

*A Short Story*

# THE MASKED PLANET



JACK WILLIAMSON

*A Short Story*

# THE MASKED PLANET

JACK WILLIAMSON



TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Artwork created by Andrew Van Wyk with  
MidJourney AI software.

"The Masked World" was originally published in Worlds of  
Tomorrow, October 1963. Additional research did not  
uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this  
publication was renewed.

This story is in Public Domain and is for the use of anyone  
anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions  
whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it  
under the terms of use provided by US copyright law.

Additional information can be found online at:

TINY WINDOWS  
[www.tinywindows.xyz](http://www.tinywindows.xyz)

*The planet hid itself from the Earthmen—and  
what lay behind the mask was fierce and deadly!*

The planet wore a mask.

At ten million miles, it was a sullen yellow eye. At one million, a scarred and evil leer. Outside the smoking circle our landing-jets had sterilized, it was a hideous veil of hairy black tentacles and huge sallow blooms, hiding the riddle of its sinister genes.

On most worlds that we astronauts have found, the life is vaguely like our own. Similar nucleotides are linked along similar helical chains of DNA, carrying similar genetic messages. A similar process replicates the chains when the cells divide, to carry the complex blue-prints for a particular root or eye or wing accurately down across ten thousand generations.

But even the genes were different here—enormously complicated. Here the simplest-seeming weed had more and longer chains of DNA than anything we had seen before. What was their message?

We had come to read it, with our new genetic micro-probe. A hundred precious tons of microscopic electronic gear, it was designed to observe and manipulate the smallest units of life. It could reach even those strange genes.

That was our mission.

Ours was the seventh survey ship to approach the planet. Six before us had been lost without trace. We were to find out why.

Our pilot was Lance Llandark. A lean hard man, silent and cold as the gray-cased micro-probe. We hated him—until someone learned why he had volunteered to come.

His wife had been pilot of the ship before us. When we knew that, we began to hear the hidden tension in his tired voice, monotonously calling on every band: "Come in, Six.... Come in Six...."

Six never came in.

For two days, we watched the planet. The shallow ditch our jets had dug. The charred stumps. The jungle beyond—the visible mask of those monstrous genes—rank, dark, utterly alien.

At the third dawn, Lance Llandark took two of us out in a 'copter. Flying a grid over the landing area, we mapped six shallow pock-marks on that scowling wilderness, where our ships must have landed.

We dropped into the newest crater, where black stumps jutted like broken teeth out of queerly bare red muck. A yellow-scummed stream oozed across it. By the stream we found a fine-boned human skeleton.

A nightmare plant stood guard beside the bones. Its thick leaves were strangely streaked, twisted with vegetable agony, half poison spine and half blighted bloom. Shapeless blobs of rotting fruit were falling from it over those slender bones.

Lance Llandark stood up.

"Her turquoise thunderbird." He showed us the bit of blackened silver and blue-veined stone. "Back on Terra.... Back when we were student pilots.... We bought it from an Indian in an old, old town called Sante Fe."

He bent again.

"Lilith?" he whispered. "Lilith, what killed you?"

We found no other bones, nothing even to tell us what force or poison kept the creeping jungle back from that solitary plant. We left at dusk. Tenderly, Lance Llandark brought the gathered bones. Carefully we carried a few leaves and dried pods from that crazy sentinel plant. We found no other clue.

Patiently, day by forty-hour day, we searched the other sites. We found jet marks and stumps and teeming weeds, but nothing like that tormented nightmare over Lilith Llandark's skeleton. We found no wreckage. Nothing to show how the planet had murdered the lost expeditions.

Day by eternal day, the unknown leered from the secret places of its genes. It was all vegetable. We saw no animal movement, heard no cry or insect hum. The silence became suffocating.

Day after desperate day, we returned to the micro-probe.

"The answer's in the genes," Lance Llandark whispered grimly. "We've no other chance."

He kept the probe running on the strangest genes of all; those from the plant nightmare that had grown beside his wife. They were like nothing else on the planet. The double-stranded chains of DNA were monstrously long; many of the nucleotide links held copper or arsenic atoms.

"Queer!" Lance kept muttering. "No copper or arsenic in other plants here. I'd like to know why."

He was running when we heard the woman scream. In that stifling quiet, her cry unnerved us all. We crowded down to the lock.

Tattered, stained with blood-colored juices, she slipped through those coiled, constricting creepers. She splashed out into the open ditch, waving a filthy rag. Halfway to the ship, she fell into the mud.

Lance Llandark led three of us to bring her in. She whimpered and looked up. Tears streaked the grime on her wasted face.

"Lance!" she gasped. "My dear."

"Lilith—" But he shrank back suddenly. "I found Lilith dead!"

"I am nearly dead." She tried weakly to get up. "You see, we're all marooned out there in the bush. Emergency landing, when we tried to get off. Wrecked our astrogation gear. Need your spare astro-pilot—"

"Back." He swung on us. "Back aboard!"

"What's wrong?" We were stunned, "She's your wife—"

"Aboard! Instantly!"

We obeyed his deadly voice.

"Help—" she whispered faintly behind us in the mud. "Survivors—need astro-pilot-to plot our way home—"

The clanging lock cut off her voice.

Angrily we turned on Lance Llandark.

"Hold it!" he snapped. "I'm not crazy—the planet is. Come along to the micro-probe. I'm probing a seed from the plant we found by Lilith's bones. It puzzled me. So much of it was—"

In spite of the tension, he had to grope for a word to express meaning.

"Arbitrary! Those shapeless leaves, twisted stalk, that sterile seed. The copper and arsenic in those needless links. Too many genes had no function. No use at all!

"I'd just got the key, when that thing screamed. The copper and arsenic atoms are not genetic instructions to the plant. They're a message to us— words replicated a trillion times, and concealed in every cell of the plant!"

"Words?" someone whispered blankly. "Words in the atoms?"

"Written in binary code." His scowl was bleakly triumphant. "That weed's a mutant, you see. The real Lilith formed the first cell with her micro-probe. She left it—I suppose in her own body—as a message that no pseudo-Lilith could intercept."

Outside that something screamed again.

"Call each copper atom a dot," he whispered. "Call each arsenic a dash. Taken in order along the chains of DNA, they do encode a message. The computer's decoding it now."

He punched a button, and the printer whirred.

TO WHOEVER COMES.... GIVE NO AID TO ANYONE.... GET OFF THIS PLANET.... ITS LIFE IS PSEUDOMORPHIC.... DON'T LET IT LEAVE.... JUST TAKE MY LOVE TO LANCE LLANDARK.... FROM LILITH, HIS WIFE.... AND GET OFF THIS PLANET, FAST....

Outside, it uttered a frantic, bubbling screech.

We did get off the planet, and we expect to stay away.

THE END

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**J**ohn Stewart Williamson (April 29, 1908 – November 10, 2006), who wrote as Jack Williamson, was an American science fiction writer, one of several called the "Dean of Science Fiction". He is also credited with one of the first uses of the term genetic engineering. Early in his career he sometimes used the pseudonyms Will Stewart and Nils O. Sonderlund.





## TINY WINDOWS

---

### **TINY WINDOWS**

A curated collection of classic and original short fiction highlighting authors from yesterday and introducing the storytellers of tomorrow.

We highlight classic stories from history, introduce contemporary authors of the present, and commission original and exclusive works in an effort to follow the muse and meet publishing and film industry desires.

Questions about licensing or adapting? Want to know more about these writers or this story? Please reach out.

---

### **FOUNDERS**

ANDREW VAN WYK

+1.424.341.4121

[andrew@tinywindows.xyz](mailto:andrew@tinywindows.xyz)

VAN DITTHAVONG

+1.323.905.2050

[van@tinywindows.xyz](mailto:van@tinywindows.xyz)