

The Empty Sky

by Tom Hollingsworth

The song of the wind from the ancient stones hung on the night breeze as Richardson scanned the darkening sky for the distant glimmer of light that was Earth. A tiny point of dim light in the vast galaxy of the black sky. Across the waving fields of grain the farmhouse glowed golden, casting a welcoming path for any passing traveler. Not that just any traveller would be passing by millions of light years from anywhere. Join the future, join the settlers, every home vidscreen had hectored, be part of a new discovery of dreams and adventures. A brand new life off Earth. In incandescent streams of fire the rocket ships had blasted off from nearly every country. Man's boldest experiment the colonization of the galaxies, and for Earth a chance to spread its teeming masses across the very stars themselves. The land wars and pollution had taken their toll and vast areas would never feel the imprint of man again. But against all hope, peace had come and the madness had been banished forever. The brotherhood of man achieved as a race teetered at the brink. Years of sending remote planet monitoring probes drifting like seeds through the cosmos had finally paid off. Man reached for the very stars themselves and hurled himself across the boundless new frontier.

Mara's voice rose on the wind and Richardson jerked his head round an excuse framing itself on his lips. "Come back to bed, you'll need to be up before too long " she smiled in the twilight and waved her hand urgently. Their farm stretched out before her, field upon field of whispering corn, thriving in the rich alien soil, bread and flour in the making, waiting for the harvest. The air was sweet and fresh, the atmosphere a reminder of home, but a reminder of how it had once been. He closed his eyes as the gentle hum of the stones that stood on the distant hills vibrated in the stillness. The stones look old as the earth they stood on. Since arriving the colonists had found many other artifacts to show that they were not the first peoples to inhabit the planet. And as far as they could tell they were of such antiquity as to be almost unrecordable. Apart from the stones no other kind of structure or town sites appeared to exist, making the kind of basic civilisation if it was such, to be lost in time. Year by year, new discoveries had been made, either buried in the dark brown earth or found in the hills and rivers that covered this part of the planet.

Richardson quietly walked past his front gate, the song of the stones fading on the wind. He was often drawn to them in some curious way. His small functional home bulged with bits

and pieces he had collected over the last five years. In town they had opened a museum, but no one went there much, except to bring in more stuff they'd find turned up by a plough or an inquisitive child. These were farmers, men of the soil scraping and tearing out a new future for themselves and their families, looking to each day as a part of a permanent foundation. They had no time to stop and wonder. Crops had to be nurtured and children raised. On Earth the skies were streaked with smog and haze, the air was gritty and bitter, but out here it was paradise, blue skies and sun filled days where a person could grow and be strong.

They had named their new home Arbour, and as far as they were concerned it was theirs and no one else's. A couple of scientists from the ship had run a number of tests on some of the artifacts but nothing really came of it apart from the small museum and so the settlers forgot about the original inhabitants. All of them except Richardson. It bugged him. Why had they simply faded to dust? Had they left too like the people of Earth. Had the planet recovered from some terrible thing? The sunrise burst over the fields in a great swathe of rushing light and Mara watched from the kitchen window as her husband bent his back in a distant field. The baby inside her kicked in anticipation. She smiled and rested her hand on her swollen stomach. A strong son she hoped, a son to help and grow with the farm and the town. Her mind went back to the training talks for potential mothers held on the shuttle craft as nervously the pioneers rocketed to their special designated settlement areas. All the eco systems of the planet checked out normal, including historical core sample data, which importantly meant that children could be conceived and born without the harrowing stories of birth defects that had been reported from other settler planets light years distant.

The Bio-med in town had assured her that she was fine, in fact he'd shown her the tests from the children born on Arbour and her fears had begun to recede. "This place is a great new start for your kid, why he's gonna love it " he'd said. Laughingly he told that he should know being father to two growing children himself. The hall was full for the regular monthly settler meeting, and small children scurried and shrieked between the rows of chairs. People entered and quickly found seats as onto the slight platform limped Donaldson the group coordinator. Hands were raised and points were made amid laughter and good humour. Like every meeting somebody became the butt of the jokes. Last month Stevens had been ribbed unmercifully about his plan to create a swimming hole without first putting it near a good water supply but tonight it was Richardson's turn to provoke mirth. "Found me some old

scrap iron or such and I was gonna comptrash it when I suddenly remembered that maybe our top alien hunter could sniff em out, you know like a hound dog" one grizzled farmer offered. Mara smiled and felt her face flush, while Richardson took it all in good humour and shrugged a grin at those around him. Someone started singing and in an instant the hall was filled with strong voices raised in fellowship as they blessed their good fortune and future. Richardson had been a bio-engineer and a navy pilot when he had first met Mara, but the lure of a new start had proved too strong for them both. They had married on the base and signed the emigration papers the same day. Their top medical marks had earned them a choice selection of potential settler areas. And almost two years to the day that they had started the farm they had felt ready to start a family and she carried the proof.

The kitchen lit up as brilliant sunlight winked off the units. Glancing up at the clock she busied herself in breakfast in the certain knowledge that a hungry man would soon appear. He ate his pan fried bread with a slow methodical chew that was typical of the man he was. Thoughtful and kind was the general opinion around the settlement. Which allowed everyone to politely ignore his constant talk of the old inhabitants. Busy folk they were, too busy to be bothering with alien memories and signs. Crops were growing and needed tending after that came family and kin. Mara smiled and shook her head as unsuccessfully he tried to interest the hired hands in yet another theory as to what had happened to their alien predecessors. A bell clanged in the bright morning and Richardson wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, rising as he did so, a signal to all that it was time to enter the fields and meadows. To help guide nature on her fruitful course. Back at the landing centre the future was busily calculated in the silent mission computers, while technicians quietly watched over their long deliberations.

Every settlement had its science group and it was they who carefully maximised every potential that all the seed planets as they called them possessed. All patterns seemed to tie the regular planetary cycle of Arbour to a close approximation of that of Earth. Data was constantly being gathered by small infogather drones who flashed in the distant hills like techno hummingbirds. Drinking in information as they spiraled through the whispering breezes. To them the sunlight was so much energy and radiation. But to the settlers it was a warmth on the face and elixir to the crops and the feeling of home. There so far away in a remote starway of the galaxy. The air was heavy with the promise of rain, and Richardson's hired hand Soames sighed as he directed his earth cultivator along the edge of the new

pasture, glancing occasionally into the darkening sky. Spots of warm rain began to tumble from the sky turning into a steady sheet. He sat down under a thick green hedge tugging the hovering machine with him. He idly scraped at the mud clinging to his boot when a small glimmer of gold at the base of the hedgerow caught his attention. The rain spattered his face as he rooted away flinging great lumps of rich brown clay over his shoulder and with seemingly little effort he soon cleared a shallow hole at the hedges base revealing a twisted metallic object. The boss had to see this he thought. And Richardson's face almost split in two, his grin lighting up the room with its pleasure.

Almost reverently he brushed away at the clods of earth still clinging to the long golden tube that lay across the kitchen table. "You really found something here Soames and no damn mistaking that" he breathed "I can only give you a few dollars mind, Mara would kill me if she found out ". Soames sourly grinned and grunted assent and clutching his reward he shambled back out into the sheeting rain, his head bowed. Work forgotten Richardson minutely began to examine the find, the strange song of the stones briefly ringing in his mind. It was a tube about four feet long intricately engraved with the same strange script Richardson had seen on the singing stones. Slashes and whorls deeply chipped into their granite like flanks. As he wiped away the last of the mud he sucked in his breath as his cloth revealed a picture unmistakable in its location. It was unbelievable. It showed vague figures standing on the great hill that overlooked the farm and as far as he could tell they were hovering above the stones. His throat was dry and he felt a tremor of excitement run through his body. The hill and the stones had long intrigued him and here was proof of their significance to the previous inhabitants.

Carefully he covered the tube with a piece of sacking and looking about him he slid it under onion baskets at the side of the kitchen racks. Mara entered and he guiltily jerked upright his face flushed. "Hello what are you doing in here before teatime, go on off with you or there'll be no dinner". She reached playfully for him and he buried his face in her long sweet smelling hair. After a lingering kiss he tenderly held her at arm's length and gazed into her eyes "You are wonderful" he murmured. Hugging her to him he whispered to her and stroked her lips with his own. And she giggled and shoed him back out the door.

His breath was ragged the swift walk up the hill causing him to bend over double. The rain had passed over and the air smelt damp and heavy as he stood by the stones on the hilltop.

Below him he could see his farm and the fields that stretched away into the distance and he felt his heart pound as all around him the song of the stones reminded him that this was now home. A shadow from an info drone flickered across the broad back of a stone, and he thought about the figures on the golden tube hidden under the onion crop in the back store. They were all standing raising what he took to be arms upwards to the sky. Judging by the swirling lines all around them the wind was up and a storm was near. After Mara had gone into town he had spent an hour examining the golden find. But as to what its purpose was he was still at a complete loss. Since touchdown day, not one real solid piece of evidence had been found that truly explained the type of race or people that had presumably lived and died on Arbour. Did they simply die out or was it a plague or a war? No clear answer existed and to Richardson's tidy way of thinking it meant unfinished business. He thought of his unborn child and Mara's beautiful swelling body and a shiver ran down his spine. Had a husband and a father like himself stood here high amongst the stones and wondered at the future for himself and his family? The farm was home and love and everything that made living worthwhile, perhaps long ago on Arbour it had been the same until whatever had happened, happened.

The stones hummed softly as a breeze flicked at his hair while above the last swollen grey clouds disappeared in the shafting sunlight. Below he saw an air buggy draw up by his gate, and with thoughts of Mara and her caress he broke into a trot and bounded down the great hill the wind cool against his face. The smell of freshly baked pie filled the kitchen as Mara heaped high another helping onto Thorsen's plate. "Now tell me if the food at the museum can touch that" she smiled and Richardson watched as his friend closed his eyes in pleasure at the taste. Zeke Thorsen was the senior archeologist and planet archivist based at the alien artifact museum in town. This fact coupled with his love of outdoors had helped cement a strong friendship between the two men. Richardson waited until Mara finally announced her intention of hitting the hay early as she put it, before dusting off a bottle of home brew he had saved for a special occasion.

Zekes eyes widened as Richardson carefully laid the sack wrapped object on the table and with a theatrical flourish whipped the covering cloth away. His friends face flushed and his eyes narrowed as with an odd reverence he ran his fingers along its length working his mouth noiselessly. Richardson grinned " Found it up at sector 10 north plot, well old Soames did but" he grinned and added quickly "He got his credits so he won't remember a damn

thing" but Zeke didn't hear him his attention completely taken by the gleaming tube on the table. Nervously Richardson coughed as after what seemed an age Zeke remained transfixed by his find, he touched his friends arm and smiled uncertainly and shrugged. "Well is it worth anything or not, does it tell you anything " he frowned " I mean you haven't said a thing since you first laid eyes on it". A long sigh of breath left Zeke's lips and he stood upright his eyes moist and looked levelly into Richardson's face. "Back in my lab I have what I believe to be the base part to this" he shook his head "No one but me knows I have it and if you wonder why I kept it secret it's because as far as my tests show my" he struggled for a word " ah base unit registers a power reading of over twenty million mega rams or if you like, the equivalent of a star drive on a ship which if I am correct is a tick over reading for it, add your piece and god alone knows how much power it could put out or what the hell we got on our hands for that matter ".

He fell silent and reaching into his battered file case he scabbled about before tugging out a bundle of Perspex sheet with a diagram neatly etched onto its front page. Richardson nodded and sipping his drink read slowly. Turning the first page he could clearly see the sharp outlines of a large drum like object with what appeared to be a long tube protruding from its centre. Along the edge of the sheets were enlarged detail slides taken from a whole variety of angles. Reference arrows pointing towards the drum clearly showing the stones and the hill with outlines of figures apparently flying above the stone circle. He glanced at the tube and it was obvious that the design was a continuation of the workings on the drum. Hours passed as they mused and explored every section of the tube until finally a soft tone hummed from the clock on the wall and Zeke jerked from his reverie gnawing at his lower lip in thought. "Look at the time I'd better head on out" he furrowed his brow for a moment "Ah right this is too crazy an idea but I'll keep that beauty safe for both of us"

His eyes gleamed "With both pieces intact and my findings so far just maybe I think we may be close to finding out a lot more about our old neighbours. I'll see how they fit together in the morning. Won't that be something". The alcohol pleasantly warming them both they carefully negotiated the garden path and squinting up into the clear night sky Zeke climbed unsteadily into his air buggy. His fumbling grip tight on Richardson's arm as he carefully laid the tube on the back seat. "Til tomorrow then my friend" he slurred and vaguely touching a panel his buggy silently drifted away the clear distant stars winking off of its plexi hood. Richardson stood for a while in the sharp early morning air until a chill wind raised the skin

on his arm in goose bumps. Shivering he hurried back indoors the thoughts of tomorrow tugging at his mind. He washed quickly and padded into the bedroom. Mara didn't stir as he carefully slid under the covers and he lay still his heartbeat ringing in his ears. Until exhaustion overtook him and he slept. Deeply.

The alien reached out for his arm and Richardson felt sweat break out on his back as he looked into its curious face. With a start he felt himself falling and just before he hit the ground he shuddered awake. A dream he knew it, typical with him having a day and a half of work come sun up. Mara stirred faintly beside him and he felt her roll over and pull him into her sweet and warm embrace. The strange dream quickly forgotten he lost himself in the familiar tenderness that was for him the foundation for his life.

The next morning smell of fresh coffee lingered in the kitchen as he pulled off his work jacket. He'd been up since six finishing the new irrigation line in sector five with Soames and MCarthy. As long as the rain held up for the next couple of days he figured that his holding tank would be full enough to carry the watering for about a good few months.

A huge yawn overcame him and just as he reached the end of his stretch the communicator on the wall buzzed. The screen flickered on and he saw Zeke's puffy face broken by a broad grin. "It fits by god and the power reading doesn't fit on the scale it's so damn enormous" he chattered on not making much sense until Richardson caught his attention by clapping his hands over his ears " Stop stop for pete's sake Zeke, talk slower and in plain English, I haven't understood a word so far you crazy coot". Zeke composed himself and still agitated he told Richardson that the tube and his own find were definitely a part of each other and by all accounts were obviously some kind of battery or power supply unit.

"I've cross referenced every find we have but this one is unique it doesn't seem to link to anything we have on records" Richardson felt a tingle of excitement run down his back as a thought came to him. "What about the drawings on the tube and the base why don't we see if there's anything like them on the carvings on the stones, after all whatever those people they've drawn are doing they seem to be involved with the stones" He pursed his lips " It's got to be worth a try". Zeke thought for a while and then nodded his smile fading "I'm on my way over" the screen blanking abruptly. Richardson felt his stomach knot with excitement.

At last they'd make some progress. They could answer part of that question that nagged at him constantly. He sipped his coffee. It tasted better suddenly.

The sun burned down high in the mid-morning sky, and the view from the hill was clear and sharp. Richardson poured some clear water into his glass and drank deeply. Relishing the cool of it in his throat. Shading his eyes he gazed back down the hill at Mara hanging the sheets in the side meadow, a puppy chasing a butterfly by the side of the kitchen verandah. The fields of waving corn sweeping endlessly to the horizon dotted with men working their backs bent in labour.

Zeke smiled at him and wiped a trickle of sweat from the side of his face. "D'you know about ten years ago I sat in a restraint cradle on the first landing ship and cried like a baby at the thought of never seeing Earth again" His eyes softened momentarily. "Just look at this place will you, it's like a dream painting in one of those old settler manuals". A snatch of music floated on the breeze and Richardson pointed to a group of children in the new orchard and nodded. "Yeah I read those manuals Zeke but as beautiful as it is, we still don't know what became of the folks who built that" he pointed to the golden tube and base now reunited as one single device. "Doesn't that bug the hell out of you huh. Not a single real trace, just some broken bits and pieces and these" he patted the huge stone beside him on its broad flank.

"I mean who would just leave this place". Zeke fumbled in his case for some papers, finally pulling one out and handing it to Richardson. A mass of mathematical equations covered its surface, broken only by very bad representations of the designs on the device. "Yeah I know. But if I could figure the purpose of this thing then at least we'd have part of the story wouldn't we?" His voice dropped "I just can't imagine anyone wanting to leave this place voluntarily". They chattered on. The warm afternoon stretching out slow and languorous as they examined the great stones, carefully comparing the figures and markings on the device.

A bird spiraled gracefully above them as the sun began to sink behind the distant mountains its cry echoing across the sky. They had tried everything but the device refused to respond, a puzzle with no seeming explanation. The stones stood resolutely symbolizing a forgotten race who had left all but these primitive and silent sentinels to remind those that followed that the fields and meadows had once belonged to someone else. Wearily Richardson rose

and stretched out his hand to Zeke. "Come on let's go get some dinner" he grinned as his stomach grumbled noisily and grunting he hoisted Zeke to his feet. And groaning they made their way back to the house.

Dinner that evening was a muted affair. Mara frowned as she slowly collected Richardson's plate up. "Well for someone who was so hungry you sure picked at my pie" She rubbed at his shoulder and looked at Zeke. He half smiled and shrugged and tilted his plate to show it was completely bare. "Mara your husband doesn't know what he's missing, but we" he stopped abruptly catching Richardson's eye. Mara regarded them both quizzically and scooping up the last of the dishes she clattered off the verandah back into the house leaving them both to the silence. The moon hung in the clear night sky like a bright silver coin and Zeke glanced at his watch. A shooting star flickered across the heavens, the night air warm a smell of rain and Richardson fidgeted and put his fingers to his lips. Finally he could sit no longer and he rose to his feet "Come on let's go get our toys" he shrugged "We can't get any further round here, maybe one of your whiz gadgets at the lab can figure it all out ". Mara came in carrying some coffee and Richardson went visibly red and shuffled his feet like an errant schoolboy.

She smiled and stroked his face "It's alright I know you've been up to more of your foolishness" she shook her head and snorted. "Soames told me about his find and I didn't think it would take long for you two to start scurrying about up there" She nodded in the direction of the stones. Richardson's shoulders sagged and he held out his arms to his wife as she nestled against him. Zeke busied himself with clearing cutlery and disappeared into the back room. Richardson rested his cheek against his wife's and a sudden thought occurring to him he stepped down from the verandah and held out his hand to her. "Come on lets go up there honey. Like when we first came remember?" And smiling she stood and held out her hand.

A slight wind tugged at his collar as carefully they picked their way up the long hillside. Soon they stood gazing up into the vast sky. The stars they looked at an unfamiliar swirl of lights. Twinkling on high in an alien sky. Around them the darkened stones rose, casting long faint shadows along the moon drenched hill top. Richardson stopped and held a hand to his ear and Mara copied him her eyes tightly closed in concentration. It was the song, a low barely audible hum, the wind tugging it from the angled stones as it whistled between their

columns and crevices. He opened the bag he'd carried and tugged out the tube and its base piece. Zeke had tested it and it was safe. It had nothing that could move or do anything. It was just two solid pieces of metal. Probably just a battery device he'd surmised. Albeit an incredibly powerful battery device. And Richardson fitted the tube in its base with an almost inaudible click. Mara smiled as she reached out to touch its smooth surface. The faint light from the stars winked along its burnished golden length. All around them stretched the sweeping carpet of fields, tiny spots of light marking out distant homesteads in the velvet darkness.

Mara stepped back and looked at her husband "It's beautiful isn't it and so..." she reached out and placed her hand on its stem like top. Light flooded around them suddenly. Images shimmering as they were projected onto the flanks of the great stones. Richardson gasped as he could see figures moving like a movie of some kind. No not projected. They were holograms. The figures appeared to become sharper almost immediately their edges faintly blurred as if viewed through water. Mara clung to him all colour draining from her face in fear. The song of the stones momentarily swelled and a wind appeared as if from nowhere sending Mara's hair whipping about her face. And in an instant they found themselves in the centre of a room of some kind. Mara's lifted her finger. A group of figures were circling them.

The larger of the figures gently moved towards them and they both recoiled in alarm and it immediately resumed its original position. One of the smaller figures raised a hand like extension in a kind of greeting. Mara gripped at Richardson's waist and he saw her smile, a bright and eager smile. He was bewildered at her reaction but she whispered in his ear and he understood at once.

There was no danger for standing before them was almost a mirror image of themselves, a family, a father, a mother. And unmistakably a child. Mara spoke first and he realised that no sound came from her mouth but he could hear her somewhere distant but clear, deep inside his mind. He spoke hesitantly at first but the nearness of his wife and the obvious bond between them all gave him confidence. Above them the open sky flashed with summer lightning as they talked, two families, one home and the other, who knew where. The smaller of the aliens that they took to be a child, moved forward and leaned to look round them. Mara glanced over her shoulder and saw Zeke standing behind them mouth open,

transfixed by the unearthly vision. She smiled and waved to him to approach them and she nudged Richardson as he moved slowly forward. The alien family began to fade from sight like a poor quality film projection the device fading with them and Zeke reached out to briefly touch the glimmering edge of their passing.

The wind begin to rise and tug at Mara's long hair and Zeke had to shout to make himself heard above its roar " Are you two okay, what.." he shook his head as the enormity of what he had seen left him lost for words. Around them great whispering swathes swept across the tall grain and they left the hilltop, the sound of a sea filling their ears, and like lost sailors they gazed to the stars and headed for home. The kitchen smelt of baking as they silently sat around the cluttered table and Mara busied herself putting a fresh pot of coffee on the electra stove top. Zeke could contain himself no longer and taking a deep breath he waved his hands about him struggling for a question.

Richardson smiled and rubbed at his forehead, his eyes wet and Mara leant over him smoothing the hair from his face. "They wanted to welcome us, to forgive us for taking their home". Zeke looked puzzled and Richardson coughed his words catching as he spoke "We came and wondered where they had gone, but we didn't know that they were still here, we just couldn't see them. Something about moving through differing light spectrums. I think they went from solid to pure light. But we changed the spectrums somehow. Just our very presence. But they saw we were peaceful, even if our history told a different story. The stones were gathering places for them, and they sang their songs of welcome and we heard the songs but didn't understand. We thought it was just the wind. But we couldn't see them. Or hear them. And to be honest we weren't listening.

Then it started, the falling they call it, the gift we brought with us, we brought death. Could be anything, a cold, measles, god knows but whatever it was it was too strong for them and they began to die. The children first" He gasped for breath "They had to move to a different spectrum but it meant they faded from this place. Like shadows in dying sunlight. And as they left they sang, singing a welcome to the new families. The machine we found it was some kind of recorder. From a time when they were solid. Before we arrived and brought our spectrum. It managed to store the thoughts and dreams of the last family before they" he rubbed his forehead distractedly "before they left, they had to leave you see, leave their precious home to us, but they were happy because they saw a family just like themselves,

just happy to be home and safe. That was the welcome you saw. Somehow it interacted for a brief moment from wherever they are now".

Along the shelves the morning sun winked off things Richardson had found in the fields. Discarded possessions of a people who were willing to share what they had, but couldn't anymore. Their home contaminated. Zeke nodded his head "Well I'll be, they existed in a different light frame to us, we couldn't see them but they could see us, and what did they see but a bunch of people pretty much like themselves" he breathed in noisily " And we took what they had without even knowing it, and they didn't mind, but we...." He hung his head as the full impact of what their arrival and the settlement meant to the alien people gripped at his heart "We kept on wondering what happened to them, carefully deciphering and testing, it was us, we happened to them and they forgave us" He stopped his eyes full and together they sat lost in it all, friends and family mourning and rejoicing in one single fragile moment. Life and death temporarily entwined.

The morning air was clean and fresh, the cloudless sky blue and bright as Richardson's plough turned the rich earth in the pasture at the foot of the hill. Around him the land stretched out, green and pleasant, and from the stones, the faint hum of the song floated on the wind. High above him and beyond it sailed, drifting through the kitchen as Mara felt her baby kick, hanging over the growing meadows and fields, whispering along the neat town streets, fading into the new day like a past memory, a song remembered, never to be forgotten, the sweet memory of home.