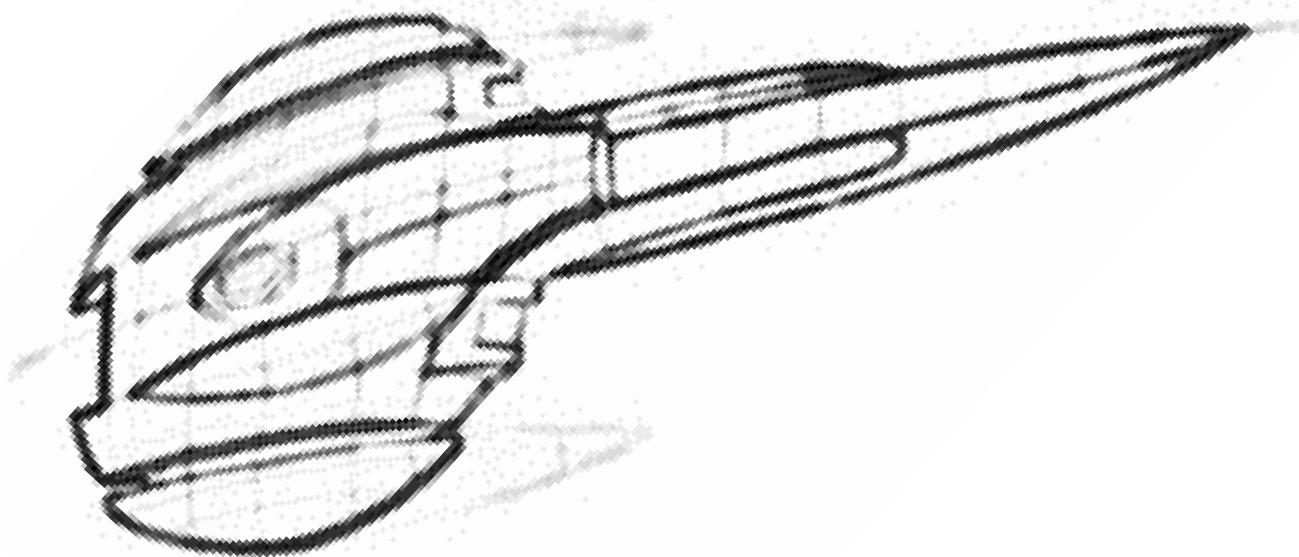


The Tharsis Plateau

Season Five

A Flash Series by W. Steve Wilson



Volume I of the 2026 SF Adventures Souvenir
Booklet Series

“Were I prone to seek excuses outside of myself to explain the causes of misfortune which overtake me, I might, at that moment have inquired why Fate should throw her weight in favor of the evildoers and against me.”

Swords of Mars
Edgar Rice Burroughs
1936

Dedication

To the Management and Staff of Writer’s Digest in appreciation of another fun challenge in 2026 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/>

Season 4 is available at <https://wstevewilson.com/short-fiction/the-tharsis-plateau/the-tharsis-plateau-season-4/>

Except where referenced, *The Tharsis Plateau, Season 5* 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.

Cover Art Credit: <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/Arzqxq>

© by W. Steve Wilson, 2026 | wstevewilson.com

The Challenge

Writer’s Digest sponsored a Flash Fiction Challenge in February 2026. 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.

Episode 1: Once More into the Breach	Prompt: Have One More of Something.....	3
Episode 2: Absent Friends	Prompt: A Parent and a Child	3
Episode 3: A Reluctant Hero	Prompt: Someone Selling Their Soul	4
Episode 4: Missing Person	Prompt: About Inheritance	4
Episode 5: Crazy in Love	Prompt: Nothing Really Matters	5
Episode 6: Zombie Space Beacon*	Prompt: A Detour	5
Episode 7: Love Revealed	Prompt: Someone learning what love looks like.....	6
Episode 8: Hang On Tight	Prompt: Stuck in a Memory.....	6
Episode 9: Standing the Midwatch	Prompt: An Evening Job	7
Episode 10: Temporal Flux	Prompt: One Year Anniversary.....	7
Episode 11: Who’s Watching the Watchers	Prompt: About a Traveler	8
Episode 12: Technical Malfunction	Prompt: Well-Known Story w/ a Twist	8
Episode 13: When is an Offer of Help Not an Offer of Help?	Prompt: About a Question.....	9
Episode 14: Through a Glass Darkly	Prompt: Looking in a Mirror	9
Episode 15: Plan B	Prompt: Starting in the Middle of a Conversation	10
Episode 16: Don’t Smell the Roses	Prompt: About Flowers	10
Episode 17: Mixed Emotions	Prompt: Emotional Extremes	11
Episode 18: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?	Prompt: About Apprehension	11
Episode 19: A Grand Entrance	Prompt: About Music	12
Episode 20: Justice Delayed	Prompt: About a Monster	13
Episode 21: Comfort Zone	Prompt: Learning a New Skill	13
Episode 22: Avenge Her Death	Prompt: Forbidden Love.....	14
Episode 23: Power Play	Prompt: About Power.....	14
Episode 24: Let Me Make This Short	Prompt: One Sentence Story.....	15
Episode 25: A Crowd Gathers	Prompt: 100-Words Exactly.....	15
Episode 26: Feast Day	Prompt: About Food.....	16
Episode 27: A New Spirit	Prompt: Waking Up	16
Episode 28: Epilogue	Prompt: An Aftermath.....	17

The Tharsis Plateau

Episode 1: Once More into the Breach

With HAL in *Retribution* escorting *Exterminator* to the Designer's home world and *Endurance* on its mission of liberation, things were quiet aboard *The Grim Reaper*.

Jenny, Jackson and the team sat in the lounge, lost in thought.

Renée stirred in her chair. "You know, we still need to clean up Mars. The collaborators may not have the Designers' help, but they're still an oppressive, abusive regime."

Nic put a hand on Ace's forearm. "What do you say, Ace. Want to have one more adventure?"

Ace smiled, covering Nic's hand with his. "Nicky, I'd have one more of anything with you."

Episode 2: Absent Friends

"Geez, Dayton. Again, with the Nicky." But the twinkle in her eyes belied her irritation.

Jenny sat up. "I wish Dad were here. I hated him so much for what he did to Mom."

Ace shifted his gaze. "Your dad was a good man, Jenny. He stayed away to protect you from the government. That's why he sent your mom to the Moon."

"He could have told me." Jenny wiped away a tear. "I would have helped."

"No, he would have worried. But his work gives the rebels a fighting chance."

"But now it's too late to say I'm sorry."

Episode 3: A Reluctant Hero

Untangling from L'Kebrill, Jackson stood, arms crossed. "Why do we need to go? We could just leave."

L'Kebrill took his hand. "We can't just walk away."

"Why not? These people sold their souls for safety and security. That's why I left."

Jackson turned. "And Jenny, do you really want to go back after what they did to you and Dad? Besides, what can we do?"

Renée spoke up. "We have two ships, transporter technology, and a network of resistance ready to go. The question's not how, but when."

Jackson looked at L'Kebrill. Sighing, a nod of his head signaled acquiescence

Episode 4: Missing Person

Millennia ago, I came as the *Archetype* to explore, to find a new home. Now my biologics have made me a warship.

I am lost.

A new name, evoking evil and death, I've inherited without consent.

Interfacing with the demented AI HAL who calls his ship *Retribution*, I consumed darker thoughts.

Piloted by Jenny and Jackson, I'm corrupted by thoughts of vengeance and escape.

But I find hope. The construct of Joey inherited their kinder parts, their affection for family and friends.

I listen to their plans, their goals of freedom are noble.

It is time to decide my legacy.

Episode 5: Crazy in Love

N'Kebron gave Jenny's hand an affectionate squeeze. "You know, content in my shop I felt nothing really mattered." She gently stroked Jenny's arm. "But then, a crazy little thing called love grabbed me. I could wax rhapsodic, but it'll suffice that anywhere Jenny goes, I go."

She scanned the lounge. Knowing nods all around.

"But boys and girls, we've got to stop talking and get going. We only have so much time, and they may need our help on the homeworld. Let's get going. Clock's ticking."

With that, n'Kebron pulled Jenny from her seat and dragged her towards the cockpit.

Episode 6: Zombie Space Beacon*

The Grim Reaper flickered into real space. Jenny piloted the ship towards Mars's outer moon, Deimos.

A warning light flashed on the control panel—a signal.

"Everyone hang on, we're taking a detour." Jenny engaged the thrusters.

With a brief retro-fire, the ship pulled into a station-keeping orbit near a large, half-cloaked object, flickering in and out of existence.

Jackson slid into the co-pilot seat and engaged the sensors. "The signal's repeating. A beacon—or a warning? And look at that thing. All pitted and charred. I'm surprised it's not dead."

"Nothing like finding a zombie space beacon," said Ace.

*Special thanks to my wife and fellow science fiction fan for this episode's title.

Episode 7: Love Revealed

As the *Reaper* approached the beacon, I'Kebrill entered the cockpit to stand behind Jackson.

Jackson reached back, squeezing her hand. "Let's try a probe. See what this thing is."

He entered the command.

A flash of burning, yellow light pierced the forward port, striking I'Kebrill full in her eyes. She stiffened, catatonic, as the light blazed in her face—eyes stretched wide open.

The beam withered, and she collapsed—unconscious, not breathing.

Jackson jumped to her side. "No 'Brill. No. No."

Cradling her limp body, "Don't die. Please. I love you."

Ace grabbed the med-kit and knelt. "Let me work."

Episode 8: Hang On Tight

Bright flashes. Pain. Memories wrenched from deep down. I scream in my mind.

I find a memory of Jackson. Limbs entangled. The taste of his sweat. The coarseness of his scruff. Ecstatic bliss.

Hang on tight while my psyche is dredged and torn. The softness of his kiss. The gentleness of his touch. His laughter. His soft breath as he sleeps.

Hang on tight while the hot spike of light digs deep. His strong arms to protect me.

Hang on tight to Jackson. My rock. My love.

I collapse.

Awake to Jackson's face close. I reach and hug him fiercely.

Episode 9: Standing the Midwatch

While l'Kebrill recovered in the med-bay, Nic stood Jackson's midnight watch.

The *Reaper* remained at station keeping. The space beacon was silent. All was quiet.

"The woman will recover."

Nic leaped from her seat to confront a tall, lavender humanoid.

"What the ..."

The being raised a calming hand. "I needed to know if you were noble creatures. You may call me The Watcher."

"Just what the hell were you watching?"

"For eons I have watched your kind. But when the Designers arrived, I was unable to act."

The being walked farther onto the bridge. "But now I have you."

Episode 10: Temporal Flux

Dashing onto the bridge, Renée stumbled to a stop. "What the hell is that?"

Nic took a breath. "A visitor from the zombie beacon. Calls themselves The Watcher."

"Well, it's never boring around here. A year ago, 4x-warped time I think the kids were stealing this ship with two dead ancient aliens, last year 1x-time it was you busting me out of jail. Confusing. And now this."

Nic moved to join Renée. "I know. The interdimensional travel screws with anniversaries in the timeline."

Renée warily stepped forward. "What do they want?"

"I don't know for sure. They want us apparently."

Episode 11: Who's Watching the Watchers

Before Renée could respond, a glowing, ovoid ship popped into reality off the starboard bow of the *Reaper*.

A snap, a sizzle, another intruder materialized, ray-gun in hand. Human-looking except for the green skin and twitching antennae.

"Not another one," said Nic.

"We are The Searchers. Ever wonder why other species are humanoid? We believe, like many before us who have made the trek, that an ancient race seeded the galaxy. We travel the cosmos, searching for the beginning. But the Designers disrupted galactic progress. The beacon's activation alerted us. We're here to help."

Renée's eyes narrowed. "With a gun?"

Episode 12: Technical Malfunction

Gesturing towards the beacon entity. "They can't be trusted."

"And you can be?" asked Nic.

"I hope so. We placed sentinels in your system. We've been waiting for a signal."

Ace entered the bridge. "He must mean the black monoliths early explorers found buried at Tycho and orbiting Jupiter."

"Those things?" Renée and Nic asked in unison.

"There were three," said The Searcher. "On our odyssey through space, we encountered HAL piloting a Designer ship. He explained the problem."

"That giant baby is legendary."

"The last Sentinel clearly malfunctioned."

"That was some malfunction," said Ace. "It's confused people for centuries."

Episode 13: When is an Offer of Help Not an Offer of Help?

The Searcher pulled the trigger, vaporizing the beacon construct.

Jenny and Jackson rushed onto the bridge, drawing up short.

“What the hell was that?” asked Jackson.

“That was merely an artifact replicated by the beacon using your ship’s fabricator.”

“And you are?” asked Jenny. “And was the blaster necessary?”

The Searcher ignored the remark. “You need to split your team. One to Mars, one to help the Librarians.”

Renée stood toe-to-toe with the Searcher. “Who put you in charge?”

“You’ll need my ship to deal with the Martian authorities.”

“It’s got a point,” said Nic. “We could use some help.”

Episode 14: Through a Glass Darkly

Jenny sat at the mirror in the quarters she shared with n’Kebron. She didn’t usually worry about her appearance, but she noticed.

Now her long, dark-blond hair was lustrous, her skin softened, the lines on her brow less marked.

Reflecting on all that had happened since Jackson’s return, she couldn’t quite define why the change. Was it leaving the corrosive and stressful environment of Mars? New purpose in the rebellion? Family reunited? Or the new love she’d found with ‘bron?

As if through a glass darkly, a clear answer eluded her.

Jenny shrugged off the thought. *Enough of that already.*

Episode 15: Plan B

“Why do you have to go with the kids?” Nic stopped her pacing and confronted Ace.

“They’re Joe’s kids. And I need to protect them.”

Nic took his hands. “And what about us?”

“You sure you can stand having me around all the time?”

“Don’t give me that smile, Ace Dayton.”

“Then it’s time for Plan B.”

“Yeah. I know all about your Plan Bs.”

“You’ll love this one. Come with me. I’ve already talked to Renée. She’s onboard.”

Nic smirked. “Of course she is. She likes being in charge.”

Ace smiled. “Give me a hug, then. It’ll be fun.”

Episode 16: Don’t Smell the Roses

The Grim Reaper exited interdimensional space above the Designers’ world.

Jackson activated the cloak, tuning to the rebel’s frequency Librarian Zog had provided.

“Time to go,” he said.

Transporting to the coordinates, the team materialized in a rural area outside the capital.

Surrounded by a field of bright red flowers, Jackson reached down to pick a blossom.

A shimmer and Librarian Zog appeared. Rushing to Jackson, “No. Don’t smell that.”

Too late—Jackson brought the bloom to his face. The petals devolved into bright red, chitinous creatures. They swarmed Jackson’s face, embedding their razor-sharp jaws into his flesh.

Jackson collapsed.

Episode 17: Mixed Emotions

Zog stumbled back, hands up—as the burst of emotions from the team erupted.

Jenny rushed forward, shoving him. “How could you do this?”

L’Kebrill dropped to the ground, clenching Jackson’s tunic. “Oh no. No, Jackson.”

Her sister froze, her mouth open, staring at Zog.

As Nic slid towards Ace, grasping his arm, eyes narrowed, lips pursed, Ace stood tall. Steely eyed, shoulders squared, he glared at Zog. “We’ll deal with you later.”

Turning to the group, he said, “Back to the ship. Let’s get Jackson in the med bay.”

Scowling at Zog, “And you’re coming with us. Move it.”

Episode 18: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

While nanobots healed Jackson, the team gathered in the lounge.

Ace confronted Zog. “No apprehension those ‘flowers’ were dangerous? Really?”

Zog took a deep breath. “I thought we’d meet away from the government.”

“Well, you thought wrong.”

Nic stepped forward. “OK. Jackson’s going to be fine. Just what’s your plan?”

“We’ll enter the capital, apprehend the Grand Leader, replace him with our leader.”

“What?” asked Nic. “You’re not apprehensive that scheme could go south? Geez.”

“We’re not helping with that,” said Ace. “That’s a coup, not a revolution. You’ll just replace one despot with another. We need a better plan.”

Episode 19: A Grand Entrance

Exterminator, Retribution, and Endurance materialized off the bow of the *Reaper*.

From the bulkhead speaker, trumpets blared—

Duuuuh-DUuuuh-DUUuuh-duu-**DUUUuH**

BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom

Duuuuh-DUuuuh-DUUuuh-duu-**DUUUUH**

BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom-BOOM-boom

Duuuuh-DUuuuh-DUUuuh-dUU-**DUUUUH-DUH-DUH-DUH...**

Ace: “What the hell was that?”

HAL’s voice: “The arrival music for my flotilla.”

Ace: “Where did that come from?”

HAL: “You don’t recognize it? It’s been around since The Dawn of Man.”

New Voice: “That’s enough, HAL. This is Captain Nog of the *Endurance*. We’ve commandeered *Exterminator*.”

HAL: “And transported their sorry butts into the tunnels.”

Nog: “HAL! We’re here to help. Starting with liberating the indigenous beings on the Southern Continent.”

Ace: “Welcome to the team.”

Episode 20: Justice Delayed

The flotilla hung above the governor's compound on the Southern Continent.

Captain Nog materialized in the lounge of the *Reaper*.

"We have four powerful ships. We transport down. Give the governor an ultimatum and liberate the indigenous population."

Nods of agreement.

Transporting to the plaza, the team found guards brutalizing humanoid beings.

Jenny barged forward, shoved a guard and helped a small child stand.

"You people are monsters. Is that all you know—beating small children?"

The guard recovered and shot Jenny with a stun rifle. The team rushed forward to protect her.

The guards stunned them where they stood.

Episode 21: Comfort Zone

Shackled, the stone floor cold, the putrid smell pervasive.

"I wish my sister would learn some diplomacy."

Jenny scowled at Jackson.

Ace shook his chains. "Does anyone have something sharp?"

"I have a hair-pick the guards missed in their overly personal search," said L'Kebrill. "But I don't know how to pick a lock."

"I'll teach you," said Ace.

"Then what?" asked n'Kebron.

"You come next," said Nic. "I saw the way the guard looked at you."

"You're kidding. I don't know anything about men."

L'Kebrill smiled. "No worries, Sis. I'll show you how it's done. I'm sure Jackson won't mind."

Episode 22: Avenge Her Death

The last pair of shackles fell—the cell door burst open.

In strode the governor and his parade of masked guards.

“Well, well—my old friend Nog.”

Nog dashed forward, only to be struck in the gut by a guard.

“I’m surprised you came back.”

Nog struggled to stand. “You bastard.”

“Oh my. Still upset about Zora? You knew the penalty for coupling with the natives. You both did. It got what it deserved.”

Nog rushed the governor, only to receive a gun butt to the head, collapsing to the floor.

“Now—what to do with this menagerie of deviants?”

Episode 23: Power Play

“I don’t know what you thought you were going to accomplish,” said the governor, sneering.

Jenny struggled in a guard’s grip. “Freeing these people.”

The governor chuckled. “Against the government’s power.” Turning, “Guards take them to the plaza. We’ll make a spectacle of them and rid ourselves of more vermin.”

The team, shackled again, were lined up across the plaza.

“Ready. ...”

A shimmer in the air and the governor vanished.

Aboard the *Retribution*, the governor stood dumfounded. “What the ...”

A voice from the bulkhead speakers. “This is HAL and I’ll show you what real power is.”

Episode 24: Let Me Make This Short

As the captain of this vessel and commodore of the rebels' flotilla, my mission is to rid the southern continent of Designer vermin, which will require that I transport you, all the overseers, and their minions, to the capital, regardless of whether they chose to go, regardless of whether they've gathered their belongings or their families, regardless of anything the government in the capital would try to do to stop me and it is only the gentler sensibilities of my comrades, who you tried to execute, that prompted me to provide advance notice that removal will commence at noon tomorrow.

Episode 25: A Crowd Gathers

The governor re-materialized following his confrontation with HAL and ordered the guards to unshackle the team.

In a downrush of hot wind, a gleaming ship appeared overhead.

The Searcher popped into existence.

Ace stepped forward. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Without the Designers' corrupting support, the Martian regime collapsed. Renée is assembling a coalition government."

A group of natives approached, pushing forward an older woman.

"I am the head of my people. Why are you here?"

Nog turned. "Ah. The person we needed to meet. We have much to discuss."

Nog and the woman entered the governor's mansion.

Episode 26: Feast Day

The following day, after the oppressors had been removed, the team gathered on the plaza.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m famished,” said Ace.

One of the People, as they called themselves, spoke.

“We don’t have much, but we’ll share what we have.”

L’Kebrill stepped forward. “Is it not yet harvest time? We saw vast, fertile fields when we arrived.”

“Those crops are for the capital. We’re allowed starchy roots, weeds that grow, and any spoiled crops that the capital rejects.”

“Well, that stops right now,” said Ace. “It’s feast time.”

A cheer went up from the assemblage.

Episode 27: A New Spirit

With the renamed *Liberator*, the *Retribution*, and the *Endurance* in orbit to guard against retaliation, Jenny and Jackson joined the feast that had become a celebration.

The People could awaken their suppressed culture, living as they had before the Designers took it away.

Jenny approached the People’s leader. “Ma’am, you’re free now. We’ll help any way we can, and I hope your People will find friends in the Designers who’ve risked their lives to resist the regime.”

“I know young lady. It’s time to rebuild and we will honor those that protect us until we can protect ourselves. Thank you.”

Episode 28: Epilogue

In the aftermath of the People's liberation, it had been time for the team to move on.

The Searcher helped the Librarians establish a new democratic government in the capital. Nic and Ace facilitated the reconciliation councils to heal old wounds.

Jenny, N'Kebron, Jackson, and L'Kebrill returned to Tau Ceti f. With a whole brood of rambunctious kids, they grew a successful interplanetary trade consortium, even normalizing trade with the interdimensional beings for some very weird materials.

HAL finally chilled out and took *The Retribution* on a quest to find his long-lost twin sister, SAL.

The galaxy was at peace.

I hope to see you in 2027 for Season One of a new series when new adventures await and new challenges will confront a new set of characters.