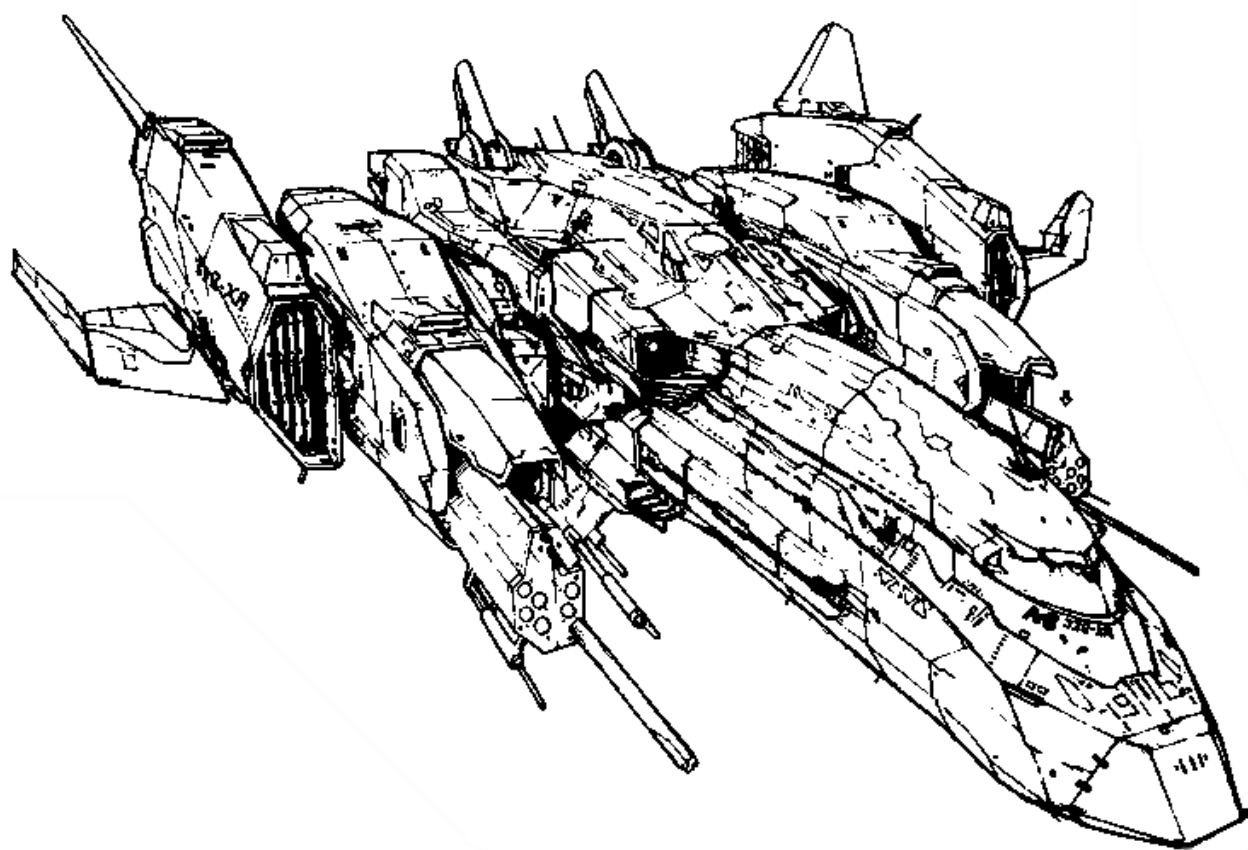


The Tharsis Plateau

Season Three

A Flash Series by W. Steve Wilson



Volume I of the 2024 SF Adventures Souvenir Booklet Series

“From the high pinnacle of their egotism the First Born had been plunged to depths of humiliation. Their deity was gone, and with her the whole false fabric of their religion. Their vaunted navy had fallen in defeat before the superior ships and fighting men of the red men of Helium.”

Warlord of Mars
Edgar Rice Burroughs
1913

Dedication

To the Management and Staff of Writer’s Digest in appreciation of another fun challenge in 2024 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/>
Season 2 is available at <https://wstevewilson.com/short-fiction/the-tharsis-plateau/the-tharsis-plateau-season-2/>

Except where referenced, *The Tharsis Plateau, Season 3* 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 2024. 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 went. And I limited each episode to 100 words.

29 (Leap Year!) one-hundred-word science fiction ‘stories’, all connected. I hope you enjoy the results.

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The Tharsis Plateau

Episode 1: Honey, I'm Home

Jackson landed the Grim Reaper at the spaceport.

"Jenny, we'll need to be wary. I told I'Kebrill I'd be right back. That was months ago."

"Maybe just apologize. Oh wait, not your forte, is it."

Jackson smirked. "I apologized to you."

Jenny shoved Jackson and proceeded to the exit hatch. "Sure, when you needed my help."

Jackson paused, took a deep breath, and whispered, "I said I was sorry."

The siblings took a self-propelled car to I'Kebrill's bookstore.

Jackson pressed the entrance chime. "Let me do the talking, Jenny."

"Sure. We'll see how that goes."

The entrance hatch slid open.

Episode 2: What the Cat Dragged In

The open hatch revealed a statuesque woman, waist length black braids, green jerkin complimenting her deep purple skin, the color most adults on Tau Ceti f adopted.

Startled, Jackson stepped back. "n'Kebron. It's nice to see you."

"Well, if it isn't the man who broke my sister's heart."

"I can explain—really, I can. Is I'Kebrill home?"

"Maybe. Who is this? Did you bring me a present?"

Jenny crossed her arms and smirked.

"No. Jenny is my sister."

"My Ace day. You know how I like sisters."

n'Kebron turned her head. "Hey 'brill. Come see what the cat dragged in."

Episode 3: Beyond Here Lie Dragons

l'Kebrill was striking, thought Jenny, with her purple coloration, bright yellow hair, and skin-tight body suit.

l'Kebrill summoned a wary Jackson with a crooked index finger.

n'Kebron guided Jenny to a low couch. "Let's give them some privacy."

Her warm smile charmed Jenny. Definitely attractive.

n'Kebron gently held Jenny's arm. "So—what brings you to Tau Ceti f?"

"That sliver Jackson bought. It took us to the far edge of the Galaxy, to our father's homeworld. Jackson thinks you can help solve our mystery."

"Possibly. I was surprised Jackson left the other artifacts behind."

Jenny perked up. "What other artifacts?"

Episode 4: Ancient Astronauts?

Artifact: Landing Party Tool Belt

Item #: 02-04-3024 WSW

The artifact was discovered in a cave system in the Great Desert, five hundred kilometers west-southwest of the capital. Accumulation of dust and debris in the cave and carbon dating allowed researchers to date the age of the artifact at 10,000 years old.

The artifact is composed of a five-centimeter wide, webbed belt and a number of pouches containing various devices. None of the devices are operative, but anthropological engineers have identified what might be a medical kit (empty), a scanner-recorder, a weapon, and a slender, sliver-like device of unknown function.

Episode 5: Time to Go

The portal to l'Kebrill's shop slammed into its slot—two humanoids dressed in black entered—weapons drawn.

The man motioned n'Kebron and Jenny into the lounge area.

"We knew you'd come here."

n'Kebron clutched Jenny's arm. "Who are these guys?"

"Designers."

The man stepped forward. "We want our ship back."

A stun-gun whined. The Designers collapsed.

Jackson entered from the back. "We need to leave. I'll throw these two in the alley."

l'Kebrill took his hand. "I'm going with Jackson."

n'Kebron smiled at Jenny. "I guess I'm going too. Should be fun."

Jenny hugged n'Kebron. "We can finish Dad's quest."

Episode 6: The Last Time I Spoke to Dad

l'Kebrill set the shop's security field.

The four adventurers sped to the spaceport.

Arriving, Jackson cautioned the group. "Designers are guarding the ship."

Jackson palmed the control sliver. "When I say—run." He pressed the activator. "Run."

Jackson's stun-gun whined as the ship extruded a ramp. They bolted past the downed guards.

Jackson activated the neural link. The ship rocketed into the lavender sky.

n'Kebron grasped Jenny's hand. "What now?"

"The last time I spoke to Dad, he said, 'They have a plan. Someone needs to stop them.'" Jenny held up her hand. "I have no idea what it means."

If you are interested reading some fun science fiction for youth, written in the 50s, check-out Ace Dayton, by Isaac Asimov writing as Paul French. My copy of *Ace Dayton and the Rings of Saturn* is the only one that has survived in my collection – read, and re-read; originally published by Doubleday in 1958, my paperback copy was published in 1978.

Episode 7: Play the Ace

n'Kebron flashed Jenny an irritated look.

Jackson slid the cloaked ship behind the largest moon of Tau Ceti f and strolled in from the bridge. “We need to locate Ace Dayton.”

Jenny glanced at her brother. “Really? He’s getting kind of old.”

“Last I heard, he was in the Omega Centauri cluster.”

l'Kebrill questioned Jackson. “Who the heck is Ace Dayton?”

“A friend of our father. We grew up on his adventure stories. If anyone can figure it out, he can.”

“Then let’s go.”

Jackson returned to the bridge, took the ship out of orbit, and headed for Omega Centauri.

Episode 8: A New Team Member

n'Kebron luxuriated in Jenny’s warm embrace after a night of gentle lovemaking.

She teetered in that vague state—not awake, not dreaming.

“n'Kebron, can you hear me?”

“Grandfather?”

“Yes, dear one, it is I—l'Kebrax. I’m here to help you in your quest. I seek a new purpose before I can ascend to the final plane.”

“But how? You’ve been gone so long.”

“I inhabit this ship now. I will stay with you. My time will come. Perhaps by aiding the intelligence that lives in this machine.”

“It would be wonderful to see you again.”

“Back to sleep, little one.”

Episode 9: “It’s Kinda Hot”

In the lounge, n’Kebron was preparing to share her ghostly visitation with her sister when an argument started on the bridge.

n’Kebron smiled at l’Kebrill. “Seems they can’t agree on which of the two stations they’ll find Ace Dayton. Should we interrupt?”

l’Kebrill smiled back. “Not yet. Humans flush a nice ruddy color when they argue. It’s kinda hot.”

So, n’Kebron sat and watched. Finally, she tapped her sister’s arm. “We should tell them.”

l’Kebrill nodded and smiled.

“Guys ... guys ... GUYS! We have two ships.”

The sheepish looks were too much, and the sisters broke into thigh-slapping laughter.

Episode 10: The Plot Thickens

*Assembly Hall, Alta Campa
Designers’ Homeworld*

The Ultimate Leader stood at the podium.

“We welcomed them—and they stole from us.

“We sheltered them—and they tried to subvert our truth.

“We shared our knowledge—and they judged us.

“We showed them they were part of us—and they spurned us.

“We took pride in our superiority—and they mocked us.

“We cannot allow their poison to spread and corrupt our future.

“Our scouts have located them at the far end of the galaxy. We will capture them and bring them here for retribution.”

Cheers swelled from the assembled faithful.

Episode 11: Mood Swings

Jenny relaxed with a cup of coffee in the pilot chair as the Grim Reaper sped to Cluster Mining Station 55B, her “win” in the coin toss.

n’Kebron still asleep, the ship quiet, only the soft susurrations of the inter-dimensional drive in the background relieved the silence.

She’d say she was content. Reunited with Jackson. Excited about her new love. Eager to see Ace again. On a grand adventure to solve the mystery of her father.

Unbidden, a tear fell on her cheek. But then everyone will leave. Her life will return to the mundane. And she’ll be alone—again.

Episode 12: A Screeching Halt

Despite his rakish reputation and his sister’s opinion, l’Kebrill always felt safe and at peace with Jackson, like this morning, enveloped in his arms, feeling his heart gently beating, his soft breath warm on her cheek. She cherished these quiet moments.

Suddenly, the Star Strider shuddered. Alarms screamed from the bridge. Red emergency lights flashed on.

Jackson struggled awake and dashed to the bridge, with ‘brill close behind.

A tractor beam’s violet glow bathed the ship. Jackson shut down the straining engines.

A massive matte black ship blocked their path.

“Who the hell are they?” asked ‘brill.

“Take one guess.”

Episode 13: Show, Don't Tell

The *Grim Reaper* drew a crowd when Jenny eased the ship into her assigned berth at the station. The weirdness of the emanations from the inter-dimensional nacelles kept the curious back.

Closing up the ship, she and n'Kebron searched out the dock master.

Jenny paid the docking fee. "Where can I find Ace Dayton?"

"That old fossil." His smile indicated some affection for Ace. "You'll likely find him at The Last Frontier bar."

n'Kebron stepped forward. "We're new to the station. Where's the bar?"

"Third level, past the retail—"

Jenny pulled out her handheld. "Don't tell me. Show me."

Episode 14: Four's a Crowd

Damn! You'd planned to spend the day in bed with l'Kebrill on this ancient "love holiday."

Instead, you try to plan.

Should you grab a weapon?

That plan dies as two Designers materialize on the bridge, brandishing blasters.

You reach over, pulling l'Kebrill behind you, shielding her with your body.

The taller Designer steps forward. "Where's your sister? We want our ship back."

"That's our ship. You left it on Mars. Salvage rights." You hope that buys time.

The Designer steps closer. "I'll not ask again."

You flip the Designer the one-finger salute.

You, l'Kebrill, and the two Designers dematerialize.

Episode 15: In the Loop

Jenny tugged the shirt of a passing waiter. “Where’s Ace Dayton?”

Ace, aging but fit, spied them approaching. Rising, he wrapped Jenny in a warm hug.

He dropped his arms, concern on his face. “What brings you to this backwater?”

“We’re looking for you.”

“Why?”

Jenny took his arm. “We’ve read parts of Dad’s datapad.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “You have your dad’s pad? Give me the pad. Go back to Mars. I can’t involve you. It’s too dangerous.”

“No. Loop us in or no pad.”

“Jenny.”

“I mean it, Ace.”

Turning to n’Kebron. “She’s like this.”

n’Kebron smiled and nodded.

Episode 16: To the Rescue

The three questers all dash to the ship
Load their gear and some fuel for the trip.

They leave in a hurry.

Depart from the docks in a flurry.

And off to mine A, they do zip.

Not able to raise the *Star Strider*

Jenny asks her friend Ace to guide her.

They chart the ship’s track.

Then follow it back.

Hoping Jackson would know how to hide her.

The other ship drifts dead in space

Gives no signs of a battle or chase.

They tractor it in

But where to begin

To save their two friends—now a race.

Episode 17: A Portrait of Defiance

Jackson spasmed as the Designer inquisitor applied another shock.

“Where’s our ship and where’s your sister?”

Jackson gritted his teeth, sweat poured down his face. “Screw you.”

The inquisitor smiled, pointing the probe at l’Kebrill. “Perhaps your girlfriend knows.”

l’Kebrill raised her chin and narrowed her gaze, defiance sparked from her eyes. “Try it. I’m with Jack. Screw you.”

“She’s just like your traitorous father, Jack. Defiant to the last. What did that get him? A painful, meaningless death on Mars. Is that what you want?”

He touched the probe to l’Kebrill’s gut, his finger on the contact. “Last chance.”

Episode 18: Lost Friends

“I wish there was some way to track the Designer ship.” Jenny had used a headset to plug directly into the ship’s sensors. She’d tried looking for large masses, energy signatures, the warp the ship would generate if it was cloaked like the Grim Reaper.

n’Kebron and Ace had tried to help, but the neuro-link wouldn’t interface with them. The Designers must have coded it to her and Jackson, Jenny concluded.

The three were sitting in the lounge, commiserating.

The hatch to the bridge cycled. A small rust colored primate bounded through, jumping up on Jenny’s lap.

“Joey. You’re back.”

Episode 19: A Moral Dilemma

Jenny saw the looks of confusion on her friends' faces. "It's an avatar the ship created for us, based on a pet of mine."

Ace smirked. "And you named it after your father?"

Jenny just shrugged.

Joey moved to her shoulder and put a soft hand on her cheek. "The ship's A.I. can help you with your wish. It can save Jackson and l'Kebrill, but it's conflicted over working against those who created it."

Ace considered for a moment. "Are there basic laws it must follow? Does it prioritize the safety of sentient beings? If so, the choice is clear."

Episode 20: The Choice is Yours

Joey went still.

"This is the *Archetype*, what you call the *Grim Reaper*." The voice from the lounge speakers was a strong, woman's contralto. "I cannot help you if you intend to harm my creators. All sentient life is to be protected. Do not ask me to choose between theirs and yours. Nor will I obey if you order me to harm them."

Ace held up a hand to stop the others. "We merely want to save our friends, who your creators will surely harm. It is your choice. You can help us, or them. Which is the lesser harm?"

Episode 21: Do the Right Thing

“I accept your logic. If I do nothing, your friends will likely die. If I help you, I maybe can prevent harm to all.” The A.I.’s voice had taken on a calmer timber. “Your call to save a life is the stronger potential.”

Jenny and Ace dashed to the bridge. Jenny activated the sensors.

The A.I. initiated the long-range sensors to detect the parallel dimension bleeding into normal space. The Designer ship glowed a bright green on the display.

Jenny set a course and activated the dimensional drive.

The Grim Reaper blinked into the parallel dimension and sped to intercept.

Episode 22: That’s One Big Ship

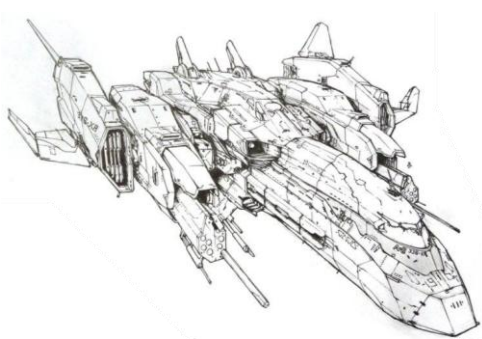


Image Credit:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/309763280603574357/>

The massive, matte-black ship hung motionless against the starfield. Ten times the size of the Grim Reaper, it bristled with antennae and weapons.

The Designers had built for subjugation.

Jenny activated the cloak, dropped out of interdimensional space, and engaged the thrusters.

She activated the short-range sensors. “I can detect Designer bio-signs, but no human or Tau Ceti ones.”

The A.I.’s image popped up on the monitor. “I’ve linked to my counterpart. They’ve agreed to help us. Get your friends to an open area. We can transport them out.”

Jenny activated her comm-link, hoping Jackson still had his aural insert.

Episode 23: Help is on the Way

Jackson wasn't sure he'd heard the buzz. He swatted his ear and tried to focus.

"Jackson. Can you hear me? We're here to rescue you."

"Jenny?" Jackson saw the guard glance over. He turned to the wall, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Jenny. We're here. Sore but alive."

"I've got Ace with me. It seems the A.I.s have a conscience and don't want you harmed. We're transporting in a stun gun. The A.I.s will open the doors. Get clear of the brig and we'll transport you out."

"What?"

A little flicker and small stun gun materialized on the floor.

Episode 24: Jail Break

Jack and 'Brill knew not to kill
But had to clear the jail.
Jack shot the guard, who tumbled hard,
And 'Brill came running after.

Out they got, and aft did trot,
Quick as they could caper.
Sped round a curve, steeled their nerve,
With the hopes they'd be escapers.

Jack and 'Brill both knew the drill
They'd been this way before.
Two more they stunned, more guards benumbed
They ran back towards the core.

Space was found, and both slowed down,
To wait for their transport.
Guards came a-running, for Jack were gunning
A flicker their force did thwart.

Episode 25: First Time Offender

Jackson and l'Kebrill materialized aboard the *Grim Reaper*. Jenny initiated the interdimensional drive and headed back to civilized space.

l'Kebrill flopped into a chair. "That was not fun. I've never been arrested and never want to be again."

Jackson smiled. "Well, there is always a first time." He turned to Ace and was enveloped in a bear hug.

"Good to see you kid. Yep, the first time is always the hardest. I remember one time the Sirians had me in their clutches—"

Jackson patted Ace's shoulder. "Can this story wait? We need to plan."

Ace flashed a sheepish smile.

Episode 26: Really Guys?

JENNY: Where to next?

JACKSON: Dad's notes mention a network.

N'KEBRON: A network?

L'KEBRILL: A spy network?

JENNY: Dad was working with someone on Mars.

L'KEBRILL: I'm not going to Mars.

N'KEBRON: We could visit Earth. Always wanted to go.

JENNY: A Designer plot. That's why he left.

N'KEBRON: Your dad was a Designer?

JACKSON: Turns out my sister and I are hybrids. Go figure.

L'KEBRILL: Is that why you're so good at that thing you do?

JENNY: Yuck, 'Brill. I don't want to know.

ACE: Really guys? You're all sitting right here in the lounge. Why are you texting?

Episode 27: Time to Go Home

Jenny scrolled her dad's datapad. "Ace, these entries are illegible."

Ace plugged a fob into the pad's port. "Special encryption."

Jenny studied the new text. "Dad was on the verge of exposing a cell of the Designers' spies on Mars. No wonder they wanted his pad."

Ace scanned the group. "They're called Designers because the cult "designs" societies—our quadrant is next."

Jackson stood. "We need to finish Dad's work."

"If we go, it won't be easy, and it won't be quick. It could take a year to unravel what they've done."

"Then let's go." Jackson headed to the bridge.

Episode 28: Gird Your Loins

As the *Grim Reaper* sped to Mars, cloaked, shielded, and silent, through the formless void of interdimensional space, our intrepid adventurers planned, plotted and prepared their assault on the Designers' machinations, guided by the wisdom and experience of Ace Dayton, and strengthened by the spirit of l'Kebrax, now melded with the A.I., *Archetype*, not knowing what lay ahead, not knowing if they could accomplish their mission or if the Designers would relent, finally completing their efforts as the *Grim Reaper* flickered into normal space in orbit behind Deimos, an apt start to a future possibly filled with terror and dread.

Episode 29: The Final Countdown

Jenny had the ship extrude a transparent dome above the lounge.

Gazing up, Ace swept his arms in an expansive gesture. “Around those stars, orbit planets, with unique societies and rich cultures. If we fail, the stars will look the same, but the galaxy will be a poorer place.”

Jackson gripped Ace’s arm. “Then we better not fail.”

Ace grinned. “Just like your dad. He knew what his people would do—make everyone like the cult. It’s the rich diversity that makes us all better.” Ace scanned the group. “Let’s get some sleep everyone, we’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

The End of Season 3

Stay Tuned for Season 4, hopefully coming in February 2025, where our five adventurers chase the Designers’ spies across the galaxy, and with good fortune (which favors the foolish) unravel their nefarious plot, and maybe free the resistance back on the home world in the process.