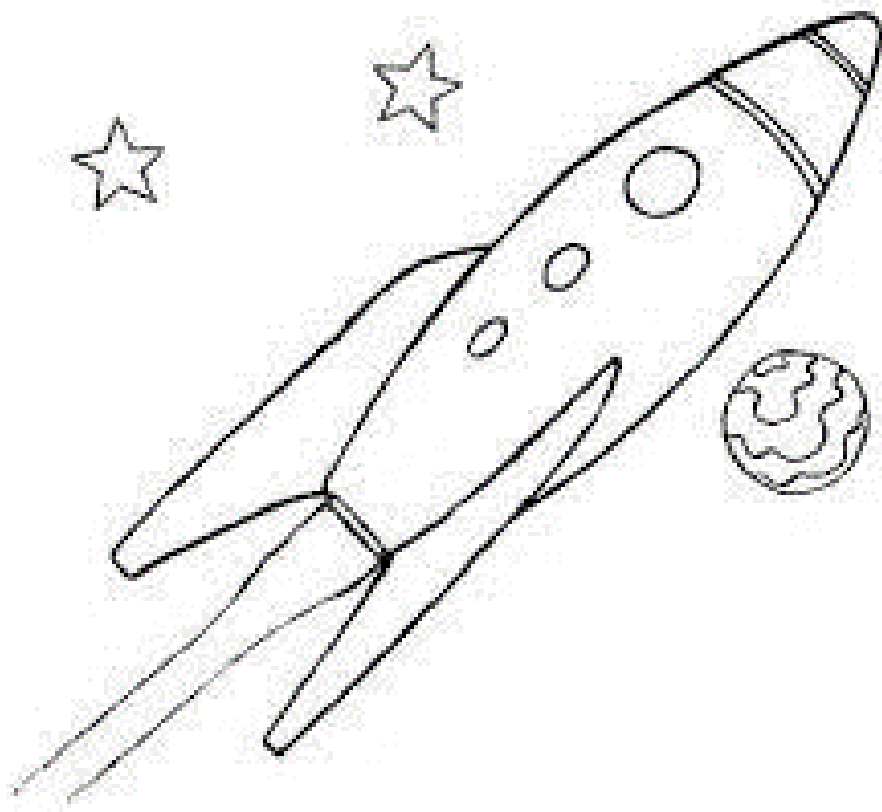


The Tharsis Plateau

Season One

A Flash Series by W. Steve Wilson



“I opened my eyes upon a very strange land. I immediately knew then I was on Mars. Not once did I question this fact. My mind told me I was on Mars as your mind tells you that you are upon Earth. You do not question the fact, nor did I.”

A Princess of Mars
Edgar Rice Burroughs
1912

Dedication

To the Management and Staff of Writer’s Digest in appreciation of a fun challenge and to my fellow challenge participants for their time and attention in reading my daily contributions and for their encouraging comments.

Except where referenced, *The Tharsis Plateau* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

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The Challenge

Writer’s Digest sponsored a Flash Fiction Challenge in February 2022. Each day, [Moriah Richard](#), Managing Editor, posted a new writing prompt and invited the Challenge participants to write a flash fiction piece based on that prompt. I thought, why not write one story for the entire month? But each day’s prompt determined where the next episode goes. And I limited each episode to 100 words.

28 one-hundred-word science fiction stories, all connected. I hope you enjoy the results.

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The Tharsis Plateau

Episode 1: Access Rights

Tracking n'Kebron to the far side of the Helix Nebula had cost Jackson a year's prospecting profits. But as always, his sources had been reliable. The trader from Tau Ceti f would part with the artifact—for a price.

Acquiring the device was one thing. Using it was an entirely different proposition. Jackson had run every diagnostic he had. He'd powered up the palm-sized sliver—maybe. At least it was warm to the touch.

The key to the operation was figuring out how the alien object gained him access to the crashed ship found under ten-thousand years of Martian dust.

Episode 2: Family Ties

Under UV light, Jackson detected a faint but distinctive circle on the face of the alien sliver. He wondered: Was it an activator? A control port?

Physical pressure, EM energy, heat—everything he tried had no effect. Maybe a signal from the ship would trigger it?

That meant returning to Mars, back to where his father and grandfather before him showed him the ropes of the alien prospecting trade. He'd taken those skills to the outer planets.

Jackson reminded himself he'd sworn never to return after the government killed his father. But now his biggest score was drawing him back.

Episode 3: Sibling Rivalry

Hiding his ship near a small asteroid, Jackson sent his sister a coded signal. Jenny had remained on Mars after their father's death, and Jackson wasn't sure how she'd respond.

“So, you're back—finally. What do you want?” came Jenny's terse response over subspace.

“I’ve found a way into the ship, but I need your help.”

“That ship got Dad killed. Access to the ship? Where does this lead?”

“Fortune and glory—and revenge for Dad’s murder.”

“As I thought—nowhere good.”

“Just meet me at the old coordinates. Please, Jenny.”

“Fine. Two days. Don’t be late or I’m gone.”

Episode 4: Sins of the Father

Jackson arrived at the rendezvous, noting Jenny was still flying their grandfather’s planetary shuttle.

“I’m here. So, what do you want from that damn ship?” asked Jenny.

“Dad’s dream.”

“Dad’s obsession, you mean. It killed Mom and it killed him. I had to retrieve his tortured body—alone.”

“I couldn’t help that. Dad would want us to work together.”

“A BS-er, just like him. You need me because I work on the excavation.”

“Jenny, it’s his dream. I can’t do this without you.”

“Screw the dream. I’ll help you. To keep you safe. You’re the only family I have left.”

Episode 5: No Clue

Jackson activated the docking collar hatch and Jenny cycled through.

Five years older than Jackson, Jenny’s face was lined and leathery, her blonde hair lusterless and lank.

“You look good, Sis.”

“Yeah, right. I’m tired and haggard. Mars extorts its price. Let’s just get to it.”

“Fine. What have you learned about the ship?”

“Little. The smooth, matte-black hull material shows no seams or ports. We’ve found some equipment, maybe parts to environment suits. But no bodies.”

“Maybe they’re inside. We’ll find them when we gain access.”

“Possibly. That’s the mystery. Who were they? Where did they go? Why Mars?”

Episode 6: Home Sweet Home

Jackson moored the *Star Strider* on a nondescript asteroid—powered down, beacons off.

Jenny’s ship got them to Mars. His expensive fake ID got him past security at Arsia Mons.

“Nice place.”

“Standard quarters, but it’s home.”

“Jenny, I can’t tell you how good it is to see you. It’s been too long.”

“You could have come back anytime.”

“I know, but I’m here now. It’ll be like old times.”

“Stop. I said I’d help you. You’re my little brother. I told Mom I’d take care of you.”

“Jenny. I mean it. I’m glad to see you.”

“Please. Just don’t.”

Episode 7: Security Checkpoint

Jenny docked her rover at the Arsia Mons excavation and, using her staff ID, accessed the airlock where she knew the guard.

“Dr. Fowler, who’s this?” came the guard’s challenge.

“My brother. Thought I’d show him the ship, Reynolds.”

Sergeant Reynolds clicked his comms. “Director, Dr. Fowler is here with a guest.”

“I’ll be right there.”

The Director arrived in a huff.

“Jenny, you know I need to clear guests.”

“Don, he’s only here for a few hours. Please, just a quick look.”

“OK fine. Just keep him away from the artifacts, and if he gets hurt—it’s on you.”

Episode 8: Pit Stop

Jenny and Jackson cycled through the airlock and entered the lift.

“It barely fits. We think they landed it vertically and then leveled it out.”

The lift stopped 180 meters below the surface.

The matte-black ship was smooth and ovoid behind the pointed bow, the only features were two scythe-shaped nacelles.

“Do you feel it?” asked Jenny.

“It’s creepy. My guts are churning,” said Jackson.

“We think it’s the drives. It’s more intense near the nacelles.”

“It feels like my body’s dissolving. This is too weird. How can you work near it?”

“Exactly. The staff named it The Grim Reaper.”

Episode 9: Family Secrets

Jackson pulled the sliver from his suit’s pouch; the circle glowed yellow.

Jenny put a hand on his arm.

“I have something for you.” Jenny pulled out an old data-pad. “Dad gave it to me before they arrested him.”

Jackson scanned the display. “Dad’s notes. I didn’t know you had this.”

“Nobody does. It’s why they tortured him.”

Jackson squeezed her hand in thanks.

A sliver shaped marking glowed yellow as Jackson approached the ship. He touched the sliver to the marking—it blended into the hull’s surface. The circle turned blue.

Jackson hesitated a moment and touched the circle.

Episode 10: 'Till Death Do Us Part

At Jackson's touch, the lit circle faded to black, and an oblong opening dissolved in the ship's surface.

Dim lighting clicked on inside; the ship extruded a short ramp.

Jackson and Jenny exchanged a wary look and ascended the ramp.

Jackson dashed towards the bow, hoping to find the bridge.

"Whoa. There are bodies here." Two tall, thin, desiccated humanoids sat in side-by-side couches; hands clasped in a gentle grip.

Jenny joined him. "These two must be the last survivors. Awaiting death together."

"My sister, the scientist. Never figured you for a hopeless romantic."

"Not hopeless. I always have hope."

Episode 11: Keep a Lookout

Jackson stepped onto the bridge. The lights brightened. A slight vibration came through the deck.

"Oh my god, Jackson. We've got to go. Now."

"Just wait. Go keep watch."

Jenny didn't move.

"Please. I'll be quick. I want to check the passageway."

Jenny dashed out. Jackson headed aft. On his way, he grabbed the sliver, now inside the hull.

The opening snapped closed. The front of the bridge turned transparent.

A security contingent was heading towards the ship.

The vibration increased. The ship rose off the pit floor, pitched up, and sped into the Martian sky.

Leaving Jenny behind—again.

Episode 12: From a Certain Point of View

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Arthur C. Clarke, Profiles of the Future, 1962

Jenny stood glaring at the empty sky, arms stiff at her sides, fists clenched. “Dammit Jackson, you just left me here?”

The security force confronted Jenny.

“What did your brother do? How did he take the ship?” asked the captain.

“How the hell should I know. I’m not on the ship.”

“We know you’re working together. Tell us what you know, Miss Fowler.”

“It’s Doctor Fowler and why should I tell you anything.”

“You need to cooperate. Don’t make the same mistake your father did.”

“You bastard.”

“How did he launch the ship?”

“For all I know it was magic.”

Episode 13: Mental Anguish

“Jenny. No,” yelled Jackson, as the ship rocketed into space.

Jackson slumped into a jump-seat behind the bridge.

Covering his face with his hands, tears welled up, anguish consumed his thoughts.

Abruptly, pain invaded his mind. Sharp serrated spikes pierced his skull. Pressure in his brain built, and he felt his head fill with viscous goo. His vision narrowed to pinpoints, his cries of agony muffled, as his hearing failed.

Through the pain and torment, tendrils invaded his thoughts, his memories probed.

The serrated spikes being ripped out was the last thing he was aware of before consciousness left him.

Episode 14: Monkey Business

The fog cleared, the pounding in his head subsided, and Jackson opened his eyes.

“Whoa. What the hell?”

“We’re sorry to have startled you,” said the small, rust-colored creature.

“What the hell happened? What are you?”

“We’re the ship’s avatar. We tried communicating directly, but it was causing you pain.

“Causing me pain? Are you kidding me? I thought I was going to die.”

“We didn’t realize how different you were. We fabricated this surrogate, from your memories.”

“Yes. Jenny’s marmoset.”

“Through us, you can access the ship’s systems.”

“Then turn the ship around. We’re going back to rescue Jenny.”

Episode 15: Enjoy Your Work

Jenny flexed her wrists, easing the pain of the restraints. “I told you, I don’t know what Jackson did or where he’s going.”

The inquisitor pulled a dull black metal band from his bag. He leaned close, placing it around Jenny’s head. His breath reeked from the fungi bar he’d eaten. Crater-like pores marked his veined, swollen nose.

“Let’s try this little beauty. It won’t damage you—much.”

Jenny recoiled. “Why do you keep doing this? I told you what I know.”

“Let’s just call it a hobby of mine.”

He turned the probe on and smiled when she screamed.

Episode 16: Hide and Seek

Pain from the probe persisted, but Jenny's thoughts had cleared. She could think today.

Guards hustled her to an interrogation room.

"Where's your buddy with the hobby?" she asked.

The security captain smiled. "We found the artifacts."

"Goody for you."

"What did you expect to do with them? Make a big score with your lowlife brother?"

"No. I needed to keep them away from you, the ones who will turn them into weapons."

"Well, it seems you've done our work for us, hoarding the dangerous pieces. Thanks for the help."

Tired, sore, and beaten, Jenny now shared her father's despair.

Episode 17: You Can't Go Home Again

Jackson hammered his fists on the console. "Turn the ship around—now."

"I'm sorry, I can't override the return command," said the furry avatar. "We're going home."

"Home. Where the hell is home? My home is Mars."

"We both know that's not true. We're heading to where the Designers made us."

"Why can't you take me back to Mars?"

"They've been waiting for our team for ten thousand of your years. When you used the emergency key, you triggered the return protocol. It's automatic."

"But how can I save my sister?"

"I don't know. But we'll find the answer—together."

Episode 18: Desperate Times

Unable to pilot the ship, Jackson paced and fretted. Every day that passed was time Jenny didn't have.

"Jenny's going to die, while I sit here helpless," said Jackson, to no one in particular.

"Don't despair, Jackson. The Designers will help us." The avatar had taken to sitting on Jackson's shoulder and reached out with a gentle touch.

"We're wasting time. How much longer 'till we're there?"

"We're almost home. This ship is moving through a parallel universe where gravity, time, and light obey different rules. Everything will be fine."

Jackson sat, head in hands—again. "I don't see how."

Episode 19: The Ghost in the Machine

The ship glided to a gentle landing.

Jackson exited down the extruded ramp.

Hulks of ships and vehicles dotted the hangar's expanse. Dust and debris filled the corners.

"We're too late. They've gone," said the avatar.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"To a new home. Escaped from the scorching sun."

Jackson looked back through the hangar opening to a burned and desolate landscape, studded with the empty husk of a civilization.

A hot wind moaned through the chamber.

From an alcove, two tall, slender humanoids entered the hangar.

"Welcome. Welcome home," they said in unison.

"They're not real, Jackson," whispered the avatar.

Episode 20: Missing Persons

Jackson waited as the two humanoids approached. He stayed wary, unsure of how they'd react.

"We've been waiting for you," said the humanoids. "We feared the team we sent to Earth had been lost."

The avatar moved its diminutive face close to Jackson's ear. "They are the same as I am. Constructed so you can converse with the Designers' AI."

"We aren't your team," said Jackson. "Their ship was abandoned on Mars."

"That is unfortunate," said the humanoids. "But other teams found suitable planets. The Designers have left."

Jackson stepped forward, hands pleading. "I understand. But I need your help."

Episode 21: Alone with Her Thoughts

Jenny lay in her cell, wishing Jackson were there. She was sure he hadn't abandoned her.

When he'd left, she'd stayed to save their father. All she could do was bury his tortured body.

Dying alone and abandoned on Luna, her mother had sent a message of despair and regret. Jenny feared it was a fate she would share.

Jenny wondered why she'd not left and searched for Jackson. And now, she'd die alone in this cell in some unknown place on Mars.

But until then, she'd cling to hope. She'd choose to believe that Jackson would come for her.

Episode 22: Behind Door Number One

Jenny sat up when the cell door opened to admit the security captain. With his hair unkempt and sporting a stubble, a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead, he looked haggard.

"Rough night, Captain?"

"Let's just say you're not making this easy for me or for yourself."

“And I care why?”

“Right now, the door is open for you to help us and your brother. If you have him bring the ship back, you’ll both be set free.”

“Like I believe you. I’ll take my chances with Jackson.”

“That’s what we’re counting on. Take the offer.”

“Go to hell.”

Episode 23: Hurry Up. We Gotta Go!

The tall humanoids stood silent.

Jackson stepped closer. “Please, help me.”

The avatar put a soft hand on Jackson’s cheek. “Patience. They’re reprogramming the ship.”

The humanoids stirred. “We’ve programmed a route back to Mars and then to the Designer’s new home. You can leave when the ship has refueled, and we’ve removed the two Designers. It’s our thanks to you for bringing them home.”

“I don’t have time for that. We need to leave now.”

The avatar leaned in. “We’ll be on our way in less than ten of your minutes.”

Jackson’s head drooped. “Thank god. I’m coming Jenny.”

Episode 24: Help is on the Way, v1.0

Jackson races to Mars.

Episode 24: Help is on the Way, v2.0 (25x v1.0)

Jackson settled into the pilot’s couch and engaged the new human ship-mind link. The connection was a soothing wave.

“I can go now,” said the avatar.

Jackson glanced at his furry friend. “No. Stay. I’d rather talk.”

The avatar gave a slight nod.

Jackson jumped the ship to the parallel universe and engaged the flight controls.

Jackson put the ship on autopilot and disengaged the link. “How will we find Jenny?”

“She’s been around the ship. Close to the planet, we can detect the residue of the parallel universe.”

“Low orbit it is.”

Ten-thousand light-years, three anxiety-laden days to Mars.

Episode 25: Never Leave Me

Jackson maneuvered into orbit. “Won’t they detect us?”

“It’s a research ship—cloaked, plus an inter-dimensional portal to operate unobserved.”

Jackson accessed the sensors. “Found Jenny.”

“The sliver triggers the portal. Get Jenny, hold her tight, press the circle.”

Jackson activated the sliver.

Jenny woke. “You came back. How...”

The cell door slammed open. The captain, pistol drawn, shot Jackson in the gut. Jackson collapsed. “Give me the ship, and I’ll call a medic.”

“You bastard.” Jenny ran to Jackson, pressing her hand against his bloody wound. “Oh, Jackson. Don’t leave me.”

“I promise. Never again.” Jackson pressed the circle.

Episode 26: What Happens Next? Plot Points.

First: Jenny and Jackson return to the alien ship.

Second: Jenny is startled by the avatar and is wary.

Third: The avatar explains the situation and learns from Jenny his name is Joey.

Fourth: Jackson is dying, and Jenny asks about the Med Pod.

Fifth: The avatar explains the pod cannot treat humans—yet.

Sixth: Jackson rallies and tells Jenny to get the Star Strider.

Seventh: They locate the Star Strider and Jenny uses the sliver to board Jackson’s ship.

Eighth: Jenny powers up the ship and un-moors from the asteroid.

Ninth: A security corvette is waiting and pursues Jenny.

Episode 27: Close Call

Jenny drove the Star Strider hard.

The corvette's plasma bolt grazed the Star Strider, throwing the ship into a spin. Momentum carried it forward.

The ventral shields dropped. A hatch dissolved in the hull; the Star Strider was tractored into the shuttle bay. The ship jumped to the parallel universe.

Jenny shut down the engines and ran out of the opening hatch, colliding with a tall alien avatar.

"I had an idea you might need help moving Jackson."

"Joey?"

Nodding, Joey lifted Jackson and carried him to the Med Bed.

Jenny activated the controls. "It's up to the nanobots now."

Episode 28: Back Together

Jackson climbed out of the Med Bed, wincing at a mild tightness where the nanobots had stitched him together.

He exited the Star Strider, finding Jenny and the avatar lounging in the forward spaces.

Jenny rushed to hug him. "Thank god you're OK. Your wound was horrible."

Jackson hugged her back. "I'm just glad you retrieved my ship."

Jenny stepped back. "I couldn't have done it without Joey."

"You named the monkey after Dad?"

Jenny shrugged, flashing a quizzical smile.

"What now?" asked Jackson.

"To the Designers' world. There's more in Dad's journal than this ship."

"Let's go then—together."

The End of Season 1

Stay Tuned for Season 2 coming in February 2023

