

## A Small New World

Sophie sat in the small, cluttered attic of her cottage, the only light coming from a glowing computer screen and the pale moon through the skylight. Outside, the rest of the world was asleep, but Sophie was wide awake, wrapped in a thick woollen blanket with a steaming cup of tea by her elbow.

For years, she had spent many of her nights like this, listening to the silence of the sky. Most people looked up and saw a vast, empty darkness, but to Sophie, the sky was a crowded room full of stories she couldn't quite hear. She used a small, homemade satellite dish in her garden to catch the faint whispers that drifted down from the stars. Usually, it was just "hiss" and "crackle," the sound of the universe breathing she thought.

Then, at 3 o'clock in the morning, the static changed.

It wasn't a loud noise. It was a tiny, rhythmic *thrum-thrum, thrum-thrum*, like the heartbeat of a bird held in your hand. Sophie froze, her hand hovering over the volume control. She leaned in so close to the speakers that she could feel the vibration.

She checked the indicators on her screen. The signal seemed to be coming from a bright, blurry patch of light she had loved since she was a child - a place where she imagined new stars were tucked away in clouds of dust.

"Are you there?" she whispered to the empty room. She didn't expect an answer, but the 'heartbeat' grew steady, almost cheerful. She closed her eyes and imagined she wasn't sitting in a drafty attic in England, but floating out there in the glowing fog of space. She didn't believe the sound was a message from a distant galaxy or a space traveller in a starship. She imagined a small, new world, still hot and glowing like a coal in a fire, finally finding its voice and humming a song to the darkness.

Sophie looked at the glowing button marked transmit. Her dish was usually just an ear, but it felt wrong to hear a first cry and offer no reply.

She leaned toward the microphone, her voice steady in the quiet attic. "Hello," she whispered. "I'm here. I'm listening."

She knew her words would take lifetimes to travel across the inconceivable distance to that nursery of stars. By the time her greeting arrived, she would be long gone, and that molten rock might finally have its first clouds and oceans.

As she switched off her monitors and watched the golden sun crest the horizon, Sophie didn't feel small. She felt like she had tucked a letter into a bottle and tossed it into the greatest sea there is. The little world was singing and now, her voice was travelling to meet it.