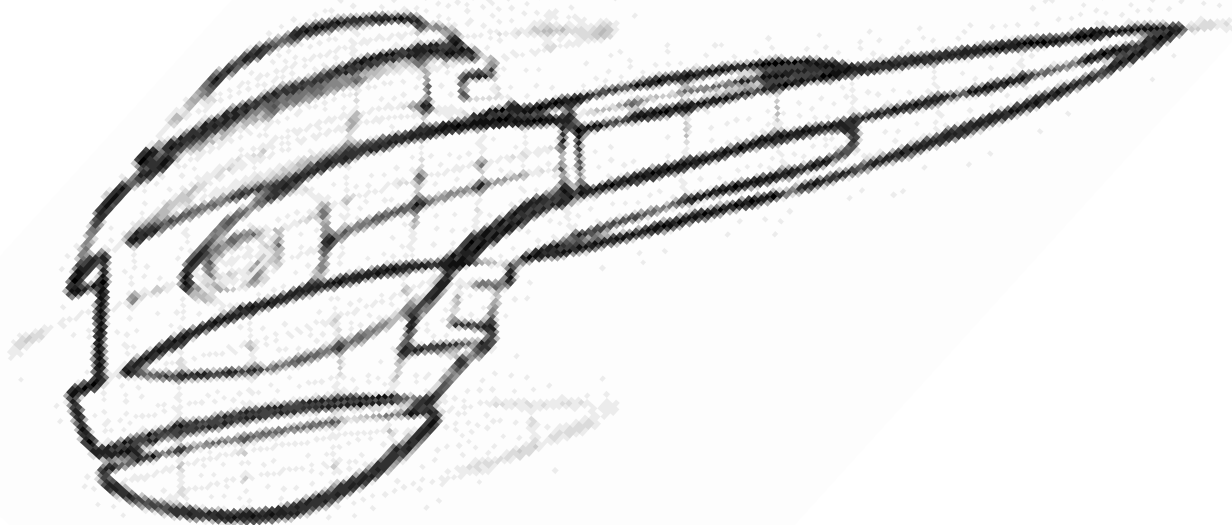


The Tharsis Plateau

Season Two

A Flash Series by W. Steve Wilson



Volume I of the 2023 SF Adventures Souvenir Booklet Series

“The scene that met my eyes was so un-Martian that my heart sprang to my throat as the sudden fear swept through me that I had been aimlessly tossed upon some strange planet by cruel fate.

Why not? What guide had I through the trackless waste of interplanetary space? What assurance that I might not as well be hurtled to some far-distant star of another solar system, as to Mars?”

The Gods of Mars
Edgar Rice Burroughs
1913

Dedication

To the Management and Staff of Writer’s Digest in appreciation of another fun challenge in 2023 and to my fellow challenge participants for their time and attention in reading my daily contributions and for their encouraging comments.

Season 1 is available at <https://wstevewilson.com/short-fiction/the-tharsis-plateau/>

Except where referenced, *The Tharsis Plateau, Season 2* 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 2023. 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: Sweet Home Alta Campa

*“New home Alta Campa
The reddish sky’s huge and vast
New home Alta Campa
Joey’s flying’ home at last.”*

Jenny woke groggy. She’d been sleeping a lot, recovering from their ordeal fleeing Mars. She blinked the sleep out of her eyes.

“Jackson, what the hell is that noise?”

Jackson stuck his head out the hatch of the *Star Strider*, parked in the hangar bay. “I know you like ancient rock, so I’m teaching Joey to sing.”

“You? You can’t sing. And you’re butchering Lynyrd Skynyrd. Those aren’t even the right words.”

Jackson turned the music up, smiling at his sister, putting her hands over her ears. “I know. It’s about Joey’s planet, means Second Earth. That’s where we’re going.”

Episode 2: Spa Day

Jenny had directed the commandeered Designer ship to create a spa; it was just what she needed: warm bath, soft lighting, soothing sounds. A lazy day before arriving at Alta Campa.

Jackson had continued teaching Joey, the small faux-marmoset ship’s avatar. Seemed Joey could actually sing. Jenny had enjoyed his renditions of her favorites.

But now, time to lie back and relax ...

BOOM! The ship shuddered; the lights flickered. Jenny was thrown from the couch and tossed across the lounge. The *Star Strider* slid sideways, slamming into the bulkhead.

The ship suddenly stopped, the thrum of the engines straining.

Episode 3: Intruder Alert

The ship shook, caught in a tight grip, surging side to side.

The crackle of shorting electric leads, the ozone smell of fried air filled the lounge. An acrid haze swirled.

When she moved, Jenny screamed from the pain of the electric burns on her legs. A cloying film of her burned flesh coated her mouth as she gasped for air; the salty, metallic taste of blood seeped through where she'd bitten her tongue.

Jenny depolarized a viewing panel. A massive, indistinct, mirrored vessel hung in the black of space; a flickering energy field enveloped the ship.

They were trapped.

Episode 4: To the Rescue

The shaking stopped; the straining engines quieted.

Through the smoky haze, a bright, blazing white figure moved through the lounge.

It spoke. "Jenny, I'm here to repair the ship and talk to your captors. Your thoughts revealed you wished for your Guardian Angel. I am he."

"Thank God," said Jenny. "But the glowing robes and feathered wings are a bit much."

The Designer avatar reconfigured to a sleek, black uniform. "I've contacted the denizens of this dimension and explained we're retrieving an ancient vessel that lacks shielding we agreed to place on our ships. They will permit passage—this once."

Episode 5: Where To?

The parallel dimension ship released its hold, fading away in shimmery light.

The avatar completed the repairs, explaining how the Designers had never met their captors directly. Their universes' constants were too different. But they'd learned their ships damaged the other dimension. They'd come to an agreement to install mitigating shields millennia ago.

“Where do we go from here?” asked Jackson. “We’ve got nothing to go back to on Mars.”

The repair avatar dissolved into the ship.

“We’ll get home,” said Joey. “Then the future is up to you.”

Jenny and Jackson exchanged a glance; neither knew what came next.

Episode 6: Good Advice

“We should look at Dad’s journal,” said Jenny.

Jackson retrieved the old data-pad from the *Star Strider*. “I’m not sure what we’ll find. No human has been in this part of the galaxy.”

Jenny accessed the device. “You never know. Dad collected a lot of weird stories.”

Jenny scrolled through files, none of interest. “Wait, here’s one. A file labeled ‘For My Children.’”

“There are two thumbprint icons,” said Jackson. He flashed his sister a quizzical look and shrugged.

They placed their thumbs on the screen.

The file dissolved into a message: “Love each other. Family is all that matters”.

Episode 7: Your Side of the Story

Jenny tossed the data-pad at Jackson. “Well, that’s a load of crap.”

Jackson snatched the pad before it hit the deck. “No, it’s not. Dad was all about family.”

Jenny stared at Jackson, eyes wide. “Are you effing kidding me? Dad looked out after Dad. Mom and I had to fend for ourselves.”

“You’re wrong, Jenny. Dad left to earn credits so you could stay home.”

“Really, Jackson? While you guys were off ‘prospecting,’ Mom fended off the authorities to protect him. He didn’t even come back when Mom died.”

“I never realized,” said Jackson, hanging his head in hurt.

Episode 8: Alien Visitation

Jackson put an arm around his sister. "Are we good?"

Jenny returned the embrace. "Yeah, we're good. You're still my little brother."

Jackson released Jenny and scrolled through the data-pad. "Jenny. Look at this."

Jenny scrunched her eyebrows. "Why would Dad have an old headline about alien DNA found in the human genome?"

"Says it goes back 10,000 years."

"Wait," said Jenny. "You don't think that's our Designer friends? That's when the ship was parked on Mars."

"Could be. The article date is when Dad started looking for the sliver."

"Seems the Designers have some questions to answer," said Jenny.

Episode 9: Why Stay Behind?

"And that might explain a question that's been bugging me since we left Mars," said Jenny.

Jackson looked up from reading the article. "What question?"

"The ship was fully functional. Why stay?"

"I wish I knew the answer," said Jackson. "Joey?"

Joey sat silent. Finally, "I checked the logs; they've been erased."

"Dammit. They probably did that when we refueled."

"They must have something to hide," said Jenny. "Damn. I wish I had been there."

Jackson smiled. "Well, Sis. You were kind of tied up. Literally."

"Cute," said Jenny. "But I'm going to get my answer. One way or another."

Episode 10: Research

The *Grim Reaper* arrived at Alta Campa.

A tour of the city, parties, and dinners occupied the siblings for days. When the Designers learned Jenny was a scientist, she was welcomed at the research library.

“They’re hiding something from me,” said Jenny arriving home one evening.

“Hiding what?” asked Jackson.

“What they did on Earth—maybe other planets. When I query certain data, it’s labeled ‘Not Available’.”

“Maybe it isn’t,” said Jackson.

“Maybe. But I think there’s more to it. And I need to find a way in.”

“Be careful, Sis. We’re their guests and have nowhere else to go.”

Episode 11: The Librarians

The entrance chime interrupted their conversation.

The door slid open, revealing a Designer, a bit frantic.

“Is Dr. Fowler home?” his voice tinny from the translator.

“Librarian Zog, please come in,” called Jenny from the apartment’s lounge.

“Thank goodness you’re home. I came to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“I believe we should acknowledge our past, but your research is alarming those that want to keep our past secret; please work quickly.”

Without another word, Zog rushed out of the apartment.

“What the hell was that about?” asked Jackson.

“Clearly, I’m on to something,” said Jenny. “And I’ll need to hurry.”

Episode 12: Where's Joey?

Jackson used the transporter to visit the shipyard.

The Designer crews had retrofitted the *Grim Reaper* with the inter-dimensional shields, refined the neuro-link, and loaded provisions. They'd even modernized the *Star Strider*.

Jackson entered the bridge looking for Joey. "Where's Joey?" he asked the crew chief.

"We deleted it."

"You deleted it? That was my avatar. I need him."

"With the neuro-link, you don't need an avatar. You talk to the ship directly."

Jackson slouched into a jump seat, hanging his head in sorrow.

That evening, Jackson informed Jenny that Joey was gone. Oppressive sadness pervaded the apartment for days.

Episode 13: The Midnight Oil

"Jenny, you need to come home," said Jackson. He'd not seen Jenny for days and tracked her down in a dark corner of the library.

"I can't come now. I need to finish my research," said Jenny. She looked haggard and exhausted.

Jackson moved some texts off a chair and put his arm around his sister. "The research can wait. You need to come home."

"I know the answer's here. I know I can find it in these old sources."

"Maybe the answer is gone. Please come home."

"OK. For tonight only."

Jackson took her arm and escorted her home.

Episode 14: What Are They Hiding?

"If I had followed my better judgment always, my life would have been a very dull one." — Edgar Rice Burroughs

"We have to find those deleted log entries," said Jenny.

Jackson looked up from his reading. “And how do you propose we do that?”

Jenny sat by her brother. “We go back to the Designers’ home world.”

Jackson put down the data-pad. “Same question, how?”

“Well—we take the *Grim Reaper*.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Maybe. But you said they’d retrofitted it for us to pilot.” Jenny smiled mischievously. “Besides, are you just going to sit around here reading data-pads all day?”

“This is a bad idea, but you have a point.”

“OK! What do we do next?”

Episode 15: Don’t Ask Permission

Things you do when you don’t ask permission:

Pack your stuff.

Leave a note thanking your hosts.

Transport to the shipyard at night.

Watch for security patrols.

When the coast is clear, enter the *Grim Reaper*.

Sit in the cockpit couches; engage the neuro-link.

Close the door, retract the entrance ramp, take off.

Execute evasive maneuver ‘Jackson Alpha-One’.

Engage rear deflectors to ward off particle beam weapons.

Try to engage the cloaking device.

Hang on as the ship shudders from a massive energy bolt.

Re-route auxiliary power to the shields.

Re-initialize the cloaking system.

Engage the cloaking device.

Jump to the parallel dimension.

Escape to a new adventure.

Episode 16: Family Reunion?

Jenny piloted the *Grim Reaper* across the burnt landscape; Jenny and Jackson were depressed by the hollowed-out husk of the Designers' world.

The ship glided into the abandoned hangar; the siblings exited.

A human form approached.

"Jenny, I am here," said their father.

Jenny collapsed to the deck, tears flowing, silent sobs wracking her shoulders.

"How is this possible?" asked Jackson.

"The Designers learned Jenny most wanted your father to make amends."

"No. No. NO," screamed Jenny. "This is grotesque. It just brings back the pain."

"Please stop," implored Jackson.

The avatar dissolved, and Jackson knelt to console his sister.

Episode 17: Search for the Truth

A familiar, tall Designer avatar in their typical black uniform approached.

"What purpose have you here?" it asked.

Jenny stood, wiping tears from her eyes. "We need the data you erased. Why did our ship's crew remain on Earth?"

"They chose to stay," said the avatar.

"But why did they stay?" asked Jackson. "Why not return home?"

"I need to know," said Jenny. "What happened so long ago?"

The avatar stood silent. "I have accessed that data. First, do you hunger for knowledge or thirst for retribution?"

"I hunger to know. You must tell me," replied Jenny.

"Then I'll share."

Episode 18: Captain's Log

"We've retrieved the log," said the avatar.

Mars, ten-thousand years ago:

"Captain's Log, final entry.

"The survey crew has decided to remain. The indigenous humanoids must be left alone to develop.

"If we return home, our government will take this new world and exterminate the native population.

"My wife and I will remain on the fourth planet. In some far future, perhaps the peoples of the third planet will find us. Until then, we'll have each other.

Captain, out."

Jenny stood quietly. "So, humans owe our existence to ancient Designers making the moral choice."

"Indeed, you do," said the avatar.

Episode 19: Moral Support

"We need to return to Alta Campa; share this with Librarian Zog," said Jenny.

"Why?" asked Jackson. "Don't you think he already knows?"

Jenny headed to the ship. "Maybe. We can at least provide moral support."

"Why do you care? We could just leave," said Jackson, following his sister.

"He's my friend. Don't forget he warned us. We kind of owe him. It's an easy choice, Jackson."

Jackson hesitated at the bottom of the ramp. "They might just arrest us."

"Maybe, maybe not. We should go find out."

Jackson just shook his head and followed his sister up the ramp.

Episode 20: Lost Love

The ship sped through inter-dimensional space.

Jenny popped into the *Star Strider* as Jackson was slipping on a clean tunic.

“What are those black marks on your side?” asked Jenny.

Jackson flashed a quizzical smile. “You a student of Earth’s past? You don’t recognize tattoos?”

“Where did you get them? They look like writing.”

“That one, yes. A name.”

“A girl?” asked Jenny, teasing him.

Jackson frowned and turned away to finish dressing.

Proximity alarms blared.

A transporter’s high pitch whined from the lounge.

They dashed from the *Star Strider*. Two Designers materialized; blasters pointed at them.

“You’re under arrest.”

Episode 21: Accused

Jenny and Jackson sat across from Librarian Zog and another Designer.

“So, what are we accused of?” asked Jackson.

Zog shifted in his seat. “Theft of government property and sedition.”

“Sedition?” exclaimed Jenny. “I thought the *Grim Reaper* was ours. They left *Star Strider* aboard.”

“The theft is a pretense,” said Zog. “The logs are the issue. The government wants to cover up our past.”

Pointing, “Is he our attorney?” asked Jackson.

“You defend yourself. I only advise,” said the Designer.

“Great,” said Jenny. “We need a crack legal team; instead, we get a support group. We are so screwed.”

Episode 22: Fight or Flight

“Jenny, we need to leave,” said Jackson after Zog and the legal advisor had gone.

“No, Jackson. We’re fighting this,” said Jenny. “Besides, how can we run?”

Jackson rose. “Your librarian friend could help.”

Jenny stood, grabbing Jackson’s arm, and stopping his pacing.

“Exactly. He’s my friend. Helping us again could expose their network.”

“Network?”

“The Librarians want to stop the government from expunging their history. And now we know it’s our history too. You can leave, but I’m staying.”

“Jenny, I’ll never leave you. But I’m preparing—just in case.”

Jenny smiled. “That would only be prudent, little brother.”

Episode 23: On Trial

“That ship was a gift,” said Jackson.

“You should have used your ship. We are not a ridesharing service.”

“The second action, Accuser?” asked the Adjudicator.

“They stole classified information and now spread sedition.”

Jenny rose. “That’s our history. Those explorers chose not to exterminate us. You think you’ve advanced because you’ve provided a ‘reserve’ on the Southern Continent.”

“You have no right to judge our policies. That reserve is the best place for those primitives.”

“Your policies were immoral then, and they’re immoral now you self-righteous prig,” said Jenny.

“That’s enough, Defender,” said the Adjudicator. “This tribunal is adjourned.”

Episode 24: Into the Dark

Zog, Jenny, and Jackson materialized in a tunnel below the building.

“The not-so-primitive natives built these tunnels. Follow the map, push the button, take the ship out of here.”

Jenny gave Zog a grateful hug, and they headed into the dimness.

Barely visible in the map’s anemic glow, gray, sightless bugs skittered across the roof. Legless, naked rat creatures slithered into crevices as they passed.

Putrid mud sucked at their boots. Unseen roots snagged at their hair.

The fetid breeze carried the moaning lament of the murdered natives.

At the labyrinth’s end, they held hands, pushed the button, and dematerialized.

Episode 25: Last Stand

The siblings materialized in the *Reaper’s* lounge; Jackson rushed to the bridge.

He engaged the neuro-link, activated the cloak, fired the engines, and rocketed into space.

Jumping into the parallel universe, he linked to the Star Strider’s star maps and headed toward Earth.

“Do you think Zog will be OK?” asked Jackson.

“Good question,” said Jenny. “Even without us, they were under pressure. Their government is trying to control what texts the public can access.”

“How can they do that? Wouldn’t the public demand the libraries stay open?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Zog is worried he’ll be the last Librarian.”

Episode 26: Hybrids

After grueling days of evasive maneuvers, The *Grim Reaper* was free of pursuit following the parallel dimension entities interdicting the Designer warship.

Jackson and Jenny had taken turns sleeping.

The ship was on auto-pilot; the two were relaxing in the lounge when a Designer avatar materialized.

“I’ve been monitoring your dreams,” it said. “To improve the neuro-link.”

“Sounds reasonable,” said Jackson.

“Your dream physiology is much like the Designers’.”

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Jenny.

“You have a recent Designer ancestor. You are Human-Designer hybrids.”

The siblings stared at each other in confusion. “Dad”, they said in unison.

Episode 27: Full Circle

“How did our father, a Designer, end up on Earth?” asked Jenny.

“I know where we can find out. My tattoo—I’Kebrill, runs a small bookstore,” said Jackson.

“A bookstore? Really? You just want to visit your girlfriend.”

“Not sure she wants to see me again. And the bookstore—it’s a front for her sister’s quasi-legal artifacts business. But she does have some interesting texts.”

“She’ll help?” asked Jenny.

“Maybe,” said Jackson. “Besides, you might like n’Kebron.”

“Now you’re trying to fix me up?”

Jackson smiled. “Let’s find out.”

He activated the neuro-link and changed course to Tau Ceti f.

Episode 28: Epilogue

Jenny and Jackson relaxed in the lounge of the *Grim Reaper*.

“I wonder where we’ll go, what we’ll find?” asked Jenny.

Jackson considered what they’d been through. “I would imagine we’ll meet a future challenge,” he said. “But we’ll face it together.”

“I have no doubt of that, brother,” said Jenny. “I just wish I had more details. What’s the plan?”

“I wish I could tell you. But if our future is like our past, events will unfold as they will, and we’ll be prompted to take action.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Jenny.

And silence fell across the *Reaper*.

The End of Season 2

Stay Tuned for Season 3, hopefully coming in February 2024, where Jenny and Jackson will embark on a quest to find the origins of their father’s appearance on Earth.

Will Jenny and Jackson find the truth of their heritage? Will they return to Alta Campa and help Zog bring change? Better yet, will they both find love?