

A MESSAGE FROM THE STARS

The night sky was filled with stars by the time Awa made it to the clearing. She surveyed the area that had been her escape for the past year: fertile soil, shifting grasses, tall baobab trees stretching towards the stars... and the abandoned spaceship. It was rusted and overgrown, but some parts of its massive hull still gleamed in the pale moonlight. She glanced back to her peaceful village in the valley below.

Her father always said they lived in paradise. That she should be grateful to their ancestors who fled the chaos of Earth and brought the tribes here generations ago. To that, Awa would often ask where “here” really was.

“This is home, Awa,” her father would scoff. And then he would send her off to finish her chores.

Satisfied that she was alone, Awa dropped her tools and inhaled the cool air. She savored the freedom of the night sky for a moment, then hurried over to the ship that had carried her ancestors here. She set to work making the final repairs on its radio antenna.

Last week, she had replaced the broken wires with fresh ones from a Speed Bike. Last night, she had completed the soldering using tools borrowed from the school labs. Now, it was just reinstalling the switches and speaker plating. If everything went to plan, soon she would be able to listen for messages from outer space.

As Awa worked, her excitement slowly gave way to fatigue. By the time she was screwing the control plating back on, she could barely keep her eyes open. This would have to do for now. She would plug in the power supply and check it tomorrow night. As she left the clearing, Awa gave one final look back at the antenna reaching towards the stars.

I'm listening, she thought.

Clang! The urn struck the floor and spilled its remaining water.

“Awa, watch yourself!”

“Sorry father!” Awa forced her eyes to focus as she set the urn upright. Her limbs felt heavy.

“Daydreaming again?” her father asked. “About some far away place no doubt.” Awa’s pulse quickened at the thought of her parents discovering that she had been sneaking off. She gulped.

“You shouldn’t concern yourself with anything beyond our village boundary, Awa. Defying tradition only leads to destruction.”

“I know, father. Have you checked with the elders for medication?” she asked, desperately trying to change the subject.

“Nothing. They said the disease isn’t in our traditional registry.” He paused. “I just need some rest. Now go finish helping your mother.”

“Yes father.”

Awa could hardly wait for her family to fall asleep before dashing out of their home. Any fatigue from the day had vanished. What if the spaceship’s antenna had received a message?

She slipped along the familiar path, running her hands through the tall grass. A brilliant flash of green and purple caught her eye in the upper atmosphere. The aurora intensified, illuminated the path stretching away from the village, as if guiding her onwards.

Cosmic beauty. She smiled.

Once she arrived at the ship, Awa could barely contain herself. She rushed over to the receiver console, fingers flying over the buttons to check the logs.

She gasped. There it was.

A single recorded transmission.

Awa's breath caught in her throat. She could hear her heart pounding. Could this be? Already? The first extraterrestrial transmission received on their planet. And from whom? Other humans? Aliens?

She pressed play.

>>> RADIO TRANSMISSION LOGGED 2137-05-29 02:11:56 <<<

BANDWIDTH: HIGH

INTERFERENCE: MODERATE

SOURCE: UNKNOWN

“People of Proxima Centauri b, people of Proxima Centauri b. We wish to establish communication. We [...]. Please respond if you're receiving this.

People of Proxima Centauri b, people of Proxima Centauri b. We wish [...]

communication. We come to you from [...]. Please respond [...] this.”

>>> END MESSAGE <<<

Awa stood there frozen, mouth agape. Her fingers trembled. Adrenaline coursed through her veins.

We're being contacted.

She wanted desperately to reply, to send a message back to the voice, but she had no idea how. She glanced around the ship frantically for anything that might transmit. But then a darker thought entered her mind.

What if they're lying? What if they want to hurt us? A chill went down her spine.

Her father's words came to her. *Defying tradition only leads to destruction.* All her life, Awa had been warned about wrongdoers that her people had escaped from. What if they had come back? Suddenly, she felt like she was being watched.

She returned to the village, replaying the message in her mind.

Awa awoke to her parents speaking in hushed tones.

"The doctors said it'll take too long to develop a cure without artificial intelligence," her mother said.

"Very well," her father said. "If this is nature's intent, I will not fight it. We agreed as a village: artificial intelligence was too risky. I stand by tradition." He spoke passionately, but Awa could hear the weakness in his voice.

Awa skipped school to tend to her father. He was getting worse. She was terrified of losing him, but she couldn't stop thinking about the message. Every time she did, a pang of guilt struck her.

"You used to point up at the stars and ask me what was out there," her father said weakly, eyes closed. "And what would I tell you?"

Awa calmed her momentary panic. Surely he was just reminiscing.

“Outsiders. Trouble. Risk,” she replied.

“Exactly. That’s why we banned space technology and off-planet communication. We don’t go looking for trouble.”

“But shouldn’t we see what’s out there? We can’t live in ignorance!” Awa blurted out.

“And put all our lives at risk? My child...” he lifted his head to look at her.

She bit her lip and looked down, avoiding his gaze. “Come now, rest, rest.”

Awa snuck out to the spaceship again that night. Her plan was to deduce the source of the message, but upon booting up the console, she was shocked to find a second transmission.

>>> RADIO TRANSMISSION LOGGED 2137-05-30 04:02:31 <<<

BANDWIDTH: HIGH

INTERFERENCE: LOW

SOURCE: UNKNOWN

“You have an old settler ship. Enough generations have passed. It’s time to activate your Knowledge Anchor. Look for the patterned red panel in the cabin. Respect your ancestors.”

>>> END MESSAGE <<<

Awa stared, dumbfounded. She didn’t understand the message in the slightest, but those final words stuck with her. *Respect your ancestors*. For some reason, she trusted this deep in her bones.

She crept deeper into the ship. Moonlight shone through dirty windows. Past the crew mess, up the ladder, into the ship's cabin. After a minute of searching the sea of buttons, lights, and display screens, Awa located the patterned red panel. She placed her hand against it, and it hummed to life.

Hissss...

Click.

A soft chime.

“Biometrics confirmed. Knowledge Anchor activated.” The voice came from the ship. “You may take the Knowledge Link. Respect your ancestors.”

The red panel detached from the wall. Awa held it in awe. About the size of a book, its smooth surface rippled and morphed under her fingers. A message emerged:

The Ancestors know that your father is ill. We have felt him drawing nearer to our plane. But his time has not yet come. There is a compound made by Acacia salvatrix, a tree native to this planet. It will cure your father. Take its bark to your scientists; they will know what to do.

Awa's mind was reeling, but this sharpened her focus instantly. The message, the ship, the tablet — they could all be explored later. What mattered now was her father.

The rest of the night flew by in a blur. The tablet leading her to the nearest tree. Peeling off a bark sample. Running back on pure adrenaline and waking the village scientist. Extracting the serum. Returning to find her father barely breathing. Administering the medicine, hands

shaking, as his vitals stabilized. Nursing him back to life as the blood-red sun broke through the darkness into dawn.

Finally, he awoke and gazed up at her in awe.

“You cured me...”

“The ancestors. The ship. There’s this Knowledge Anchor...” She wanted to tell him everything but didn’t know how.

Her father placed a hand on her arm and she met his gaze. His eyes glimmered, and in that moment, Awa felt like he understood her.

“You did what needed to be done,” he said.

“I think I understand the importance of this planet now,” she said. “Our people have put down roots here.”

“Awa... you’ve always been a dreamer. You can’t hide it from me.” He smiled up at her. “This is home, yes. But every village needs explorers, ambassadors... visionaries. We’re lucky to have you.”

Tears welled in the corner of her eyes, but they did not fall. She grasped her father’s hand, smiled at him, and gazed out towards the horizon.

“We’ll face the cosmos together,” she said.