

## Landscape with Alien

Edward Willett

Kareen Aldona added a white highlight to the orange flank of a boulder, considered a moment, enlarged it a bit, then set her brush aside with a sigh. She had hoped to finish the painting that day, but shadows were lengthening in the canyon, and it would take her most of the two remaining hours of daylight to get back to the colony.

She stood, stretching, then moved back from the easel to compare her creation to the real thing. Not bad, she thought, but the light still isn't quite right.... She shook her head. The sun, slightly more orange than Earth's, had a subtle effect very difficult to capture.

"Next time," she promised, and began packing palette, brush and paints into her metal art case, which she stuffed in her backpack.

She stored the painting and easel inside the nearby cave she had discovered on her first visit to the canyon, then filled her canteen at the gurgling spring further inside.

When she returned to the cave's mouth she saw the alien for the first time.

Though slim and no taller than she, its thick, black fur made it look much larger. Eyes of brilliant, liquid yellow gleamed from its long-muzzled face as it picked its way on broad, clawed feet through the rocks. It wore only a thin gray belt, from which hung a knife and a leather pouch. A slender rod of crystal glittered on a silver chain around its neck.

Kareen's breath froze in her throat, and at the same instant the creature looked up and saw her, and stopped.

Even across the fifty meters separating them, she heard its low, menacing growl.

It can't be real! her mind kept insisting, despite the evidence of her eyes. There's no intelligent life on this planet. Dad's the colony biologist, he should know, right? The survey showed nothing. No cities, no villages, not even cave dwellings!

But the impossibility of the alien's presence didn't make it go away. It stood its ground, staring at her, still growling.

Kareen wanted to turn and run, but had nowhere to go. The only way she had found into or out of the canyon was the treacherous climb up the wall above the cave, and the thought of attempting it with the alien behind her was too terrifying to contemplate.

Never taking its eyes from her, the creature slowly sank crosslegged to the ground. It drew its knife and thrust it into the ground close by its side.

Kareen tried to swallow with a throat suddenly as dry as the canyon floor, despite the cold spring water she had just drunk. The message was obvious; "I'm armed. Come no closer."

Why doesn't it just attack? she wondered sickly. I couldn't fight it. I don't even have a club.

She sat down on a large rock, to the relief of her trembling knees, wrapped her arms around her legs and bleakly met the steady glare of the alien. It must not realize I'm helpless, she thought. It's wondering what kind of weapons I've got.

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She tensed suddenly as the creature reached into its pouch and took out a transparent, glassy cylinder. Still staring intently at Kareen, it took the crystal rod from around its neck and touched it to the cylinder. Light flashed from both rod and cylinder and Kareen jumped to her feet. Now what? A bomb? I have to make it think I'm not defenseless!

She struggled out of the straps of her backpack, and opened it to take out the art case. The alien hissed softly when it saw the silver box. "Same to you," Kareen whispered.

Holding the case on her lap, she took out a sketch pad and a pencil, carefully keeping the lid of the case between her and the alien, so it couldn't see exactly what she was doing. "This ought to puzzle it," she muttered, thinking morbidly that at least her parents would know what killed her. Rummaging in the pack again, she pulled out her binoculars, hoping to make out what the alien was doing, but even with them the cylinder was only a meaningless light-filled tube. But the creature tensed when

she pointed the binoculars at it. Good, she thought. Let it worry for a while. Taking an occasional look through the glasses to get the details right, she began to sketch, while the alien continued to work on the glowing cylinder Karen was convinced was a weapon. She only hoped the alien believed her imaginary weapons were as real as its own. When the alien became hard to see in the shadows stretching across the rock-strewn canyon floor, Karen put her sketchpad away. Her drawing was a good likeness of the alien, still faintly visible in the light of its strange device, but her artistic success didn't seem nearly as important at that moment as it usually did.



She had decided what to do. Though she suspected the alien's night vision was better than her own, she had to try to sneak out of the canyon in the night. She couldn't just sit there, fighting sleep, picturing the alien creeping closer and closer.

She put the sketchbook in an outside pocket of the backpack and took out her canteen, taking a much-needed drink of water, though her mouth remained dry. Her stomach growled, reminding her of her missed supper, and she wondered what was happening back at the colony. Her parents wouldn't worry for an hour or two yet, she knew; she had been this late before. When they did become worried it would take them time to

organize a search party. It would be four or five hours at least before anyone could arrive.

Too long, she thought, waiting for dusk to become full night, watching the constant flickering glow that marked the alien's location.

But abruptly that light vanished. Kareen gasped, then scrambled up, listening. She heard nothing but the faint whisper of wind across the stones.

Now, she thought. Wiping cold sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, she began picking her way toward the canyon wall.

Her progress was agonizing. Every few seconds she froze, listening for the clicking of claws on the rocks or soft,

hissing breathing. But hearing nothing did not calm her fears. When she couldn't hear the alien, it could be anywhere.

When at last she reached the wall, the first part of the ascent proved no problem. The gentle slope at the cliff's base was no harder to traverse by darkness than by daylight.

But halfway up the slope steepened. Flat, slippery rocks shifted treacherously beneath her feet. As stones crashed down below her, Kareen realized all hope of slipping out of the canyon unnoticed was gone.

Heart pounding with fear and exertion, she reached the last stretch of the climb, four meters of nearly vertical

rock.

She had climbed two meters when, reaching for a new handhold, she heard rocks she had not dislodged crashing down into the canyon.

She started, and her feet slipped. For a moment she hung desperately by the fingers of one hand, scrabbling with her other hand, and then the rock gave way and she fell.

Agony stabbed her ankle as she hit the slate-strewn slope and rolled, gaining momentum, in a growing avalanche of rocks, down to the very bottom of the wall she had so torturously climbed. As she lay dazed, bruised and bleeding, the rocks gradually stopped shifting and silence returned...or near-silence. Then

the sliding of the rocks resumed. Someone—or some *thing*—was coming down the slope.

Kareen managed to roll over and sit up, but when she touched her ankle pain lanced through it, and she knew she couldn't run, or even stand. Dust ground between her teeth, and she felt for her canteen, but the backpack that contained it had vanished, torn off somewhere during her headlong plunge. Now she heard what she had only imagined before, the click of claws on rocks, as the alien approached. It paused, and light flickered up the slope as it bent over something wedged between two boulders. My backpack! she thought. What does it want with that? She

watched it paw through her belongings, sniffing the brushes and paints, paging through her sketchbook.

Then it bent down and picked up the pack and the light went out again.

By the time it reached Kareen the pounding of her heart in her ears was as loud as its footsteps on the loose rocks. Finally it loomed above her, a blacker lump in the darkness. It tossed something at her and she almost screamed, but it was only her sketchpad. Light suddenly glowed around them from the crystal rod around the alien's neck, and Kareen saw the sketchpad was open to her drawing of the alien. From its pouch the alien drew out the glassy cylinder that had so frightened her, and, kneeling beside her,

touched it with the crystal rod.

A soft glow suffused it from within, and Karen gasped.

Her own figure appeared in three dimensions inside the cylinder's walls, rendered in perfect detail and color, sitting on a rock with her art case open and a pencil in her hands.

The alien made a sound like a soft purr and set the cylinder on the ground beside the sketchpad. Then it took Kareen's canteen from the backpack and, supporting her head with its warm hand, trickled cold water between her lips.

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