A Short Story

BEAST OF PREY

JAY WILLIAMS

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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Illustration created by MidJourney AI software using the prompt: “a man in a spacesuit walking with a large otter, a marshy forest, alien landscape, red flowers, ominous, deep shadows, two moons in the sky, comic book art.”

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The little party came through the air lock bearing a limp figure on an improvised litter.

"Who was it this time?" Fenner asked.

Gorsline pulled off the transparent hood that covered his head and face, and unzipped his suit. He dug his fingers wearily into his eyes.

"Bodkin," he said. "Same as the others." He turned back to the group. "Get him right to the infirmary. Not that it'll do much good," he added, in an undertone, to Fenner.

Fenner sighed, glancing at Bodkin on the litter. Behind the plastic protection of his mask the man's face was a dark purple; his chest rose and fell spasmodically and there was a faint line of foam on his lips.

Gorsline slipped off his suit, and put it over his arm. Then he and Fenner walked together up the ramp to the Common Room.

"I need a drink," he said. "And a smoke. It's awful not being able to smoke out there."

"You should cultivate Aristotelian moderation," Fenner said, with a grin. "It is far wiser in a Planet Biological Survey Station."

"Moderation didn't do poor Bodkin any good." Gorsline threw his suit into a corner and touched the stud on the dispenser. A lighted cigarette dropped into the trough. "Make me a drink, will you, Luke?" he asked, dropping into a reclining chair.

Hagen, the chief of the Station, came bouncing through the iris, walking as usual as if he had springs under his heels. He was a little plump man with a goatee, which he was tugging in a sort of ecstasy of exasperation.

"Hello!" he cried. "Ha, Fenner. Listen, Gorsline, I've just seen Bodkin. This is dreadful. Three in one week!"

"I agree," Gorsline said, taking the drink Fenner had made for him. "Let's pack up and go home. Shall we?"

Fenner relaxed on the middle of his spine in an easy-chair, and folded his hands together, peering over them at the chief who sat down and stood up and sat down again. You'd never know that man was a capable organizer, he said to himself. Astonishing how people can betray their own appearances—seldom what they seem. Aloud, he said, "Excuse me, Hagen. I want to ask Gorsline—did you see any animals nearby when it happened?"

Gorsline shook his head. "I remembered what you said, but I didn't notice anything at all. It was just the same as in the other two cases; well, almost the same." He drank and sat upright. "We were in Area B, you know. Bodkin was taking a series of photographs of the pollination of those red flowers by leptorrhinus. Hakim and I were digging up bulbs and collecting the larvae that live at the roots—you know the ones I mean?"

Hagen nodded. "Go on."

"Let's see, Staines and Petrucci were taking soil samples. And Bondieu was chasing what he likes to call butterflies. It was very quiet. Those tall plants were just hanging limply. I remember Hakim saying, 'If we were home, I'd say we were going to have a storm.' I said something like, 'It'd be nice to see grass again for a change, even in a storm.' About that time, Bodkin got up and walked away from his cameras. I said, 'Where are you going?' He didn't answer. He took his head in his hands, and stood still, and I knew immediately what it was. But before I could get to him he collapsed."

"Did you look for insects?" Fenner asked.

"Yes, we thought of that at once. We looked to see if any of the leptorrhinae were on him, or any other bugs. There wasn't a thing, not a mark, not a sting or a puncture. Nothing."

He stopped and drew a long breath. "Well, then I thought about animals. I asked Bondieu—he'd been running around, after all. He said he thought he saw the oil-bushes moving, but he couldn't be sure. I set Staines and Petrucci to beating the bushes, but nothing turned up. I thought, then, if we could get Bodkin right back something might be done for him."

Hagen nodded slowly. "Quite right."

As Gorsline had been talking, the others had come in and now Hagen turned to them. "What about Bodkin?" he asked.

Bondieu, the tall, thin, gloomy-looking entomologist, said, "Not much hope, I'm afraid." He tapped his head. "The doctor says he's gone, like the others. Alive, but empty."

Fenner sat up abruptly and slapped his hands together. "I'm certain I'm right," he said. "It must be some sort of animal. The fact that you didn't notice anything doesn't mean a thing; any hostile animal would be exceedingly cautious and probably carefully camouflaged as well. The one thing you noticed—that it was so quiet—seems to me to indicate that something was prowling nearby."

"That is so," said Gorsline. "You remember, Hakim, there were no bird calls, no rustlings, none of the amphibians cheeping."

Dark-faced Hakim nodded.

Fenner went on, "I've said this before, and I'll say it again. It is possible—just possible, mind you—that this mental paralysis represents an emanation of some kind from a predator, a method of paralyzing its prey before attacking. Wasn't Bodkin off more or less by himself, away from the rest of you?"

"That's right," Gorsline said.

"And the same was true of Lermontov and Parson, both of them were alone, or at any rate, a little apart from the rest."

He got to his feet. "I'll tell you one more thing I've noticed, on my own field trips, not only in areas A and B, but also in the bush. You're familiar with this, Bodkin, you were with me all four times. But I haven't told you yet, Hagen. Those large banks of red flowers always grow near marshy areas. The marshes are thick with those furry reeds, the ones that look like giant bulrushes that have opened their seed pods. I have found two things: one, numbers of bones and exoskeletons among the flowers and the reeds, and two, in one place, in the mud, a definite mark as if a heavy body had rested there. There was a scent-spoor; the tracker confirmed it."

Hagen twisted the point of his goatee between two fingers. "This is hardly proof of anything," he said. "Now, one minute. I agree, it's interesting and provocative. Was the spoor fresh? It was? Well, it gives us something to think of. We have no definite indication, however—"

"No, of course not," Fenner said impatiently. "But we can't go on this way, losing a man almost every time we send out a party. We'll be afraid to set foot outside, after a while. And how the devil can we study ecology under these circumstances? We've got to know what we're up against."

Hagen stood up, too, and suddenly his wiry little body assumed great poise and authority. "Let me think about this," he said. "We'll have a meeting tonight of the entire Station personnel, and we'll discuss the matter. But I want time to consider all the aspects of it."

He went to the iris. "I want to look at Bodkin, too," he said. "Take it easy, gentlemen."

There was a short silence after he had left. Then Gorsline, looking speculatively at Fenner, said, "Luke, if you're right—you know, it's interesting that in the month we've been here we haven't seen a single large animal, not one larger than a rabbit."

"That doesn't mean much," said Hakim. "Imagine a Station being set up in, say, Sussex. In one month—barring the animals that go with civilization—you would hardly expect to find anything larger than a fox. And nowadays you'd be hard put to it to find a fox, at that."

"Not quite apt, Hakim," Fenner said. "Because in Sussex a larger predator—Man—has cleared away all his lesser rivals. Is it possible that something has swept this region clean, and perhaps only a last few survivors are now hanging about? Perhaps they're delighted to have us visit them, eh?"

He cracked the knuckles of his long, bony fingers, and strode restlessly to the iris. "I'm going to think about it, too," he said.

Gorsline, as if with a sort of clairvoyance, said, "Don't go jumping into things, Luke."

"No, no, of course not."

Fenner went out into the corridor. There was a faint odor of pine that blew from the air conditioner, and contrasted oddly with the almost hospital bareness of the hall. He walked down to his own room, musing, and glanced through the large window at the Orphic landscape.

As the Station's head ecologist, it was his duty to evaluate a great many aspects of the survey which might not be apparent even to the chief. For instance, assuming there were such a predator in the neighborhood, what might be the probable results of trying to exterminate it? Or what was its relationship to a region in which there were so many winged creatures —"birds," they called them for the sake of simplicity, although they were actually flying marsupials and some very large insects—and so few ground animals that might serve as its prey? Was it itself winged, or, he asked himself, did its mind-paralyzing ability serve to pluck birds out of the trees?

He stiffened. Even while his mind had been busy with the subject, he had been automatically scanning the view with the involuntary precision of his profession. From the Station, the cleared ground sloped away to a cluster of tall tree-ferns whose upper branches, long and drooping like greatly oversized date-palm fronds, brushed the mossy earth. And among those branches Fenner had seen something long and glossy move swiftly.

All his attention focused at once on that spot. In the same instant, he whipped out the tiny binoculars he always carried in a side pocket, and put them to his eyes.

There was no doubt of it, something was crouching in the shadow of the fronds. He had difficulty making it out, for it was a pale blue-green, but he had an impression of a heavy head and shoulders, and what appeared to be, incongruously, a bunch of feathers.

Feather crest?" he thought to himself, with a grin. "Indians?"

The creature moved again. It slid sinuously out of the shadows and crouched on the moss. Its color then changed to a darker green dappled with brown. Fenner saw through the glass that the bunch of feathers was a pair of antennae, similar to those of the larger moths, that sprang from the top of its narrow head. It had short legs and a slender body covered with short, fine fur. The general effect was that of a smallish mountain lion.

As he watched, the creature turned on its own length somewhat as a snake might turn, and glided out of sight over the edge of a ridge.

Fenner did not hesitate. Without a second thought, he snatched up his plastic suit and zipped it on. The air of Orpheus was breathable, but the

suits had been designed to prevent contact with possibly poisonous spores, pollen, plants, or insects. He took down a Remington which was capable of delivering a bolt sufficient to stun a bear at thirty yards; his intention was to capture the beast for study, not to kill it. He also clipped to his belt a Mark III collecting net, a light, strong, fine-mesh net in a capsule the size of an old-fashioned hand grenade. Then he let himself out the side lock and ran quickly across the moss towards the spot where the beast had vanished.

The moss was crushed and flattened where the thing had lain, and he touched the selector of his wrist tracker and held it over the spot. The scent-cell glowed, and the tiny needle swung over to point. Fenner followed it over the ridge and down the hill on the other side.

The forest began at the foot of the hill, and beyond, looming above the foliage, were the peaks of distant mountains, hazy in the faintly greenish air. Somewhere beyond those peaks the Archeological Survey was at work, and there was something comforting and neighborly in the thought.

The light was always crepuscular here, and because of the color of Orpheus' sun, the sky had a green tint as of a summer pool. This green, against which the dark brown moss and lighter colors of the trees shimmered like waterweed, was extremely restful and yet alien so that in four weeks Fenner had not been able to accustom himself to it. He felt always as if he were walking in a dream, as if his limbs were weighted and languid, although in fact the purity of the air made him feel more vigorous than ever before in his forty-five years.

He entered the forest which here was composed chiefly of a gray-stemmed tree, very slender and rigid with a crown of glossy red-brown leaves. The tall boles rose straight out of the moss, and there was little underbrush so that it was almost like a planted park. The needle of the tracker led him on a winding course but he was not afraid of becoming lost for if by some mischance his homing compass, which was always set for the Station, should fail, he had only to follow his own footsteps back with the tracker.

The trail led for half a mile or so through the gray trees. Now and then one of the long-tailed "birds" flashed like a shining jewel across some cleared space, the yellow-green sunlight glistening on its fur. Once

in a while, a giant jointed thing, like a centipede, fluttered lazily past on wide, scaly wings. From the tree-tops came whistles and hoarse calls. He came at last to the bank of a rushing stream and the needle halted. The beast had taken to the water.

Fenner decided to cast up and down the bank for a little way, in case it had come out on the same side again. He had walked only a short distance, when suddenly he had the distinct feeling that he was under observation. He glanced down at the tracker. The needle had swung over to the right.

He turned slowly in that direction, at the same time cautiously raising his gun. In the corner of his eye, movement flickered. He braced himself and tapped the firing button. A halo of white light surrounded the muzzle, and there was the dull "crump!" of the discharge. He saw a flurry in the leaves of the oil-bushes that grew here and there among the trees. Leaves and bits of branches flew. A mottled gray and brown shape darted like a streak away between the trees.

Fenner ran after it. He began to pant for breath, and sweat dripped into his eyes. The trail led upstream, now, and soon the stream grew more sluggish and broadened, and the gray trees thinned away. There were dank, twisted plants here, some of them eight or ten feet high, and wide stretches of reeds between which gleamed brown water and patches of oily mud. A chorus of chirps sounded from the marsh, dying away at his approach and starting again when he moved on.

Without warning, the needle of the tracker spun round, and Fenner stopped. At the same instant, a lithe form shot out of the reeds towards him. He dodged, throwing himself to the ground. The beast bounded past him, and turned. Fenner rolled over and sat up, groping in the moss for his gun. For a moment they regarded each other, Fenner trying to bring his gun into position. The creature, he saw, had a wedge-shaped face, narrower at the top where the feathery antennae were, wide at the jaw which now gaped showing a double row of small but sharp teeth. Its eyes were round and large, and bulged as a frog's do; they were completely dark purple showing no trace of white. They swiveled forward to stare at him, and as he braced his weapon the beast made a coughing sound and sprang into the reeds.

All was quiet again. Fenner got up slowly, holding his gun ready, and glanced at his tracker. There was a crack across the face of it, and the needle was motionless. It had struck against a stone, when he fell.

He tried to see into the reeds, but he knew it was hopeless. By now, the animal must have changed its color and pattern, and without the tracker to guide him he could distinguish nothing. He commenced to walk upstream, in the hope of somehow flanking it. He unclipped his net capsule and held it ready.

It seemed to him that there was a slight movement in the marsh. He stopped. There was no sound about him; the chirpings in the water had ceased, and there was a quality of hush in the air, of almost ominous tenseness as though the marsh itself were waiting for him.

He began to feel a little frightened. He looked from side to side. Where was the thing? He had not realized how much he depended on the wrist tracker. He found that he was trembling, and the perspiration stung his eyes so that he had to keep blinking. Cautiously, he slipped one of his gloved hands under the edge of the hood and wiped his eyes.

Something rustled slightly in the oil-bushes. These were thick clumps of low shrubs, their branches a naked and repellent pink, covered with spiny leaves on which a thick, pungent oil gathered during each day. It apparently served to attract small insects which the leaves closed over in much the same way as the Venus fly-catcher, of Earth. Fenner went towards the bushes, moving very slowly, his gun tight against his hip, his net-capsule in his left hand.

There was nothing in the bushes, and yet he thought the moss beneath them looked flattened, as if something had lain there watchfully. Were there two of the beasts? Was one still in the marsh, among the reeds, while its mate stalked him here? His spine crept, and he glanced over his shoulder.

He went softly on. Beyond the bushes, the ground rose again in a high bank that overlooked the marsh, and all along this bank grew the lustrous red flowers. They were larger than poppies, emphatically vermilion so that they stood out among the dark greens and browns. They had hairy stalks as thick as a man's wrist, and all about them buzzed the snouted little beetles the survey team had named leptorrhinus.

Fenner stood before the flowers thoughtfully. Their leaves were broad, and close to the ground, but underneath one of them he could see a small

cage of white: the clean rib bones of some animal. He went closer, bending to peer. Brittle bones, some with rags of skin clinging to them, were scattered here and there on the ground. There were also the empty wing-cases of some very large flying insects, as big as crows, spotted yellow and black.

If he was right, this was the lair of the beast itself. And just beyond these flowers, or even among them, itself vermilion now, the thing might be lying.

He straightened cautiously, holding himself ready for a sudden attack. And as he came erect, he was conscious of a curious light-headedness.

It was like inhaling too much oxygen. His ears rang and he felt giddy. He took a step, and it was as if the ground heaved under his feet like a living thing. A group of flowers before his eyes appeared to increase in size, and to sway towards him.

He shook his head to dispel the illusion. He staggered a few steps away, and it seemed to him that the flowers reached after him on stalks that became incredibly elongated, like red worms, bristling all their length with coarse hairs.

At that precise instant, the beast charged.

Fenner saw it in midair, and in his dizziness it seemed to move very slowly, so slowly that his automatic movement with the net-capsule was, by comparison, leisurely. He squeezed the capsule; the net shot out and opened in the air. It missed the beast by an inch or so and fell among the flowers. The beast struck Fenner full in the chest and bowled him over. Its antennae bent towards his face, all his weight rested on him. Its jaws were open. He closed his eyes.

Gorsline and Hakim, using their wrist-trackers, found them less than half an hour later. Hakim, a little in the rear, threw up his gun but Fenner snapped, "Don't shoot!"

"Are you all right?" Gorsline said incredulously.

Fenner was sitting up with one arm around the neck of the beast which, at Hakim's movement, had recoiled.

"I'm fine," he said. "Speak softly."

"What ... what is that thing?" Hakim asked.

Fenner looked at the animal. It was now brown, with a bluish tinge from the surface of his plastic suit. He patted its head, and the thing put out a slender tongue and licked his mask.

"I can tell you what it isn't," he grinned. "It isn't very dangerous. Judging by its teeth and general appearance, I suspect it hunts amphibians in the swamp, or perhaps goes after water-creatures like an otter."

"So it does live in the swamp," said Gorsline.

"Yes."

"Why haven't we seen it before?"

"It's timid," Fenner replied. "There were always so many of us, and we made so much noise. Alone, as I was, it was less frightened of me, although I must have scared it by firing at it. I thought it was stalking me. As a matter of fact," he added, "it was stalking me. But not for the purpose I imagined."

"What do you mean?" Hakim said.

"Why, appearances are deceiving. If a man who had never seen a dog before were to see one jump up on its master, he might think the creature was attacking the man. Putting two and two together, I was sure this animal lived among the red flowers and was stalking me for its dinner. But it was stalking me, and it rushed at me, only because it wanted to protect me."

"Protect you? From what?"

"Well, I was right, you see. There is a beast of prey here which uses a form of mind-paralysis in order to stun its victims." He motioned over his shoulder. "Those are the real predators, those red flowers."

He looked at the lovely bank of vermilion, and shuddered. "I should judge that their use of the mind-paralysis is automatic, but we are too big and too many for them to actually attack us. That is why, although poor Bodkin and the others succumbed, the flowers never tried to go for them. If you'll look over there, you'll see the remains of my Mark III net. It fell amongst them and they devoured most of it before they realized that it wasn't alive."

He stood up. The beast nuzzled his calf and he stroked its neck, behind the feathery stalks.

"I can't tell you how it's done," he went on, "because it only just happened to me. We'll have to study it. But apparently this creature has the ability, by means of these antennae of his, to counter, or nullify the mind-destroying waves of the flowers."

"Great heavens!" Gorsline exclaimed. "Then it must have been lurking—one like it, at any rate—each time we came near the flowers."

"Yes. It would have saved Bodkin," Fenner said, "but it was afraid of the rest of you. You were so many, so noisy—"

"But why should it try to save us?" Hakim said. "If it is an animal, I mean."

Fenner shrugged. "Why did the first dog become domesticated, and how did it happen? Perhaps," he said softly, "there were once other beings here who were its masters. One thing is clear to me: this creature is very intelligent. And like all intelligent creatures it has a profound need—"

"For food, you mean? Or shelter?"

"Oh, of course, for food, shelter, propagation, and so on. No," said Fenner, smiling, "it is a deeper need than that."

"What?"

"Affection," said Fenner, and he set off walking, with the beast at his heels.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Williams (May 31, 1914 – July 12, 1978) was an American author of science fiction (often for children), fantasy, historical fiction, non-fiction, and radical theatre.

In all, Williams authored at least 79 books including 11 picture books, 39 children's novels, 7 adult mysteries, 4 nonfiction books, 8 historical novels and a play. He is probably best known for his young adult "Danny Dunn" science fiction/fantasy series which he co-authored with Raymond Abrashkin. Though Abrashkin died in 1960, Williams insisted Abrashkin should continue to receive credit as co-author of all 15 books of this series, which continued from 1956 until 1977. Williams was reported to personally reply to over 1,000 fan letters from his juvenile readers each year.

He was also interested in the future in his many speculative science fiction tales, often published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction; eight of these stories were published under the title Unearthly Beasts. His novel *Uniad* sees a world in which individuality has shrunk.

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FOUNDERS

ANDREW VAN WYK
+1.424.341.4121
andrew@tinywindows.xyz

VAN DITTHAVONG
+1.323.905.2050
van@tinywindows.xyz