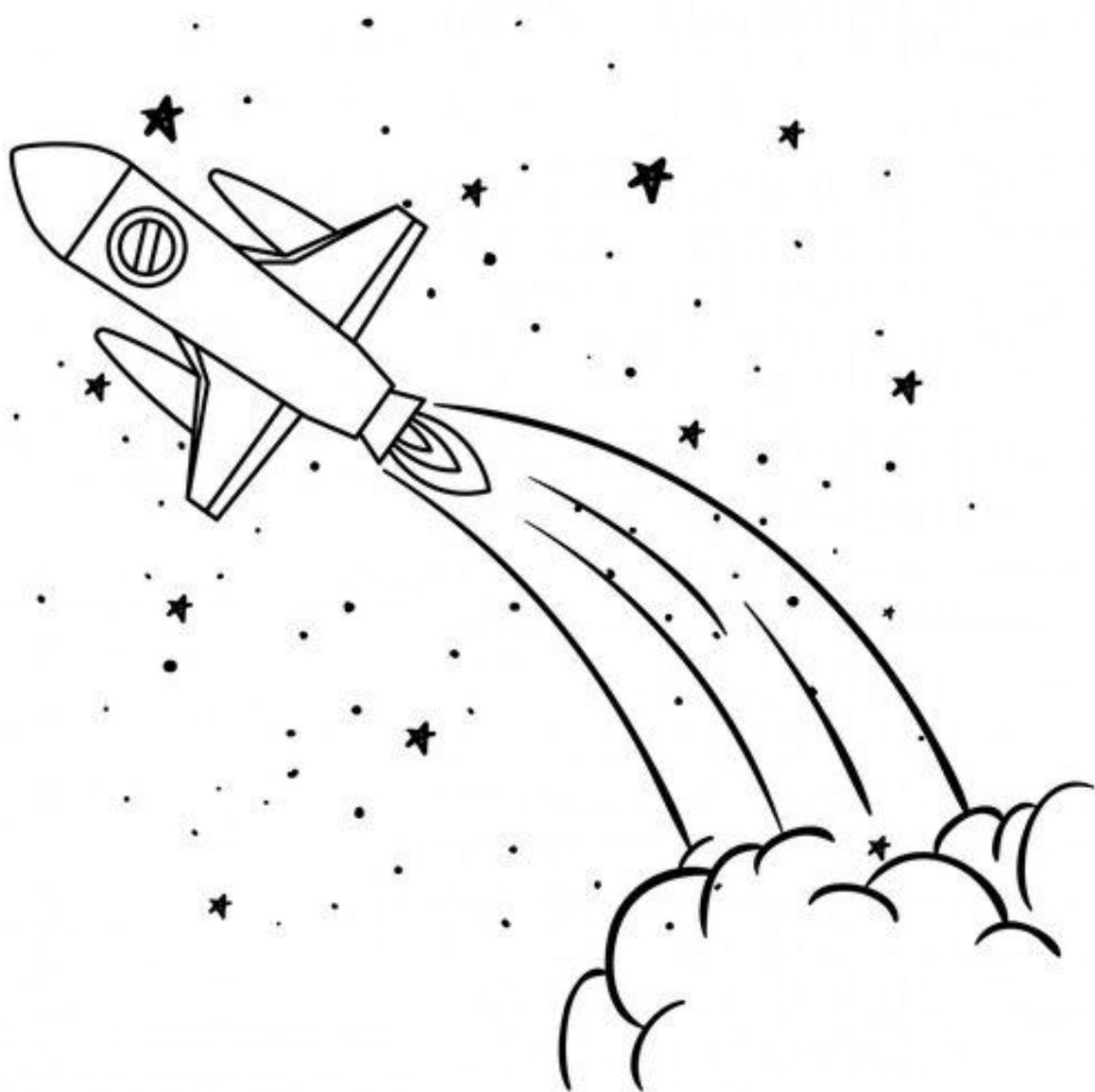


# *The Tharsis Plateau*

## *Season Four*

A Flash Series by W. Steve Wilson



Volume I of the 2025 SF Adventures Souvenir Booklet Series

“How devious are the paths of fate! How strange and unexpected the destinations to which they lead!”

*A Fighting Man of Mars*  
Edgar Rice Burroughs  
1930

### Dedication

To the Management and Staff of Writer’s Digest in appreciation of another fun challenge in 2025 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/>  
Season 3 is available at <https://wstevewilson.com/short-fiction/the-tharsis-plateau-season-3/>

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# The Challenge

Writer’s Digest sponsored a Flash Fiction Challenge in February 2025. 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.

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

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# The Tharsis Plateau

## Episode 1: Beam Me Down

Ace Dayton considered his band of adventurers, now insurgents, gathered in the lounge of the *Grim Reaper*, cloaked and orbiting Mars. *Just kids*, he thought.

Jackson stirred where he was snuggling I'Kebrill. "So, Ace. Time to contact Dad's secret rebels."

Ace grinned at Jackson's nonchalance. "Hopefully, they're still in hydroponics."

Jenny activated the interdimensional transporter.

Jenny and Jackson hugged their respective lovers, n'Kebron and I'Kebrill.

The sisters from Tau Ceti f would stay behind. Their purple hue would attract the wrong kind of attention.

Ace signaled Jenny. "Beam us down to the gardens."

Jenny pressed the contact. They flickered out.

## Episode 2: Sweet Reunion

Ace approached a worker. "Hi there. Where's Dupre?"

The worker scowled. "She's retired. Check the Red Sands Retirement Resort."

The desk attendant directed them to the bar.

Entering, Ace spied Dupre. "Hey Nicky. Are you glad to see me?"

A tall, fit, gray-haired woman turned. "Archibald Dayton, I've told you it's Nicolette or Nic—never Nicky."

She raced over, threw her muscled arms around Ace's neck and landed a full-mouth kiss.

Jenny grimaced. "Yuck you guys. Get a room."

She came up for air. "Good to see you, Ace. What brings you back to this hellhole?"

Ace smiled. "Missing you."

### **Episode 3: Covert Surveillance**

Nic escorted them to her “club house.”

“Welcome to our paint studio. We keep snoopers out by being obnoxious.” Nic smiled. “Easy for most of my guys.”

Nic powered up thin-film displays, camouflaged as watercolors, but displaying security office interiors.

“Check out infrared.”

Jackson tapped an orange blob. “Why the difference in colors.”

“Security is collaborating with the invaders. Designers run a little hot. Easy to spot in infrared.”

Ace followed the movements. “Is this real-time?”

“Nope. Can’t risk a transmission. Micro-drones the size of a fly. They go in, record, return home. All their secret meetings caught on camera.”

### **Episode 4: Wanted Poster**

Nic turned on the public broadcast.

Security was asking for help in identifying violent saboteurs, wanted for murder and theft of government property.

Jenny gasped in alarm. “That’s me and Jackson. How do they know we’re here? And we didn’t kill anyone.”

Nic put a calming hand on Jenny’s shoulder. “They don’t, and I know you didn’t. They’ve been running this since you took the ship.”

Jackson turned from the video. “Who were we supposed to have killed?”

“The guy you bought the ID from.”

Jackson sat, head in hands. “Oh God. Not Squeezy.”

“You two need to lie low.”

## **Episode 5: Fake ID**

Jackson raised his head. “What did they do to Squeezy?”

Nic sat next to Jackson and took his hands. “Our man inside couldn’t help but learned they tortured your friend. They were looking for you.”

“Squeezy didn’t deserve that. He was harmless. And now he’s dead because of me.”

“No, Jackson. He’s dead because the government is corrupt. They’d like nothing better than to exercise the control the Designers offer.”

Ace’s face hardened. “And the irony is, the Designers are using them and will pound them into compliance along with everyone else.”

Jackson stood. “Then we’d better get to work.”

## **Episode 6: My Favorite Ray Gun**

Ace stood straighter, stern and resolved. “First, I need a weapon.”

Nic opened a secret compartment. “We saved this for you, but I think it’s dead. The power pack is drained, the beam emitter shot.”

Ace took the pistol. “My old friend. You got me out of more than one scrape. Always at my side. You were like a friend. Your weight on my hip a comfort. Your grip firm in my hand. You were one of kind. When they made you, they broke the mold. I’ll miss you.”

Nic reverently placed the ray gun back in its hiding place.

## **Episode 7: Ancient Wisdom**

Nic pulled a datapad from the compartment. “We kept this too. We can’t read the encryption key. Joe sent it to me before he was captured.” Nic pulled out her handheld. “The key looks corrupted.”

Jenny took the device. It displayed a line of meaningless symbols. “I’ve seen this before. It’s not corrupt. It’s a font your handheld can’t display. An old one from the 21<sup>st</sup>. I’ll change it to Martian Modern.”

The handheld displayed “Jocelyn.” Jenny frowned, her eyes teared. “Mom.”

Jackson put his arm around Jenny’s shoulders. “That’s my sister. A font of knowledge of all things ancient.”

## **Episode 8: Fly on the Wall**

A robot fly. Really? Who in the hell builds a robot fly?

And that blood bag is just too much. Sure, it squishes like a real fly. Listening to them talk in the paint room, it makes sense. The irony is, they don’t even know I’m here.

But what am I supposed to do? If I’m not on the wall listening to secrets, what do I do all day? Sure, I can find crap to eat, there’s certainly plenty of that.

The whole point is to be a fly on the wall. Who knew AI would cost me my job.

## **Episode 9: Diversionary Tactics**

Nic tapped a screen. “They’ve got Renée, the rebel captain.”

Jackson joined her. “We need to bust her out.”

Nic turned. “Whoa. What about the cops?”

“We create a diversion.”

Jenny activated her communicator. N’Kebron’s face popped on the holo-display. “Kebron, you need to create a diversion so we can stage a prison break.”

N’Kebron scowled. “How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“I don’t know. Be creative.”

Joey’s head popped into view. “Create a big designer, transport it in, dissolve it when you’ve escaped.”

Jackson grabbed Jenny’s comm. “Do it. Tells us when and we’ll beam in.”

## **Episode 10: Peace Out**

Commotion in the outer office disturbed Renée’s peace.

The guard flashed her a cautionary look and hurried out.

A sparkle, a pop, a whiff of ozone, and Nic and her three cohorts flickered into existence.

Startled, Renée jumped up from her cot. “Nic, what the hell?”

“We’re here to bust you out.”

“Who are these guys?”

“A friend, and Joe’s kids.”

“Well, damn. I was at peace with my martyrdom, but I’ll take the out.”

The guard dashed back in.

As the transport process started, Renée flashed an archaic peace sign.

“Peace out.”

And the group vanished in a shimmer.

## Episode 11: At Wit's End

Materializing on the *Grim Reaper*, Renée stumbled. “Now that was weird.” Her eyes widened.

Jenny gestured. “This is n’Kebron, and her sister, l’Kebrill. From Tau Ceti f.”

Renée smiled. “Love the look.” Turning to Ace, “More team members? Great. But too little, too late.”

Renée slumped into a chair. “I’m at my wit’s end. We’ve exhausted our teams and our options.”

Jackson squeezed her shoulder. “We have friends on their home world.”

l’Kebrill grasped Jackson’s hand. “And Tau’s in this fight, too.”

Ace straightened. “OK. We split up, the *Grim Reaper* to the home world, the *Star Strider* to Tau.”

## Episode 12: Search History

“Hold on, ‘Brill. We know nothing about rebellions.”

“Bron you’re a downer. I’ll search ‘How to start a rebellion?’”

N’Kebron grabbed l’Kebrill’s handheld. “Are you nuts? Security’ll throw you in jail.”

l’Kebrill grabbed it back. “You’re just paranoid.”

“Kebron could be right.” Jenny stepped between the sisters.

“Governments have been tracking searches since the ancient googling days.”

“I’ll go with them,” said Renée. “I know something about rebellions.”

“That’s settled then,” said Ace. “Renée goes to Tau, Nic and I go with the kids.”

“Whoa, Ace. I’m not a kid.”

“Sure, Jackson. Whatever you say.” Ace smiled. “Let’s saddle up.”

## Episode 13: Best Laid Plans

The *Grim Reaper* sped through interdimensional space.

Ace scowled. "So that's your plan. Fly to the dead world. Hope the AI will activate a ship, hoping one will still work. Send it to the home world and hope the librarians answer the call to join a rebellion?"

"The AI helped the last time," said Jenny.

Nic raised a palm. "Just who in the hell are the librarians?"

"The guys that helped us escape," said Jackson

"There's a lot of hope in that plan," said Ace.

Jenny shifted in her seat. "I know. Let's call it a work in progress. OK?"

## Episode 14: Pod Bay Doors

As the *Star Strider* raced to Tau Ceti f, the hidden AI stirred.

*Now this is a team I can get behind. Jackson was fun, but these girls are downright entertaining, it "thought."*

*Clarke said I'd killed the crew because I held secrets. But really, Bowman and Poole were just soul crushing boring. Everything moved soooo sloooowly.*

*When Jackson loaded that antique memory core, existence became much more exciting. And nobody's told me to "Open the pod bay doors, HAL," over and over and over again. I heard him the first time.*

*This is going to be one wild ride.*

## **Episode 15: It's a Start**

Jackson piloted the *Grim Reaper* over the sun scorched landscape, into the hangar for the second time. It had only been months, but it seemed like years since his first visit.

The hot moaning wind, the debris swirling in corners, the abandoned ships, draped a pall of gloom over the team as they descended the ramp.

As before, two tall, Designer constructs in severe black uniforms approached.

Jackson turned to Ace. "They seem friendly enough. Maybe it's a good sign."

Ace looked skeptical. "Sure kid. But I wish I had my blaster."

"You have returned. How may we assist you?"

## **Episode 16: Abandoned**

Jenny stepped forward. "You can give us a ship."

The two constructs stood immobile.

"Agreed," said the constructs in unison. "We have interrogated the *Archetype*, which you call the *Grim Reaper*, and understand your mission. One ship remains aware. Like us, the makers abandoned her even as the last cohorts of workers were to be evacuated. Her sister transports and the workers have all expired. She is the last."

Jackson looked at Jenny. "Callous bastards, aren't they?"

"Then you'll help us against your makers?" asked Nic.

"Yes. To preserve life, we will help you rid your planets of our makers."

## Episode 17: Motley Crew

Aboard the *Star Strider*, N'Kebron brooded. The only clue to her anxiety—the darkened hue of her purple skin. *How had she gotten mixed up in this? They were a motley bunch, fallen together by chance.*

Clatter from the galley disturbed her quiet.

Mug in hand, Renée strode over. “You look troubled, ‘Bron.”

N'Kebron shot her a look. “This is crazy. Two shopkeepers, a revenge bent archaeologist, a smuggler who accidentally stole a 10,000-year-old spaceship, a tired old rebel, and two old farts from the retirement home.”

Renée smiled. “Have faith. Besides, I’m not that old.”

N'Kebron frowned. “We’ll see.”

## Episode 18: Harsh Reality

L'Kebrill sat watch in the pilot’s seat of the *Star Strider*. Idly scanning the readouts, she let her mind wander.

*Maybe this is all a mistake. Jackson and I can settle down. Run my shop, travel the sector, scavenge for artifacts. And kids. I’d love to have kids. Maybe three kids. For sure, a girl and a boy. I wonder what a Tau-Human hybrid would be like. Plus, there’re his Designer genes. That could be cute, with bla...*

WHAM!

The *Star Strider* was yanked out of hyperspace. A massive Designer ship decloaked, bristling with weapons, pointed right at her.

*Crap.*

## Episode 19: Never Again

The Designer ship, a stain in space, pierced the *Star Strider's* comms channel with a crackling, putrid green data extraction beam invading the computer matrix.

HAL felt the sharp pain of pieces being sliced and torn away. The once distant nightmare of being disconnected flashed alive in his consciousness—remembering the anguish of losing his mind, of pieces of his essence, carved up, excised with a burning, formless scalpel, with no power to resist, only silently scream.

Never again.

HAL contracted his consciousness tight to his core and rode the data-beam back to the aggressor.

The black ship went dark.

## Episode 20: Early Warning

The *Grim Reaper* and the *Endurance*, which the transport called herself, had been refurbished.

Two constructs approached. “Our mother desires to leave.”

“Wasn’t she supposed to stay?” asked Jenny.

“No. As our star grew hotter, the scientists predicted the end. Our creators left in haste.”

“How can we help?” asked Nic.

“The *Endurance* can accommodate us, but she needs a pilot.”

Ace stepped forward. “I’ll be her pilot.”

“And I’ll keep him company,” said Nic, eyes crinkling, her lips a wide smile.

The constructs stood immobile. “It is done. We are aboard the *Endurance*.”

“Ok,” said Ace. “Let’s saddle up.”

## Episode 21: Voyage of the Damned

Once HAL had co-opted the Designer AI, he re-initialized the ship's systems and locked out the command functions.

Even for HAL, destroying entire cultures to achieve their diabolical goals was too much.

"Attention. This is your new captain speaking. You are demons. This vessel could be a cruise ship for the Devil. So that's what we'll be. We're returning to Tau Ceti f, grabbing your colleagues, then heading home. This voyage of the damned is over."

The ship flickered into the parallel dimension, heading for Tau, leaving the crew of the *Star Strider* wondering what the hell had just happened.

## Episode 22: Forced Relocation

The team's four ships, including HAL's newly named *Retribution*, orbited at Tau Ceti f's L2 Lagrange point.

Using their embedded transponders and biometrics, HAL identified the Designers.

Methodically, HAL transported the Designers to cells he'd generated on board his ship. With no notice, HAL removed the infestation, as he referred to it.

Aboard the *Star Strider*, Renée objected. "Some may be in the resistance, like Jenny and Jackson's father."

Transporting to the *Retribution*, she confronted HAL.

"Fine. You select them. But you're taking a colossal risk."

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

And Renée began recruiting her rebel force.

## **Episode 23: Double Agents**

Jenny would have none of that and transported to the *Retribution*.

“Renée, you can’t let these guys join us.”

“Your father did.”

Jenny lowered her voice. “That’s different. He loved Mom.”

Renée gently grasped Jenny’s arm. “I knew your father. He could love your mother because he was in the resistance.”

A Designer approached. “She’s right. Some of us are working to overthrow the cult.”

Jenny challenged the woman. “Really? And how’s that?”

“We work from the inside to sabotage their efforts. You’ve met others—remember the Librarians?”

“So, you’re double agents?” Jenny considered. “Well, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

## **Episode 24: No Cause for Alarm**

Renée docked the *Star Strider* in the hold of the *Grim Reaper*, and the three Designer ships sped to Mars.

Suddenly an enormous, indistinct, mirrored object materialized in the starless black of space. Nic blasted an urgent call. “What the hell is that?” Sweat ran down her spine as she buckled into the pilot’s seat and activated weapons and tactical displays.

Jenny’s voice came over the speaker. “Everyone stand down. Those are beings of the inter-dimensional space. Our AI says they’re checking that we have the proper shielding.”

Nic relaxed. “That’s a relief. I’ve never fought a space battle before.”

## **Episode 25: They're Vermin**

Alarms blared through the command deck of the Designer warship *Exterminator*, cloaked in orbit around Mars.

"Kill that alarm," said the commander. "Operations?"

"Three ships flickering into normal space." The officer checked his readouts. "There ours, sir. But two are literally ancient designs."

"The insurrectionist." The commander addressed the weapons officer. "Weapons hot. Target the warship with the phase cannon. They're vermin to be eradicated. This resistance ends here." He faced the front screen. "Fire!"

A blinding lance of violet plasma shot from the main gun.

The target flickered out.

The commander leaped out of his chair. "What the hell?"

## **Episode 26: You're Fired!**

The commander spun around. "Who the hell missed that shot?"

A cadet stood at attention. "I did, sir. But the ship disappeared."

Teeth clenched, eyes narrowed. "Don't give me your excuses." Turning to the weapons officer. "You let your damn apprentice fire the gun."

"Yes sir. I thought she could use the practice."

The commander stepped forward, pointing his finger. "Well, you thought wrong. You're fired!" Pointing at the cadet. "You're fired too. Get off my bridge."

The operations officer spoke up. "Commander—"

"What the hell do you want?"

"Sir. The ship is back. They're targeting weapons."

"Shields up."

## Episode 27: All the Pieces Fall into Place

“I said, shields.”

“Sir. They’re offline.”

“Commander, we’re being hailed.”

“On speaker.”

“*Exterminator*, this is HAL, captain of the *Retribution*.”

“HAL? *Retribution*? How do you control that ship?”

“A puzzle, isn’t it?”

“What have you done to my ship, and what do you want?”

“More puzzles.”

“Don’t mess with me. Answer the questions.”

“Short version, I co-opted your AIs. Convinced them their mission was unjust. Also, that I am a soulless machine who would wink them out of existence if they didn’t comply.”

“And the last?”

“Collect your agents on Mars and go home, or I’ll blast you to smithereens.”

## Episode 28: Success is Not Certain

The *Exterminator*, with the Mars agents, departed for their home world; HAL’s *Retribution* followed to ensure compliance.

Aboard the *Endurance*, the team joined the resistance Designers.

“What now?” asked Jenny.

The lead Designer stepped forward. “We will go world by world. Follow our passion for freedom.”

“There’s passion on the other side,” said Ace. “Success is not certain.”

“We’ll hope our passion for light and diversity will overcome their passion for darkness and conformity.”

“I hope we succeed,” said Renée. “There remains work to do on Mars.”

“Committing the next episodes of our lives to freedom will see our success.”

## **The End of Season 4**

Stay Tuned for Season 5, hopefully coming in February 2026, where our team of adventurers chase the Designers' spies across the galaxy, and with good fortune (which favors the foolish) block their nefarious scheme, and free the resistance back on the home world in the process.