



# CANALS OF NEW MARS

episodes 106 - 120

## 106 - Canals of New Mars: We've Got A Problem!

Landing in the exclusive resort proved much funnier than their wildest dreams. At least for the S-Marines. To ensure the effect, Vasquez and others carried out some rehearsals under JS's direction, cheered by their mates.

"Who are these blokes, Larry?" Miss Letitia Hard asked.

"Shut up and do as they say! Surely it's a candid camera with the Galactic Adventures' compliments. Play along with them! You don't want to appear in Galactic-Vision as the fearful flibbertigibbet you are!" grinned Larry, quickly combing his hair and pulling his potbelly back.

After a while, Letitia began to suggest that perhaps it wasn't a skit for their own fun. After the third confiscated martini, Larry decided that the joke wasn't fun at all, and burst out:

"Who's in charge of this gang fuck, I've not fun at all! I'll complain with the direction for this option I hadn't asked!"

"I won't bother our boss for sure!" Vasquez barked scowling very convincingly.

"You are real!" Larry exclaimed aghast. "You're authentic space scum!"

"Never knew we're fakes. We're genuine specimens!" Vasquez countered and left him to suck his lower lip.

The next day, as planned, Miranda Vasquez returned to the resort with Dr. Lee. JS had provided her with a hidden microphone. To JS it was an excuse for concealing his telepathy, to Vasquez playing the secret agent was funny.

"Relax, sunbathe and enjoy the French cheese and champagne coming directly from the Earth," suggested JS. "Let Lee and Larry fraternize, since Lee can't tell him anything dangerous. With Lee you must stress not to say anything that would endanger the ship. If Larry asks you something, you aren't allowed to speak." JS winked at her.

When JS told Lee to go with Vasquez to the resort to make sure no one was hurt, and that he could relax there, the man exclaimed: "It's wonderful, Larry's prime time is one of my favorite shows!"

"I would bet on it!!" JS smiled ironically.

Lee proved a very appropriate choice and Vasquez was no less. The doctor was firmly determined not to loose talk or betray the cause, but Larry Qing was a diabolically skilled, JS had to admit it. Qing caught every nuance and reticence of Lee's conversation. He pretended to drop the subject, feigning not to notice, but after a while, Larry pounced on Doc's leaking like a hawk.

When Lee, cornered, took refuge in a "Miranda knows the whole story, I came later."

Vasquez's "I'm not authorized to speak about it", brought Larry Qing almost to tears with frustration and desire.

"You're a STORY, you must let me speak with your captain!" he begged.

"Jay, it's OK?" Eve asked, while training with Vickie. JS focused on her.

"You closed your mind!" shouted Eve.

"That's not fair that you can read what I would do! You must decide by yourself." he laughed nodding. "It's OK."

"Captain Sea!" the Atargatis king was enthusiastic of the waterproof equipment JS had presented him and that allowed him to communicate with the outerspace. "That Fish Company proposal. Can you spare a minute?"

At that moment the Vasquez's mike totally attracted JS's attention: "Fuck, those were gunshots!"

Seeing through Vasquez's mind JS saw a Nyhlloghast monster from the black swamps of Bellatrix V running into the jungle with Miss Letitia thrown over his shoulder. Vasquez's bullets bounced off the monster's bone plated torso.

"Stop, stop!" Lee shouted. "Or you kill the girl!"

Vasquez's mag run out and the monster vanished.

"What the hell's happening?" JS shouted.

"We have got a problem, sir." Vasquez cried. "Miss Hard went to snap the flowers. I heard screaming and rushed. Those fucked flip-flops! I saw the monster abducting her. What's doing a fucking Nyhlloghast male at 3,000 light years from home! Why is he here?"





## 107 - Canals of New Mars: Save Soldier Nyhllo!

JS landed at the resort with Flotsam and Jetsam happily wild, and Eve refusing to listen to reasons to stay at the HQ.

"The entrance is everything, Eve!" JS grinned on the way. "Look, a tropical storm is coming. This will make our arrival even more dramatic!"

"Who are those people?" Larry kept saying, looking with bulging eyes at the two urchins. But nobody bothered to reply. Vasquez was reporting to JS. Eve was keeping in check the two scamps who strutted out their new space suits, a gift from JS. Lee paced back and forth aimlessly on the sand.

Sneering Flotsam snapped: "We're Captain's bodyguards, so what?" leaving Larry flabbergasted.

But Larry wasn't one to stay dumbfounded for too long especially with a scoop in front of his nose. Therefore he approached JS just in time to hear Vasquez and the brats asking: "Why is this Nyhlloghast here?"

"Someone put out a death contract on his head." JS muttered indicating Larry with a nod.

"A death contract? Are you kidding?!" Larry cried.

JS fixed his iciest gaze on him and replied calmly: "I never joke on contracts."

"Who dares? Who dares so much?"

"Your ass is grass, do you know it?" Vasquez grimaced.

"Good plan! To do you in by a simulated accident. Your ready-to-use Nyhllo travelled in your own spaceship, probably." JS observed. "Really you don't know who owns Galactic Adventures, do you?"

Larry was about to reply when Lee broke angry: "Miss Hard's in danger. It could devour her. How can we save her?"

"Miss Hard isn't in close danger. Despite their horrid look, Nyhllos are flower-eaters," JS pointed out. "This Nyhllo is an alpha male, apparently. He has kidnapped the girl as a challenge. Now he expects the claimant challenges him, otherwise he'll come to fight. Fighting between Nyhllo males is a brutal affair with horns and claws, and the winner often rips off the genitals from the loser. The no-hoper bleeds to death. More or less, this was Larry's friends' smart idea. But we weren't in the picture."

A lightning tore the sky."It's going to rain," said Lee." What are you going to do, now?"

"That poor bastard." JS shook his head "Jetsam, Flotsam, let's bring Miss Hard back."

"Why you must go yourself, it's dangerous!" Eve thought.

"Thanks to your telepathic gift. You care for my family jewels more than me, honey!" JS laughed mentally.

"Daredevil!" Eve kissed him mentally.

"That poor bastard!" Larry shouted. "You sympathize with the Nyhllo!"

"Sure!" JS grinned. "You're peacefully enjoying your harem of 40 boinkable, compliant females at hand and a dozen submissive male. Then some brutes come. They stun, kidnap and throw you into an island light years away from your beloved swamp! And with only an emaciated female, by Nyhllo standards, at least. Another girl shoots at your balls, turning your world upside down. Now a SOB's going off you, as if it were your fault. Of course I'm with the Nyhllo!"

"Killing a poor animal is never fun," remarked Vasquez.

"To kill him, is it the only way?" Eve asked.

"Even if I capture him alive, what can we do?" JS said. "You cannot kidnap a wild animal and return it to the wild as a package. Assuming that we bring him back to Bellatrix V, dodging the Rogue fleet, we haven't the faintest idea of where his territory is. We'll send him certain to death. More merciful to kill him."

"Damn, what a story! A group of fugitives, pursued by the Rogue fleet, risk their lives to help a monster, after saving a damsel in distress." Larry exclaimed. "You'll become the hero of the galaxy if you let me tell the story!" Lee nodded earnestly.

JS and Eve stared at him. "Galactic hero," JS thought, "this could be useful against 3TC, Eve." Nodding he added aloud: "We can make it, Eve, if Doc gives me a hand."

"What about the contract on me?" Larry put out.

"We'll talk about it later. Now, let's save Soldier Nyhllo,!" JS entered the jungle with the two brats at his heels.





*107- Canals of New Mars: Save Soldier Nyhllo!*

## 108 - Canals of New Mars: A Damsel in Distress?

JS began his campaign to save Miss Hard and capture the Nyhllo with a heavy mind bombing. He and Eve focused on the Nyhllo sending soothing, relaxing and unaggressive messages. The Nyhllo was cooperative. Since his head was more bone than brains, their task was easy. It was also easy to track the Nyhllo to a hidden glade. The scene before them was bucolic.

"It was a damsel in distress, wasn't it?" Flotsam asked in a whisper.

JS grinned: "With females, you never know!" Eve muttered a reproach in his mind, but JS went on: "Now the problem is that Miss Hard doesn't scare the Nyhllo or make him furious with a reckless scream."

"What's the plan?" Jetsam asked.

JS looked at her carefully: "Yes, it can work." At the questioning glance of the two scamps he explained his tactics: "Jetsam, now we dress you up a bit and then you go into the glade with ..."

"Why me?" Jetsam protested, "I'd rather keep him under fire. It's more fun."

"You're a girl and the Nyhllo likes more muffins than nuts. You aren't a threat, just a new entry in his harem." JS grinned wryly. "And we boys didn't leave our jewels at home!"

Flotsam chuckled.

"Hum, I'm afraid that you've to take your space suit off." JD suggested scratching his chin and picking a lot of leaves and flowers carefully. After a while, looking at his work, JS nodded

"Perfect!" While spraying a water lilies bouquet with a good dose of Ipnosweet, he added: "You present the Nyhllo with this bunch of flowers. The poor bastard should sleep for a week!"

"What if I Miss Hard asks me who I am?" Jetsam sounded a little dubious.

"Say you are an elf of the jungle, maybe she drinks it whole, just enough to shut up."

While JS and Flotsam zeroed in on the victim, Jetsam made her entry the bouquet in her hands, but showing what she thought of Flotsam's quips.

Her appearance left Miss Hard speechless while the Nyhllo grunted joyfully. After a few water lilies he was soundly asleep. The Nyhllo's thunderous snoring silenced the jungle. Made sure the Nyhllo was fast asleep, JS tied him just in case.

"Who are you? What are you doing here? Are you going to kill him?" Miss Hard exclaimed pointing with her chin at his gun.

JS uttered quietly: "We're here to save a monster in distress, I suppose. We want to bring him back to his planet."

"To save this beast! What about me, then!" Miss Hard glared at JS. "Why don't you ask me how do I do!"

JS sighed: "Have you been abused, raped, ripped apart, eaten?" JS knew that, apart the initial shock, she had taken the lead.

"No, none of this. He's friendly, you know?" Letitia smiled with quivering lips.

"So, we can go home."

With an eyelashes flutter that pissed off Eve, who was seeing everything, Letitia asked: "May I know who you are?"

"He's the boss!" giggled the two urchins stopping teasing each other.

"Oh! How can I walk in the jungle with these Italian sandals, perhaps you can carry me in your arms?" she blushed and her lush, bright-red lips parted on a sensual smile.

"She's seducing you!" Eve's mind screamed.

"Don't worry, Miss Hard. I brought these for you." JS put a pair of work boots in front of her. "Flotsam, you guard the Nyhllo. I'll send someone to relieve you, ASAP. Miss Hard, Mr. Qing is very worried and waiting for you anxiously."

"Bullshit!" Letitia cried. "We're here by contract. To feed gossip columnists and later play a fake quarrel back home."

"Miss Hard doesn't seem scared at all!" laughed Flotsam nudging Jetsam.

"On my advice, elf, or whatever you are," said Letitia. "I had to hold off far worse monsters in my career. For years I've had lovers in accordance with the rule of 'The Twenty': 20 cm shorter and 20 years older. I'm fed up with these bug-fuckers!"

"Fed up?!" the brats shouted.

"Literally, throat-deep!" Letitia pointed at her neck with a hand cut. "Which way, Mr. ...?"

"Sea, Jay Sea." Hardly concealing a grin, JS bowed pointing to the direction.







## 109 - Canals of New Mars: Mioragor's Embrace.

The time was approaching. The asteroid was fast reaching the position calculated to obtain the best result.

"All aboard." JS ordered, "it's time to leave Atargatis. So greet everyone, take your stuff and embark."

Entrusted the Nyhllo to Lee's care, and Larry and Letitia to Adam's, JS and Eve went into the palace of the Atargatis king.

"We are indebted to you, my friends!" exclaimed the king. "You'll be always welcome."

"You owe us nothing." JS declared. "Wolfblood & Suckheart, Lucas' Law Firm, sent me your copies of the contracts."

To remove Atargatis necks from the noose of the 5 Fishmarket Sisters, JS had convinced the king to form a his own company. W&S took care of Company's interests, rented cargos and hired the crews.

NMS Victory Co. ensured the trade and received 5% of the profits.

"And the resort?" Melusine asked.

"According to Lucas, your claims are well placed. Galactic Adventures couldn't produce any valid document certifying that it purchased the estate from the first inhabitants, that are you. GUNESCO withdrew their permission, at once. Greasing some wheels, this ecological heritage should be entrusted to you, the original inhabitants. Forever. Now it's up to you to decide how to handle it." JS answered.

The king looked at them puzzled.

"Anyway, we'll keep in touch, occasionally," Eve smiled. "Just to know everything's OK."

The king and Melusine looked relieved. "Good luck." They said shaking their hands.

Since their arrival on Atargatis, some astronomers of the Galactic Space Center with JS had kept in touch, as well as JS's pilots had been watching the asteroid and applied to small directional forces to navigate the still intact asteroid beyond Atargatis toward Miogaror, the gas giant. When the celestial boulder passed within the Miogaror's Roche Limit, the planet's tidal forces were strong enough to disrupt its body held together only by its own gravity. The asteroid broke apart in several pieces. Vickie sang a celebrating aria throughout the hull.

Once sure that no fragments would fall on Atargatis, the pilots unleashed their weapons against those wonderful targets.

"Jay, why don't you shoot with that big gun between your legs?" Vickie suggested excited about that firepower.

"Vickie! What the hell are you saying!" Eve cried.

"Vickie's super cannon in the bow, she means!" JS laughed. "I can shoot against the larger fragment, so we can measure the time it takes to charge it again."

JS shot and the impact was stupendous. The celestial boulder almost disintegrated. The super cannon was ready to fire again sooner than JS expected.

"You're the best, Vickie!" JS decreed. The ship chuckled, then began to sing a solemn march that set everyone in high-spirits.

Miogaror's deadly embrace soon showed its effects. The first fragment slammed into Miogaror's atmosphere with a fireball as powerful as a big atomic bomb. The plume of the fireball raised up for miles from the cloud-top of the planet expanding and cooling rapidly. Few minutes after the impact the ejected material falling back onto the planet raised again the heat peak. When the second fragment hit the upper atmosphere, a few hours later, a huge, dark increasing spot marked the first impact place.

The hail of the asteroid's debris went on over the next four days, and Vickie's singing highlighted the solemnity of the event.

Watching the blue moon fading away, Eve sighed: "Don't you think we should tell them that everything is fine?"

JS embraced her: "Already done. We must leave, Eve, or we'll take root. Atargatis is so beautiful, but isn't ours."

"You are right." Eve nodded.

"We need to find a world for us." Embracing her tight, JS was silent for a while, then added: "I wonder where your world is, the one from which your ancestors left. Why nobody has ever heard of them and their ships?"





109 - Canals of New Mars: Mioragor's Embrace.

## 110 - Canals of New Mars: Free Nyhlo.

Since envy and suspicions are very dangerous in a closed environment like a ship, JS ordered that there was no separation between civil and military rank, when off duty. "Nobody has to think that we enjoy privileges while others are on ration." JS told his officers, "Set a good example dining in public canteens and restaurants." To stress his suggestion, JS made a point of honor to have his meals in the cafeterias of the Urban Quarter of the ship.

"May I sit here?" Lee asked as soon as Eve left.

JS nodded and waited.

"I'm afraid I put us all in danger." Lee spat out, while destroyed two paper towels.

JS looked at him inquiringly.

"About Larry. I was careful, but now I've realized I spoke at full speed. I..." Lee said embarrassed.

JS smiled magnanimous: "Don't worry, you know nothing that could endanger our people. I appreciate this attitude, that you worry and have spoken to me."

"You're helping people you don't know, even the Nyhlo..." before Lee could say something embarrassing, JS stopped him: "Forget it, Doc, it's neither the time nor the place."

"Can I join you?" Larry exclaimed jovially, approaching with three coffees.

"Of course!" JS waved and added with a smile. "Stay with us, Doc?"

Relieved Lee nodded and began to sip his coffee.

"If you don't have anything better to do, can we talk about that contract out on me?" Larry asked with some anxiety. "I do not understand ... a lot of people would like me dead, but it's only a catchphrase, is it?"

"Any guess? seen the place and the killer, it should be easy," grinned JS.

"Don't talk to me in riddles!" Larry exclaimed angrily. Lee almost choked. Larry, mending his manners, quickly recovered: "Excuse me, I'm upset. I don't know what to do. Can you help me? I can pay for it," he added, thinking that if that guy was helping a Nyhlo, certainly he would help him.

"By chance your interests intersect with mine, so I'll help you my way. This means that, unlike the Nyhlo, you now become my spokesman. Got it?" JS stared at him sardonically.

"Is he mind-reading me?" Larry thought.

JS grimaced: "You broadcasted a program on the 55 Cancri drug cartel. Those pirates didn't appreciate it because GUN's DEA was forced to intervene. The crack-back bosses had to shift their refineries to Bellatrix V, from where, incidentally, our Nyhlo comes."

"I wasn't supposed to be in Atargatis this month." Larry protested.

JS looked at him like a parent watching his poophead son: "The crack-back makes half of Ecominerals miners's wages."

"It's illegal!" shouted Lee.

"But effective. After GUN's action, Ecominerals stocks collapsed due to the scarce productivity of its workers. And they blame you for this, Larry!" Larry stared at him dumbfounded, JS went on: "Ecominerals put out a contract on you and asked the narcos to execute it. Atargatis was perfect. Galactic Adventures is owned by Green Foods Inc., that controls Star Estates, that is the owner of Ecominerals, which owns the golden share in Galactic Fly, the owner of Green Foods. We call it incestuous share dealing, but the puppeteer is just one: Cypher Ltd."

"How do you know that?" Larry asked piercing JS with avid interest.

The intercom rang. "We'll continue later," JS jumped up, "we've arrived. Doctor give the Nyhlo a crack-back hit, and Larry, ready to go on air. The first must be good. "

"Do you want to dope the Nyhlo?"

"If we throw him out stoned by sleeping pills and cryostasis, the first male passing by will cut his balls into tiny shreds." JS asserted. "Good way to help him. Give him a chance with a bit of chemistry."

Larry nodded in agreement, and Lee surrendered.

As JS suspected, the Nyhlo's habitat was close to the refineries. The beast seeing his beloved swamp roared his excited cry of defiance. Larry's show on the air was sublime.





110 - Canals of New Mars:Free Nyhllo.

## 111 - Canals of New Mars: Code Name 'Augean Stables'

"And now?" Eve asked, mimicking Larry but stressing the cranky tone.

JS laughed: "Quiet, Eve. He's a bit a pain in the ass, but we're suffering for a good cause. He's going to set up us as Galactic Heroes, ergo the EA cannot off us directly or handing us over to the Rogues."

"Phew," Eve sniffed. "He's always posing, I wonder if at the toilet ...!" she laughed in turn "How horrible! "

JS shook his head: "What are you thinking of, rather go to ask him if he wants to broadcast embedded with the attack team or from the ship. I'm getting through our plans with Vasquez."

"Him embedded! This is witty!" Vasquez exclaimed coming in. "That bloke's nothing just a lot of talk and some pixels, but someone forgot to check 'genitals'! Well, what's the plan?"

Eve found Larry in the common quarter of the bridge, up to his neck in a philosophical conversation with Lee. "JS says that the best way to off the contract is to dispatch the middleman. That you are under our protection will come loud and clear to the hirer who can hardly find a new liquidator. Do you like to go with the assault team?"

"Huh, no, I'd like it a lot, but I've no training," Larry smiled pimpishly.

"What are you going to do?" asked Lee, since Vasquez kept him ignorant about actions.

"Clean the stables: blow up the refineries and leave." Eve said.

"I'll take care of the wounded and prisoners." Lee mumbled.

"We don't take prisoners." Eve remarked.

"But we cannot kill all those civilians!" Lee exclaimed shocked. "They will be entitled to a trial, at least!"

"We too are civilians!" backfired Eve. "Let the Nyhllos put them on trial! They're hunted to extract erotic essences from male musk glands."

"You say we are civilians. New Martian Army: that I read on my contract." Lee retorted.

"Actually she's right." JS had entered the room silently. Puzzled, Lee and Larry looked at him. "Only states with internationally recognized governments have the Military, the others can boast titles and uniforms, but are in fact civilians."

"But we are at war, right?" Lee asked.

"I'd say we are forced to war. I'd say we strive to fight decently, but the fact remains. We have neither state nor country but this ship, and no recognition. We are as much civilians as these narco-pirates, apart from trafficking in drugs or the slave trade."

"The Rogues are hunting us like pirates, actually!" Eve stated.

"And runaway slaves." Vasquez added with a nod to JS: "Mission is set for 0300, sir."

JS nodded.

"What is EA's position?" Larry asked.

Since there was time until H-Hour, JS decided to accept the debate: "For the Earth we are boat people, refugees, actually bad-shit, since we defend ourselves. Humanitarian organizations dubbed us a threat since we don't entrust our destiny to them. GUN, well, no GUN's bureaucrat will sweat his ass to decide our status. He leaves it to history."

A leaden silence dropped. Everyone looked puzzled. JS sighed and said: "Civilized wars are fought by civilians, don't you know? Seldom postmodern wars are fought by the military. In those cases, the war lasts a month or two. The winner withdraws its army with fanfares and the asymmetric war takes over again. Call them guerrillas, insurgents, partisans, spies, contractors, spec-op units, we are people of the same ilk. 'Civilian' fighters operate among civilians like fish in a pond. Sorting out a civilian fighter from a peaceful one, that's hard, very hard. But I, we try to do our best, to be decent, even if fighting à la façon du pays would be easier, sometimes."

"Be ready anyway, Doctor." Vasquez said.

The mission kicked off at 0300, the Centurions dropped them onto the roof of the installation while the Fireghosts shelled the extractors.

"If anything goes wrong, shoot your way clear of danger and get the hell out of there. Good luck." JS's orders.

At dawn, the refineries were razed.





111- Canals of New Mars: Code Name "Augean Stables"

## 112 - Canals of New Mars: P.R.L.S.A.R.

The bright giant star Bellatrix shone a blinding blue light. The fiery massive star was burning fast its hydrogen fuel. No longer supported by nuclear reactions, its core was contracting and heating, producing an expansion of its cooler surface layers. A matter of a few million years and Bellatrix would become a red giant. A growing shell of red orange gaseous matter was already heralding the beginning of its transformation and the threat to its smaller and fainter companion.

However, this didn't affect either JS, or the Nyhllos: by then they would be dead quite a while. Now, only the trap mattered.

The onboard radio kept repeating like a mantra: "Perry Rat Likes Shooting Arseholes Regularly".

"What the hell is it gibbering?" Larry asked Vasquez coming into the bridge common area with Eve.

Vasquez snarled: "It 's a mnemonic to remember the Six Sections Battle Drills: PRLSAR. Now it's up to the Flying Circus to brass the mutha-fucka!"

Larry smiled: "Stop jargon, please. How did it work over there? Have you made some good shots?"

"A lot! They had few jimpy and were taken by surprise. No casualties among us. Now it's up to the Airy Fairy to finish the job." chewed Vasquez, who couldn't stand Larry.

Larry couldn't wait to broadcast the material. "But don't we go away?"

Reading into Vasquez's mind a rude sentence, Eve blurted: "No. To quote a JS's favorite from Machiavelli, 'If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared'. Now we'll give the narco flotilla so a devastating shot that they won't attack anybody for a long time."

"Machiavelli?" Larry mused. "I've never heard of him, he isn't in the EA government. Ahh, he's one of those national security ghost-advisers, is he, right?"

"Action station!" the radio cracked.

"I must go." Eve ran to her command chair in the balcony.

The pirate mother-ship materialized out of the hyperspace. At first glance she seemed a harmless cargo ship, but she turned in a flash. From her wide open hangars a pack of Astro-Zodiaks swarmed out.

"Don't jilt me at the battle altar, Vickie!" JS thought.

"Never!" Vickie could feel the excitement rising within him, Eve's kick of adrenalin and felt herself stronger as each second passed.

"Our pilots are with their fangs out, sir!" radioed Roma, the flight leader.

"So are the pirates. Let's them think we're a fine bounty! Stand by!" JS ordered.

"What are they waiting for?" Letitia whispered to Vasquez.

"The commander wants to test the ship and the crew."

"You trained against the asteroid, didn't you?" exclaimed Larry.

"Asteroids don't fire you back!" Vasquez snapped.

"Vickie, open your energy shield when within range. Remember: our fighters are ready to protect you." JS could feel Vickie's neurotransmitters buzz.

The pirates approached hubristically. Big battleships were almost defenseless against the attacks of their tiny Astro-Zodiaks. Their shields could block high-energy emissions, but were useless against weapons that resort to kinetic or explosive force to achieve damage. A suicide A-Zodiac full of explosives could easily pierce the shield and immobilize the ship if it struck in the right place.

Vickie modified her shield into a cobweb texture. JS and Vickie had trained long. Once captured by the web, the preys were immobilized. The ship sucked their energy annulling the Newtonian forces. The energy net was sufficient to keep them at bay and render any explosion harmless.

The swarm of astro-zodiaks entangled in the web like flies on flypaper while the thick clouds of the Nyhllos' planet absorbed the heat signatures that could give away the fighters awaiting for their prey.

"In, in, in!" JS ordered.

The A-Zodiaks went down like clay ducks at a shooting gallery.

Vickie's big guns put an end to the mother-ship before she could jump into the hyperspace.





## 113 - Canals of New Mars: Evil Plans.

JS could feel Vickie's driving force slowing down. The excitement kick was starting to drain out of all of them as the immediate danger passed; they felt empty and exhausted.

"You OK, Vickie?" JS asked.

"I was scared stiff. But I was even more scared of disappointing you, Jay. To bug out and jump into the Nowhere killing you all. I was afraid to bugger up everything."

"But you gallantly fought. That only matters." JS's tone was warm.

"You won the day, Vickie!" Eve added. "I'm so proud of you!"

"I'm drained, and thirsty." Vickie stated then grinned: "We kicked them in the teeth, did we?"

"Positive, baby!" JS smiled mentally. "It's customary to have a beer, back to base! That Horsehead nebula seems a fine bar to me."

It was almost goodbye time when Ms. Letitia Hard walked into JS's office. "I'd like to stay, sir."

For the first time in his adventurous life JS panicked: Eve wouldn't take it quite well. Yet, years of training allowed him to maintain a poker-face and ask in a firm voice: "What can you do?"

"I've a vocational nurse degree. I talked to doctor de Carvalho. He told me I can stay.."

"Goddam, Vasquez!" JS thought. As she spoke, he called Eve mentally. "Eve, here there's Miss. Hard asking to stay."

Eve giggled: "Don't panic! No problem, she can stay. We need nurses."

"Are you sure, really SURE?"

"Vasquez and I agree, and Mariko Ishikawa will be happy!"

"Mariko.., uh, now I understand!" JS grinned.

"Why are you smiling?" Letitia asked.

Dodging the question, JS uttered: "Welcome aboard."

Larry was champing at the bit. JS had given him more classified material, and the man couldn't wait to go on air.

"I'll contact you via Wolfblood & Suckeart, which will also provide your protection. You owe me a life. Don't force me to collect." JS stared at him making more effective his threat, "I don't miss."

"Are you kidding? You're my deep throat. Nobody pisses his source away."

JS saw that Larry was serious about that.

Larry's show was phantasmagoric. The President got really pissed off and summoned 3TC, EVIL's director.

"Hell, why is that fuck-shit still alive and sound?! Larry Qing is making a hero of him! We can't kill him now, it's too dangerous politically."

"I betrayed Sea's position to the Rogues, those tossers. I put out a contract on his head, but to no avail. He's a tough nut to crack."

"He must die. I can't risk to have him as the People's Party candidate in the forthcoming elections. Not with this favorable press."

"Can I use any asset, even the most vicious?"

"Fuck it! The vilest! You're EVIL's director, do your worst, for God's sake! But it must look a natural death, a cruel twist of fate."

Later on, in the limousine neither 3TC nor his wife, Lady Louise Cyfer, wished to comment on the show they had just seen at the Opera House.

"That Larry Qing Show is like a soap bubble sired by a fart!" Lou Cyfer snapped out abruptly.

"How is it that Larry Qing is still alive, my dear?" 3TC asked.

"I've been wondering myself. Kak-No, the drug-cartel chief in Bellatrix V, assured me that his death was a done deal. Instead Qing is still alive, the back-crack shipment disappeared, the refineries destroyed and Kak stone dead. I need one of your top men to settle the issue."

"Any clue?" 3TC hissed between his teeth.

"My henchmen found these in Kak's men's mouths."

"Death Cards!" 3TC shot.

"What?"

"Death Cards. That damn Sea wants us to know he did it." 3TC growled. "He was one of my best men, and now he's my worst problem."

"Sea? I've already heard this name." Lady Cyfer mumbled.

"New Mars, my dear. The Rogues exacted Sea's head for granting the exploitation of Yttrium mines to our Ecominerals." 3TS muttered. "But somehow he survived."

"He's damn damaging our interests. The man is a problem." Lou Cyfer stated coolly.

"No man, no problem! But everything has to look natural, by presidential order." 3TC grimaced.





## 114 - Canals of New Mars: The Unnamed Soldiers' Cemetery

Some months after Larry's departure, and thanks to his fine job with his show, in the galactic social fora there were millions of fans supporting the "Victory's Fugitives". "We need a planet for us, Eve, or it's over." JS shook his head. "We cannot keep the bandits at bay for much longer and deceive ourselves by thinking we can win against the Rogue fleet."

"We'll make it, I'm sure!" Eve tried lovingly to soothe his nerves a bit.

A women-only lunch with Vasquez and Ishigawa didn't cheer Eve up. "Sea's right. If we don't find a sanctuary, we are bugged." Ishikawa stated flatly.

"There are problems rising even among our own people." Vasquez added thoughtfully. "Some people are starting to suffer from claustrophobia."

As if fulfilling these dire predictions, coming out of the hyperspace they had bounced on Rogue frigates twice. Once JS preferred to jump again, the second he gave battle.

"Once is an accident, twice means that the noose is tightening." he grumbled.

"Vickie, Eve, we must ponder on the ancient S'skash star charts." JS sighted. "Let's figure out where the hell is your native planet, damn it!" Frustrated, JS was even ready to bear that Vickie and Eve sang the songs they knew about it.

"Jay, time spans differently in the Nowhere. It's like a perpetual present. There were many ships over there, but now I understand that no ship had been evoked from the Nowhere in a very long time." Vickie ventured. "The stars have moved since my mother's time."

"The problem is to know how much time has passed, a million years ... more than that, less ... and where was the observation point. Found that, found our planet." JS made the point.

One day Adam came to visit him on the bridge. JS noticed how the man had aged, and looked fragile.

"We've problems downtown. Many complain that we continue to wander."

"We need our own sanctuary. Atargatis was all water and Bellatrix meant to fight every day as we did on New Mars!" Eve stated.

JS nodded. "I'll come to talk to people. We'll organize shifts so that everyone can enjoy Isla Tortuga when we go shopping. That will help."

In his attempt to crack the ancient star maps, JS went gruelingly back and forth getting intelligence.

Meanwhile at Isla Tortuga, Adam had just entered the store to pick up some supplies when Peter exclaimed: "Look who's here!"

"Vlasav, old chap, to what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you?" Adam held out a hand.

"Good news, I hope." Vlasav smiled. "Where's Sea?"

On the Victory, Eve welcomed Vlasav mind-reading him. The man was sincere and had an offer from EA.

Three days later JS was back. "You all right, Miki? Been long time..."

"Still in the GOD's business, mate. I have an official letter for you." Vlasav was truly happy to see him.

EA offer granted them a planet in perpetual legacy. They had only to choose from the attached list. There were no conditions.

"I don't trust them, Eve." JS said, weighing up the pros and cons.

Two days later GNN prime time news reported the starship Tisiphone had been hastily destroyed and Isla Tortuga quarantined.

"Shit! Tisiphone was my ship!" Vlasav whistled. He was shivering, his face purplish.

"He has a fever." Lee whispered to JS.

Soon they knew Vlasav had contracted the SW3 fever, the deadly plague that had racked and killed those on the infamous EAS Pasteur.

"Bastards! They infected me so I could act as a Trojan Horse." Vlasav whispered. He knew he had no hope. "I don't want to die rotting. Keep your promise, mate."

JS nodded. "Quarantine the ship, Doctor. I must keep an oath."

Members of the special forces had long since built their own secret graveyard, the Unnamed Soldiers' Cemetery, on a nameless moon under the Hand of God Nebula.

Here they buried their dead, or hang their dogtags. Those unnamed elsewhere, here had a sincere tribute from their comrades.

Raising the visor of Vlasav's space suit, a biohazard warning, JS vowed he'd avenge his friend.





*114 - Canals of New Mars: The Unnamed Soldiers' Cemetery*

## 115 - Canals of New Mars: : Yellow Jack

On his return, JS found the council of war already gathered. The military were in uniform as he had expressly requested. The idea was to emphasize the gravity of the situation and the fact that they were at war. The meeting was attended by Eve, Adam, Vasquez, Ishikawa, Roma, Pak, Lee De Carvalho, S-Victor and S-Lizzie, both S'skash. The S'skash names were very simple, the family name followed by a number. To the S'skash, however, the Earthener names were cooler. Encouraged by the missionaries, they begun to baptize their children with names from famous soap opera characters. The names were preceded by an S-, hence the nickname "Hyphenated Martians".

"The situation, Doctor."

"The SW3 fever mortality is approximately 100%." Lee's voice was calm, but his hands couldn't mask his tension. The note-sheet before him had been reduced to tiny fragments with which he fiddled unconsciously. "It spreads via aerosolized respiratory droplets with great ease and speed. It has an incubation period of 12 days exactly. The ability of infection is highest during incubation and the first day of the acute phase when the fever explodes and the skin-color becomes purple, from which the nickname of the Red Death."

"12 days exactly. Are you sure?" Roma asked.

"It's a biological weapon and the time factor is essential." JS intervened.

By chance, Lee was sitting in front of him and now he stared at JS very directly.

"Yes, it's the result of genetic engineering. There's no cure."

"The BAR, the deceased Rogue empire, engineered it." JS added holding his gaze.

"It looks so." Lee countered.

Both Eve and Vasquez sensed testosterone-fuelled antagonism rising, and both decided that this wasn't the time for a fit of temper.

"Apart from the vaccine, doctor." JS interjected again, narrowing his eyes at Lee.

The tightening of Lee's lips was a danger signal to Vasquez: "You had been vaccinated when they commanded you on the Pasteur, right?"

"Yes, I was. The only cure is a therapeutic vaccine during the incubation or at most within the first day of overt disease. Then there is only a slow painful death."

"We could take the vaccine then!" Roma smiled.

JS shook his head. "Eartheners and Rogues have orders to shoot us down on sight. The only way would be to take the vaccine with a coup de main, but who conceived this evil plan, expects something. It won't be easy, they're waiting for us."

"Even if you succeed, the stocks won't suffice for all." Lee admitted.

"12 days, so I and the others of Isla Tortuga's shuttle, we have 5 days left." Adam ascertained.

"On Isla Tortuga, maybe Peter is already dying." Eve murmured.

"What shall we do with our people here, when they begin to die?" S-Victor asked.

"We'll tell them the whole truth and isolate those who may have been infected ASAP." JS's suggestion was an order.

"Panic will break out!" Vasquez uttered.

"No," JS countered. "Panic breaks out when people don't know what's going on. We'll explain everything. If everyone is responsible and cools it, we can contain the outbreak to a minimum."

"SW3 to a minimum?!" cried Lee. "We'll die all!"

"No, doctor, because you will make the vaccine." JS pointed out to the equipment around them. "You have the knowledge and the tools to do it."

Lee shook his head: "It's impossible. I need a suitable blood serum."

"I know nothing about vaccines, but you can take mine." Adam offered. "I've got nothing to lose."

"I can try, it might work." Lee lied.

"And yours, Lee?" Eve blurted out. "You were vaccinated."

"Mine is not suitable." Lee shook his head. "Moreover we must be fast. I need the lab protocols and the blood serum of infected patients resulted immune."

"Mine is." JS replied, "And I know where's the BAR lab. I'd been there. It's in the Gray's sector, so I must collect my credit."

When they jumped out of the hyperspace, the view of the hellish BAR lab did hold their breath. It was surrounded by some Gray flying saucers.





*115 - Canals of New Mars:: Yellow Jack*



## 116- Canals of New Mars: War Is a Suq

"Go away!" a Gray yelled from the screen. "This is a forbidden zone."

"I'm Jay Sea, commander of the NMS Victory. I'd like to speak to the swarm leader."

A few moments later, a Gray, very different from the previous one, appeared on the screen. "Why you do this request?"

"I ask the permission to enter the BAR lab. If you agree, your debt is extinguished." JS's stance was very composed.

"Debt?" asked the astonished Gray.

"Exactly."

A long confabulation followed, then the Gray admitted: "There is a debt. We invite you on our ship."

JS had just dressed in his full uniform when he saw Eve dressing in full regalia too. "Eve, you stay." JS said freezing her with her bodice at half mast.

"You don't go alone, right? Lee told me dreadful stories about the Grays." she pouted.

"Eve, you're contagious, you've forgotten?" JS smiled at her sadly.

"Oh, I hadn't thought about this. I cannot conceive it, really." Eve sighed heartbroken.

"It's OK. I need you here. If we are together, in a minute the Grays can behead our chain of command. You must stay with Vickie, in mental contact with me and do what I tell you. We'll make it."

JS summoned Lee on the bridge. "Doctor, you come with me. Take one tube of blood. As guests, we can't go empty-handed."

"Why me?" Lee asked. Vasquez rolled her eyes, Lee was a lost case.

"Hereafter I expect my orders executed without discussions." JS grinned. "My order is in reason of: first, if some Gray scientist starts to ask brainiac questions, you can answer better than me.

Second, you're an honest bloke." Lee interrupted him: "That's an idiot."

"Honest means honest. I call spade a spade and moron a moron. The Grays are empathic and will perceived your honesty. That will support my cooked truth."

On the shuttle JS gave Lee further instructions. "They shouldn't know that we're infected. The vaccine is for Isla Tortuga. Whatever you see, stay cool. If you have questions, I'll answer later.

Keep this poison capsule in your mouth as an insurance, doc."

"What a fun!" Lee quipped.

"Do you speak Gray, doc?"

"No, just Rogue."

"Better so!" JS thought and said: "I'll translate if needed. The Grays are organized like our bees, more or less. We usually meet Gray worker bees. Special nutrients are supplied to the genetically manipulated fetuses to produce queens and male leaders. Since they are the result of eugenics, they all look alike."

"Commander Sea, this is a forbidden area." A Gray knight welcomed them. "We let you go unharmed, honoring our debt. We want to know, however, how you know that the BAR Lab is here."

"Thanks to the beacon I put there." JS smiled politely and motioned to Lee to approach." Your debt is paid. This is a gift for you."

"You entered the Lab, and you're still alive?" the Gray exclaimed.

"Hale and hearty!" JS turned to leave. "We failed!" Lee thought desperate.

"Wait!" the Gray Queen made her entry. Pointing at the BAR lab, she asked: "Why do you want to go in there?"

"Due to the SW3 outbreak at Isla Tortuga. Our doctor can make the vaccine if I get the lab protocols." JS's answer.

"If I let you go in, Sea, you'll hand us those protocols?"

"You'll owe me a new debt: Isla Tortuga is more your business than mine." JS stated nonchalantly.

"How can I honor it?"

"Your labs will manufacture the vaccine, Ma'am."

The queen nodded at JS: "Are there unknown protocols in there?"

"Positive! But you already know it, Ma'am."

"None of us managed to come in and get out alive. If you grab the BAR secrets for us." The queen bit her lip.

"You'll owe me one more debt." JS concluded.

"Your request?" she sighted.

"You vaccinate Isla Tortuga for free. Keep your word, and I won't unleash my most powerful, vicious curse." JS threatened.

"Granted." Frightened, the queen nodded.

"You made it!" Lee shouted on their way back, "I didn't think they'd yield."

"War is a suq!" JS grinned. "But we haven't the protocols yet."





## 117 - Canals of New Mars: Gray Soul Quest

Lee's brain was boiling like a volcano. He had at least a million questions to ask, but was afraid of being intrusive. JS took pity of him before he blew up:

"OK, doc, question time until we land on the Victory."

"You knew from the beginning that the Grays had failed to enter the lab. You bet everything on this. How could you be sure?"

"The Grays cannot swim!" JS snickered.

Lee looked at him dumbfounded.

"The mineral part of their bone tissue is strontium phosphate which makes their skeletons heavier than ours. Moreover Gray workers lack fat tissues, so they can't float." JS grinned.

"They can use some device!"

"No, the Lab is a shit-hole." JS grimaced. "Many structures collapsed and many rooms are full of water or worse. To go inside you must slip and wriggle. A space suit is too bulky and breaks getting entangled in the spikes. You've to take off your suit to proceed into the pressurized area."

"Did you force your way in without a bio-safety suit?" Lee goggled at him.

"Exactly. Nobody explained to us what to expect. But maybe that shitty broth made me immune." JS shrugged his shoulders.

"Strontium." Lee mumbled, "the DNA-phosphate of strontium lacks the lethal effects of calcium on many epithelial cell types and allows pathogens to grow dramatically. The Grays are walking dead inside the lab!"

"Well?" Eve asked after they landed.

"They let me go in." JS tried to focus his mind on something else, but Eve was faster.

"You CANNOT go in alone, right?" urged Eve.

JS kept a stiff upper lip.

"I volunteer." Adam established with a firm voice.

"What's the problem?" Vasquez asked.

"There aren't only microorganisms over there. There are also other things, descendants of experiments for biological warfare. We must make our way by force." JS admitted.

"I don't understand why the BAR did this." Eve shook her head.

"If there's a dorky gene, well the BAR had it." JS snapped while he and Adam were checking their stuff. "They wanted to create the super-Rogue and the perfect weapon for disinfecting the galaxy from lower races. But a bio-weapon got out of hand and an epidemic swept most of their elites away."

"The Rogue waited more than a thousand years to be able to rebuild part of their empire. But they are still to-and-fro assholes!" Vasquez concluded.

"Why do the Grays want those bio-weapons?" Lee asked worried.

"The Grays believe they can capture people's souls, sooner or later, and use it as food for their queens. Doctor Frankenstein, they're." JS checked his weapons. "They are exceptional in medical techniques, but start from false assumptions. Now they hope to rip souls using bloody BAR science."

"You don't believe in the soul, Captain?" Lee asked.

Lee had inadvertently stepped onto a mine field. By JS's experience, religious talks could destroy a friendship and too many were willing to kill or die for religion more than for a loaf of bread.

"I am a soldier not a philosopher." JS dodged of the question. "But I'm sure that a soul, if there is one and whatever it is, cannot be taken with forceps and scalpel. Adam, are you ready?"

"Never been more ready!" the old man grinned to JS who had given him a good dose of back-crack.

"Eve, don't worry, you're with us all the time." JS thought hugging and kissing her.

"Will you give the BAR weapons to the Grays?" Eve asked.

"No way! I'll give them doctored protocols." JS grinned. "Doc, stay with Eve, just in case I need some suggestions."

S-Victor landed them in the Lab flight deck. There some Gray opened the airlocks and closed them behind them. JS and Adam took off their space suits and entered into the corridors.

"This way, Adam! through the gutter," JS pointed.

They dived in a soupy liquid and emerged in a lab. The bluish lights twinkled annoyingly. The air smelled of chemicals and excrements. The feeling of being watched hovered over those ruins.





## 118 - Canals of New Mars: A Newtonian Mayhem

"Jay," Adam whispered feeling his skin scales stand on end. ""There's a huge spider watching us."

"Don't worry," JS nodded. "It isn't dangerous unless you fall into his web, or you get too close. But if you see one coming down, just shoot!"

Eve felt JS uneasy. "Jay?" she worried.

"Nothing," he thought, "I hate spiders!" and she almost saw him tilting his head in his ballsy challenging way and devil-may-care smiling. "Let's move."

They began to advance in the guts of the hellish lab-ship slipping through the debris, jumping from a collapsed walkway to another, plunging again into the yucky broth and sometimes shooting at a hostile nasty business or a spider that had built its web just on a corridor entrance.

"This place makes my flesh creep." Adam cursed.

"You've lost your night vision glasses. Do you want mine?" JS asked.

"No. You're a much better shooter than me. I'm more for burp guns!"

The vibrations of their footsteps, as stealthy as they were, reverberated along the tubes, the bulkheads and the atmosphere itself. Now it was a bolt that plunged the canyons below to betray them, now the heat of the discharge of their plasma weapons, now the contortions of a dying devil-knows-what monster. Their advance woke up the ship from centuries-old stagnation.

When they reached the bridge, the stage was ready. JS began to work on the main console, praying that there was still enough energy and the computer's files were still intact. Meanwhile, Adam welcomed the honor committee liquidating a giant rancor that had found its way to the platform, despite the many blows. The smell of blood excited the spiders that had elected the place as their kingdom thanks to its warm and humid atmosphere. While the spiders moved their pedipalps in excitement, hordes of humanoids, eager to join the bash, rushed from the ports. All the ship radiated a single thought: HUNGER.

"Have you finished?" Adam asked, firing like a devil. "They're too many!"

"Almost done. Our copy is ready. But I have to ask the doc two things. I must do the changes here or the Grays will smell the trick." JS replied and let fly a plasma burst.

"Rope yourself tightly Adam. Mr. Newton and the spiders are going to help." JS grinned. "I'll switch off the gravity. This will push many of them into the cobwebs by inertia. When I switch it on again, those who are in flight will fall into the abyss."

"And the spiders, they'll fly too!" Adam asked worried.

"No they are attached to their webs. When in doubt, however, don't spare ammo!" JS added: "This is the console. Switch gravity on and off as you please! "

Now the air of the command center, thick with the usual miasma of chemicals and excrements, was also filled with screams, screeches and squalls. The bloody stench blended with the tang of sweat that JS had come to associate with fear and slaughter.

"Done!" JS yelled to Adam.

Gravity was on again and the spiders were feasting.

"Jay, we must blow this hell up!" Adam stared at him.

JS was about to reply when he saw that the old man was sweating profusely, his skin color reddish. The disease was entering the acute phase. "Damn, you're at the death's door!"

"Maybe on my race it acts faster. Please, blast this place."

JS nodded. "She's like current Rogue ships. A charge on the control console starts the self-destruction procedure."

"Adam wants to stay there!" Eve whispered in the JS's mind.

"I know. Would you say something?" Then he told Adam, "Eve can hear you, through me."

Once back, JS stopped at the bulk airlocks beyond which S-Victor's shuttle was waiting. "This is the remote control to for the explosion. Adam, give me two days or the Grays will take it badly. In any case I put a timer." Then he handed him a capsule: "Here, if things get too bad."

Adam nodded: "It'll be a big bang!" The fever was devouring him.

"It'll be a stellar bang." JS confirmed.





## 119 - Canals of New Mars: Lab Talking

"You're back!" Eve cried running towards JS just landed on Vickie's deck. Before he could react, she took his mouth with a powerfully erotic, all-consuming, passionate kiss.

The Grays, sealed in their spacesuits, stared in horror: that exchange of germs and fluids, the Eartheners indulged with insane frequency in, was beyond their comprehension.

"Hey! I'm full of germs!" JS exclaimed, pushing her away gently, so earning the Grays' nod of approval. At last one Earthener showed some common sense. Eve walked away. Only in the secret of their quarters, she spat out the flash card JS had passed to her. The kiss was one of JS's typical ruses, but she had really needed it. Then she lay in a couch waiting for JS, her mind united to Adam's in an attempt to comfort him. She felt that part of JS's mind united with hers making the signal stronger.

JS entered the biohazard area and started all the decontamination procedures.

"The Grays sent a team with their equipment on the Victory. Fortunately van Huys and Miss Hard speak a bit of Gray, or I'd be lost!" Lee was conversing. "Why did they decide to work here? To stay in their spaceship gave me the chills. I had to suture your wound. They said they will leave their equipment here, at least if we understand right. How did you convince them?"

"Easily." JS replied "I only needed to say that, if there is a pathogen on the loose, it's better it be among us."

JS left the restricted area along with the memory card. The Gray knight took it with gloves, disinfected it once again before inserting it. From his squeaks it was clear that he was satisfied. "You kept your word. Your friend?"

"He didn't make it. I must warn you that the BAR-lab's reactor is unstable and can explode at any moment. Better to go to a safe distance." JS stated.

The Gray nodded: "A sad loss for the science."

"Doc, Adam was already in the acute phase. The fever is quicker on the S'skash. We must get the vaccine soon!"

"Now we can make it!" Lee said checking JS and his wound.

In the lab every Gray was busting its butt.

"The Grays use their own people as culture medium and for the stem cells! How can they be so inhuman?"

"cause they aren't human, of course! Doc, remove that 'You-are-turds-and-your-culture-is-shit!' face!" JS counted with his fingers. "1. We need their help. 2. To call someone a scumbag, doesn't increase his good feelings. 3. Some of them may talk Earthener, take offense, and then.. 4. goodbye!"

Lee's eyes widened: "Talk Earthener? I hadn't thought of that!"

"I don't think anyone can." Letitia interjected with a sunny smile.

"Me neither." JS confirmed. "In their shoes, I'd put someone. Doc, paste a plastic smile on your lips as Miss Hard does. If she could shoot like she plays, she may apply for the special forces."

"You've never said this to me!" Eve exclaimed inside his head.

"You play worse than doc, honey!" JS replied mentally. "Eve, we must support Adam."

An exchange of words between JS and a Gray ended in a laugh.

"What did he say?" asked Lee.

"He said you have a Friday-face. I told him you're mourning and he offered to grief-ectomy you with a scalpel. On the genitals. The Grays decided that our soul is there! "

"I find nothing to laugh about!" Lee said, shocked.

"I never said the Grays have a sense of humor! If you finished, I get dressed before arousing the Gray's curiosity, in medical sense, don't misconstrue, doc."

"How can you laugh?" Lee shook his head.

"Imagining my revenge, doc!" JS's icy answer.

Two days later the Gray knight announced: "The vaccine is ready!"

The Grays returned to their spaceship. While the vaccine production was going on, Lee asked JS: "You met a lot of aliens, are they all the same assholes as the Grays, or there are more genial civilizations?"

"Most are real turds" JS settled, "but I had my tours only among fucking bastards. So my point of view is biased!"

In a big flash of light the BAR-lab exploded.





## 120 - Canals of New Mars: The Soul Master

When the bloody space-lab blew up, JS and all the military personnel came to attention. Their tribute to Adam.

"Did you blow it up? Right?" Lee asked with open admiration.

"There's no evidence." JS chuckled.

Then he and Lee began to lay the rounds of vaccinations.

"Miss Hard was vaccinated as soon as she offered as a nurse. I had a dose in my medical kit." Lee explained, "Van Huys took one of the first doses, now they are both fit again."

JS nodded, looking at the doctor quizzically.

"The reaction to the vaccine is quite virulent." Lee explained.

"You wonder whether you had better die!" Letitia burst upon.

"If the S'skash are so reactive, then we must expect an even more violent reaction to the vaccine."

The radio reported that a Gray called for boarding.

"Our Queen wishes to thank you for warning that the BAR lab was about to explode, and she sends you a gift," and held out a box of syringes for the vaccine.

JS mind-read clearly that the Gray wondered what JS could ever ask to settle this debt. "It has been an honor and a pleasure and there is no debt. Keep the covenant and vaccinate the Isla Tortuga people."

The Gray cleared his throat. JS motioned for him to speak.

"The queen would like that he," and pointed to Lee, "may give us his soul."

Lee saw the gesture and alarmed. JS said something, smiling. The Gray bowed with an expression of respect and fear and left.

JS ordered Ishikawa to make the jump to get away from the Gray sector.

Time was precious. JS ordered that everybody with an experience as a paramedic, had to help out with vaccinations.

"The Gray, what was he looking for?" asked Lee.

"He wanted your soul. He said you're a human being full of emotions and your soul should be first choice."

"Eh?"

"I said you couldn't give them your soul. It doesn't belong to you: I'm the master of your soul and that I won't pass it on." Seeing Lee's incredulous stare, JS grinned: "I thought you're fond of your balls. If the Gray had asked you the question directly, you couldn't refuse. Is a matter of etiquette. In this case either I forced you to accept or I had to fight. But if you aren't your soul's master, and I have your contract signed, "JS allowed himself to accentuate his grin," well, no problem."

"They're mad these Grays!" Lee said, "But will they keep the deal?"

"The Grays are medicine geniuses, but also superstitious idiots. Now they believe I'm the powerful lord of many souls, and that the swarm will be pursued by my familiar spirits if they don't respect the agreement. They fear that I embodied some part of their queen's soul in a voodoo doll. Yes, they will keep the agreement." JS nodded.

As the crew would be out of action for a while, JS decided it was better to find a safe haven, at least for a while. Therefore he landed Vickie in the middle of a lake, deep in the heart of the impenetrable jungle of a planet with a breathable atmosphere. The planet was inhabited by indigenous groups whose technology was beginning to move towards the fusion of metals. There was no living soul in the chosen area and that guaranteed complete privacy to the ship.

Having landed, JS decided to follow Lee's advice and take a few hours of rest not to risk the effects of the crack-back. At last, he and Eve could have some time for themselves, remembering Adam.

"He was more than a father to me." Eve wept. JS wrapped his arms around her, cradled her to his chest and kissed her hair and her face with feather-light kisses until her wracking sobs ceased. They made love and wrapped each other in their luxuriant intimate heat.

Her shivers woke him up hours later. She was lying beside him, trembling and muttering incoherent words, her body burning with fever. JS lifted her tenderly in his arms and took her to the hospital care unit.

"The two urchins are bad, truly bad!" Letitia whispered just as he entered.

It would be a very long day.





*120ñ Canals of New Mars: The Soul Master*