indicated her high rank. She moved with precision and poise, her movements graceful. Today, her golden eyes discreetly scanned the other council members as she checked the command tablet fused into her left forearm.

“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 vapour in the atmosphere.”

An audible murmur of affirmations pulsed through the chamber.

“An interstellar vessel is feasible,” - added Duroth-Kei, the construction firmly in his mind. Duroth-Kei was very different in build from Ouralon. He had a broad, plated form with integrated data spines, and his manner was, as always, blunt but highly practical, although he often came across as slightly arrogant. He was the Lead Engineer and the Interstellar ship architect, and had devoted thousands of hours to design and construction planning of the vessel, so there was not much he didn’t know about every part of it. He continued, “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, in a quieter voice.

Iluun was older than most council members and was known as an Elder Advisor. The years had been hard, and now Iluun looked aged and thin, with faded shell markings that rippled with ancient pigments. His eyes, set deep and always partially lidded, conveyed his manner of thought before speech, which matched a personality that was reflective, cautious, and yet reverent of history.

Although Iluum spoke rarely, it was always done with gravitas, which caused others to listen to his words, and he was renowned for upholding ethical continuity and long-term 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. "Return? 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 because there will not be enough energy to support a full ship, but the outbound journey before it will not. Those who make the final voyage to Verdantis will be marooned there. Life-support mass aboard ship 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’s 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 resonated on the walls of the chamber, which now 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, perhaps something shaped with intent, built to outlast language, crafted to endure the erosion of time itself. It would be a message that is not intended for 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, although 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 refreshing, 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. From what Ouralon has told us so far, our readings suggest that Verdantis is biospheric, but we have no certainty about its culture. It may be unguarded, or it may be 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 intervened, her voice intended to soften and calm the discussion. “Vael, what do you say?” 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 his duty to his people and his love for T'Riah.

She was athletic, with a red-crested head and bioluminescent dots. She was, by Proximan standards, a beautiful and elegant reptilian with pulsating bioluminescent body markings.

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 members were not surprised and had expected it as an inevitability, due to his experience.

Across the chamber, Advisor T’Riah’s crest dimmed with tension. She sent only one phrase: “I will not stay here 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 we could both stay”

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

The chamber held their words with respect, yet another factor in their thinking and solemn considerations of risk and costs.

They could see that the science was cold, but the cost, as always, would be measured in lives and loves.

And on that sombre note, the council session closed for the day.