

Novelette: \*SINBAD THE SAND SAILOR\* by R. Garcia y Robertson

The author is currently at work on two historical fantasy romances. One is set in the time of Christ and the other during the golden age of piracy in the Caribbean. His latest science fiction story is both a jaunty homage to adventure fiction of the near and distant past and a thrilling depiction of the perils of the future.

\_Woman in the Dunes\_

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Near to noon, SinBad saw something flapping on a dune. Loose shiny fabric, with an expensive sheen, shone in the morning light. He had the wind on his port beam, and was making good time on firm red-ochre sward, bordered by sand, headed north for Hastor. Sand goggles hid half his face, showing just the hard line of his jaw, and a black spade beard. Clean, even teeth grinned at the prospect of getting something for free. Barsoom was seldom so giving.

SinBad spilled air, losing precious headway, pulling his sand sail into the wind, skidding to a stop on the sward. Starting up would not be so easy.

Leaping out of his seat, SinBad ran to see why he had stopped.

Up close, SinBad saw the sandy bundle had blond hair, and smooth bare limbs, half-hidden by a torn air hostess uniform. Her big silver badge said, "Hi! I'm Tiffany."

He instinctively looked to heaven. Thuria, the nearer moon, was rising soon. Leave her here, and Slavers would snatch her up.

Feeling a faint pulse, and a flutter of breath, he said a swift prayer to Issus, "Do not take her yet."

SinBad dashed back to his sand sail, breaking into the cargo box. Luckily, he was smuggling offworld drugs. Finding a hydrated sedative and a broad spectrum antibiotic, he injected her, then waited.

His employers would hate this. SinBad smuggled for the Aymads, the Number Ones -- who did not do charity. "Watch Out for Number One," was their motto. Whatever meds he used would come out of his end. Or else.

Pulse and breathing grew stronger, more regular. Good. Now what? He could not leave her. His sand sail was fully loaded.

"Shit." There was just one solution. Removing his cargo box, SinBad buried it in the dune, consigning a fortune in pharmaceuticals to the sand. His employers would hate this even more. If anything happened to the cargo, he had no hope of paying back the Aymads.

Horrible thought. But he could not leave her to dire wolves and Slavers. His trip to Hastor was over.

Barsoom's .4 gravity made lifting the unconscious woman easy. Beneath the sand, sweat, and sunburn she might even be pretty. Probably was pretty, given her air hostess uniform. Silver rings shone on sandy fingers. Her badge said, "Tiffany," but air hostesses were notorious for using assumed names, and unusual positions.

SinBad rolled his eyes. "Hope to hell you are worth it."

He strapped her to the back on the sand sail, wrapped in his sleeping furs, then turned the wind-powered tricycle about, to get the best of the southeast breeze. Sitting down in the seat, he gripped the boom

controls and released the brake.

Off they went. He had been headed north, with the wind abeam. Now he went over to the opposite tack, running almost due west, with the wind on his port quarter. There was a wind wagon track ahead, and a canal a couple of hundred haads farther west -- once he got the offworlder to medical care, he would work his way back upwind to retrieve the drugs.

Sward turned to grit and gravel, then to packed sand. SinBad made excellent time until the wind died. At dusk he lit a fire, and hydrated his sleeping supercargo, with a shot of superglucose. Using some precious water, he washed her face. She was air hostess pretty, with a cute turned-up nose, and fine cheekbones. Too bad she was comatose.

He doctored her scrapes and bruises as best he could. Her limbs were not broken, and her ribs felt right. Nice even. Then he covered her with furs to hide her from Thuria.

Hopefully, she had no internal injuries, since his medical skills were minimal. Praying that sleeping booty would survive the night, SinBad lay down by the dying fire, watching Cluros, the further moon, drift across the starry sky until he fell asleep.

Dawn breezes woke him, light airs out of the west. Restarting the fire, he put on coffee, then checked on his fallen angel. Still asleep, but even more beautiful by daylight.

Good thing Thuria was down. Or Slavers would be dropping in for breakfast. What had she been doing in the dunes? He would have to ask, when she awoke. If she awoke. SinBad sipped thick black coffee, waiting for the wind to change.

Slowly it did, shifting around to the south. His supercargo stirred. Putting on fresh coffee, he watched her long lashes flutter. Finally her eyes opened wide, looking first at the sky, then at him, revealing a fetching shade of blue.

"Kaor." He smiled to show he was friendly. "Are you hurting?"

"Not much," she whispered.

A compliment to his medical care, and offworld painkillers. "It's Tuesday," he told her. "You have been out over twenty hours."

Shaking her head in disbelief, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Your savior." It was not too early to get on this pretty hostess' good side.

"Thanks." She glanced about the gravel wadi he had camped in. "Where are we?"

"South of Hastor, headed for a wagon track."

Lying back, the woman closed her eyes. "What am I doing here?"

"Hoping you would tell me."

She shrugged. "I do not remember much. Not since late Sunday night."

"How about your name?" he suggested.

"Tiffany. Tiffany Panic." She sounded proud she remembered.

Just like on her perky badge. Now his pretty problem had a name. "Your outfit says you are an air hostess."

Tiffany looked at her torn sleeve. "So it does."

"Did you fall out of a pleasure palace?"

She sighed. "More likely pushed."

"By who?"

Tiffany shook her tangled blonde hair. "Cannot say."

Cannot or would not? Either way, it was not his business.

"It was near to morning." Tiffany studied her silver rings, seeming shocked that they were still on her fingers. "I had gone out on a balcony, to greet the day. Something shoved me from behind. Then, I was falling. I do not remember hitting the ground."

Small surprise. "You were passing over high dunes. You must have hit the side of one, and the sand broke your fall. That is where I found you."

"Thank you," Tiffany whispered. For salvaging her, not just her rings.

"Thank the dunes." He just did what he must. Even criminal sex addicts had standards, however low.

Offering her some coffee, he prepared to get underway. Wind was perfect for Hastor, but he no longer had the drugs. Instead, he strapped Tiffany into the seat behind him. "I will take you to the wagon track, or the canal, where you could get a boat bound for Exhume beanstalk."

And a safe trip back offplanet. Then he could retrieve his cargo -- minus the drugs that went into Tiffany. That would cost him. Tiffany did not comment on his plans for her, merely asking, "What's your name?"

"People call me SinBad," he warned her. "Because I sin badly."

"What sort of sins?" Tiffany inquired.

"Smuggling, drinking, sex crimes..." He released the sail, and they were off, skidding over the gravel onto a starboard tack. He guided his land schooner out of the wadi, then turned due west toward the wagon track, sailing over hard packed sand. "...the usual offenses."

Being in the business, she leaned closer, expressing polite professional interest. "What kind of sex crimes?"

Most women did not want to know. "Abetting adultery, copulating with the wrong clan, co-habiting with known lesbians, that sort of thing. Desert tribes have many rules."

His supercargo understood. "That's why pleasure palaces are airborne."

"Right now I am transporting an air hostess without a valid permit. Or her owner's permission. Both serious felonies."

Tiffany laughed. "I have no owner."

"Nor do I." Sinbad trimmed the sail, to go more with the wind, avoiding patches of deep sand. "Folks

take that amiss."

"Same with me," Tiffany agreed. "What do your friends call you?"

"I got no friends." Just customers. "I am an O-mad, a man with one name. Cast out by my clan and tribe. No one wants to know me."

"Can't you get another name?"

"Only if I kill someone. Then I would get his name."

"Seems a bit drastic." Tiffany was plainly new to Barsoom. "So, you have never killed anyone?"

"Not yet." One crime he worked overtime to avoid.

Tiffany squeezed his shoulder. "Me neither."

Her squeeze felt good. Not committing homicide seemed to absolve his other crimes, at least to Tiffany. He liked this air hostess more and more.

Having dodged the heaped up sand, SinBad set out across cracked golden claypan, broken by patches of mossy orange sward. Even with the good wind, it took most of a twenty-five hour Barsoomian day to reach the wagon track. There he camped atop a low bluff, at the head of a wadi, where he could easily turn about, going back the way he came.

Waiting until Thuria had set, he lit a fire, telling Tiffany, "There will be a wind wagon through soon. And you can be away."

"Away where?" Tiffany surveyed the empty waste.

"Exhume beanstalk." Barsoom was obviously bad for her.

She smiled at his neat plans. "How can I ever repay you?"

"No problem there." Sex criminals were easily satisfied. "You are an air hostess, and a pretty one too."

"Badly banged about," she noted.

SinBad nodded. "Assorted scrapes, sprains, and bruises. But no broken bones."

"How do you know?" Painkillers masked almost anything.

"Because I checked on that first night."

Her smile widened. "You are exceedingly thorough."

"I try."

"And kind." Her white-gold hair shone in the firelight.

"Too kind for my own good." His last night with this pretty air hostess would be a chaste one, though that could hardly be helped. "Which palace are you from?"

"Erotopia."

Said to be the best. If you could afford high flying entertainment.

"Here, lie beside me at least." Tiffany made room next to her. "For I am sorely in your debt."

He lay down beside the offworld woman he had found in the dunes, costing him two days' time, and all his profits. Easily worth it. Tiffany felt both slight and exciting. Strange, what a strong effect women like this had on men. When this wild adventure ended, he would be both glad and sad.

SinBad let the fire die, covering them both with sleeping furs instead. Thuria would be up during the night. By dawn the Slaver moon had set, and they both slept in. Awaking to dark winged shapes circling over the wagon track, slowly spiraling downward. Tiffany looked at him. "Vultures?"

"You wish." SinBad shook his head. "Massingales."

"Who are they?"

"You'll see." SinBad went to the schooner and buckled on his sword, a long thin rapier.

Tiffany eyed the blade. "Are they dangerous?"

He nodded grimly. "Oh, yeah."

Despite having two names, the Massingales had never killed anyone. So far. They were sky folk, soaring above the desert tribes, living in legal limbo. And liking it.

"What should I do?" Tiffany asked.

"Smile," SinBad suggested. "You have a very nice smile."

Massingales liked that. Dropping lower, the shapes turned into fliers, men wearing solar-powered wings. Barsoom's light gravity made flying easy. If you had the wings.

Two of the winged men landed beside them on the bluff. Both Massingale brothers, Joe and Jeramie, stood before them, looking strong and handsome, as usual, in kilts and flying harness, with huge silver wings attached to their backs. They had hand-forged rapiers at their hips, but were otherwise unarmed.

Greenies considered firearms and energy weapons obscene, and banned them from Barsoom, forcing humans to assault each other with edged steel. More winged swordsmen circled above. SinBad greeted them with a wary, "Kaor."

"Kaor, yourself," Joe replied. "What's your cargo?"

"Just her," SinBad was happy to say. Tiffany was too big to be whisked off. Besides, the Massingales did not traffic in females. They had women of their own, good-looking ones. They favored more marketable loot, like the drugs he had been smuggling.

Jeramie grinned. "Where did you find her?"

"Lying on a dune."

Joe shook his head. "You always were a lucky shit."

"Some of us got to work for living," his brother noted.

"How about helping out?" Joe suggested.

"Sure." SinBad had little choice.

"Gonna hit the wind wagon," Jeramie explained. "We need someone to catch the swag."

SinBad nodded in brisk agreement. "Can do."

Any other answer would hardly be wise. Seeing nothing they wanted, both brothers leaped from the bluff. They caught an updraft off the cliff face, spiraling skyward to rejoin their wing men.

SinBad sat down next to Tiffany. "Change of plan. We are not going to put you on the wind wagon. We're going to rob it."

"Rob it?" Tiffany looked shocked. "Why?"

"Because that is what the Massingales do." And he was not about to get in their way. In fact, he had to help.

Tiffany reached over and squeezed his hand. "Thanks."

"For what?" They were now accessories to armed robbery.

"If it were not for me, you would not be here."

"Same goes for you."

Tiffany nodded. "Oh, I know."

Presently, the wind wagon appeared, a sleek two-masted brig, sailing along on big balloon tires. SinBad hauled his sand sail over to the head of the wadi and waited.

Right on cue, the Massingales swooped down like birds of prey. SinBad released his brake, rolling down the wadi, bouncing over stones and ruts, picking up speed.

Crossbowmen aboard the wind jammer opened fire on the Massingales, but birdmen swooped down, slashing the fore sheets and mainsail stays, bringing the wind wagon to a thundering halt, amid flailing lines and flapping sails. Both Massingale brothers landed on the stern gallery, surprising the guards. Joe kept them busy with some fancy sword play, while Jeramie broke a window, disappearing inside.

Reaching the bottom of the wadi, SinBad popped his sail, slewing about onto a parallel tack, passing the stalled wind jammer. Crossbow bolts zipped past his head, hitting the mast, ripping through the sail. One bolt buried itself in his boot. Another went through his right cuff, pinning it to the tiller.

Suddenly, Joe and Jeramie reappeared, leaping off the stern gallery, wings beating hard, carrying a heavy sack between them. Dropping the bag onto the back of the sand sail, they disappeared into blue.

Switching his tack again, SinBad sailed off downwind, away from the wind wagon, dodging the rain of missiles. Glad to leave the havoc behind him, SinBad jerked the crossbow bolt out of the tiller, freeing his arm. Tossing the bolt aside, he worked his way back around, tacking back and forth, until he was once more atop the bluff. Safe and sound. He did not want to know what was in the bag.

Tiffany looked worried. "You're hurt."

"No." This latest meeting with the Massingales had been fairly pain free.

"Yes, you are," Tiffany insisted. "Your boot is bleeding."

He looked down. "Damn."

"Here, I'll help you." It was Tiffany's turn to nurse him, pulling the bolt out, then helping strip off his bloody boot. Now it started to hurt.

There was a nasty gash on his lower calf, just above the ankle. Tiffany slapped on antibiotic, then used an adhesive salve to seal the wound, followed by painkiller, all left over from his borrowed supplies.

While she worked on his foot, the Massingales came winging back. Joe shook his head. "Hurt yourself?"

"No." SinBad grimaced. "Some crossbowman did it."

"Where did you steal the meds?" Joe asked.

Jeramie smirked. "Aymads ain't gonna like that."

Barsoom's underworld was not that big. Both brothers knew his employers, well enough to sell the Aymads their own meds back. Joe tried to cheer him. "Least you got a woman to treat you."

"You're one lucky sucker," Jeramie agreed. "A little to the left, and you'd have lost that foot." Chuckling over SinBad's good fortune, they hoisted the loot and took off, leaving him in Tiffany's care.

She finished bandaging his foot. "Fine friends you have."

Like he had a choice. "I have no friends. At least the Massingales do not toss pretty blondes overboard." Not on the first date.

"Good to know." Tiffany helped him pull on the bloody sand boot. "What now? You were going to deliver me to the wind wagon, but you robbed it."

"Not me," SinBad objected. "Massingales did that."

Tiffany accepted the distinction. "Transporting stolen property, then."

"That's my job," SinBad reminded her. "Though right now, I am working for free."

"I know." Tiffany ran her hand up his thigh.

Which felt astonishingly good. Too bad he was half lame. And Thuria would be up soon. He limped about, readying his sand sail, then arranging furs to keep Tiffany hidden. She asked, "Is this really necessary? Hiding from the nearer moon?"

"Not if you want to be seized by Slavers." These notorious cosmic pests infested Barsoom's inner moon.

Tiffany peeked out from between the furs. "On Erotopia we partied happily, with Thuria hurtling overhead."

"That just means they got a good look at you." Pleasure palaces had defenses even Slavers feared, like batteries of Issus surface-to-space missiles. Greenies did not care so long as they exploded in the air. "Macrosopes can read the logo on the seat of your hot pants. If they see you now, I'll be dead, and you'll belong to the highest bidder."

Who wanted that? Tiffany stayed hidden until Thuria had set. Of all the offworlders SinBad had met, Tiffany was the most willing to learn. Too bad he must be rid of her.

But he must. They were almost out of offworld meds. With the wind holding steady, he rode on through the night, steering by Cluros and starlight. Thuria rose and fell.

Just past dawn, desert hardpan turned to soft mossy sward, a sign they were nearing the canal. Presently palm tops poked over the close Barsoomian horizon. An airship drifted overhead, following the line of the canal, a long silver craft, gleaming in dawn light. A wide blue banner trailed behind the gold control gondola.

Tiffany asked, "Should I hide again?"

"They won't care about us." Airfolk had their own worries.

"Then why are they turning our way?"

Unbelievably, the big airship was coming about, bearing down on them. Shit. What had he done now? He was not due in Hastor until tomorrow, so it could not be the Aymads. They did not know he had betrayed them, yet. None of his other enemies traveled in such style.

Fliers in solar-powered wings spilled out of the silver ship, flitting down toward them. SinBad hit the port brake and spun around, turning his sail into the wind. Tiffany put her hand on his shoulder, asking, "What are you doing?"

"Coming about. We'll never outrun them." And they had nowhere to hide on the flat yellow-orange sward.

"Who are they?" Tiffany asked.

"Someone nice, I hope." He kissed her hand. If not, he would die -- because of her.

Winged figures landed around them, women in blue jackets and gold kilts, wielding short composite bows. Young business-like women eyed him warily, from behind bent bows and razor tipped arrows. "Who are they?" Tiffany whispered.

"Not sure." Winged Amazons were a first, even for Barsoom. "Northerners maybe, not desert folk."

Fliers grabbed the dangling ground lines, guiding the airship down. Her name was on the nose, in big red letters, Jeddara.

With the silver ship tethered a few feet above the sward, a ramp dropped down from the rear of the golden control gondola, and the lead archer told them, "Come."

SinBad went quietly. As did Tiffany. Inside the gilded control car were more women, along with albino SuperChimps to do the heavy lifting.

SinBad was searched for weapons, by a thorough young woman who did not enjoy her task. When she determined that he was lame and unarmed, he and Tiffany were ushered into the glass-walled command cabin. White apes worked big manual control wheels, keeping an even keel, as the airship lifted off. SinBad saw his sand sail sitting on the rusty-yellow sward below, watching it dwindle, then disappear.

So much for his livelihood. And any hope of satisfying the Aymads. However this interview ended, he was a dead man.

He was presented to the airship's commander, a tall woman in a gold gown, with a white fur cloak, made from the hide of some big arctic beast. Her hair was as white as her cloak, a wild frosty mane enclosing finely chiseled features, and pale ice-blue eyes.

Flanking her were two SuperCat bodyguards in battle armor, bio-constructs with humanoid brains, like



Greenies; only SuperCats had tawny fur, feline faces, clawed fingers, and long curving saber-like upper canines. These two carried repeating crossbows.

There was a Greenie in attendance, wearing a flier's harness bearing the insignia of Greater Helium. He was a bald, handsome, humanoid bioconstruct, with photosynthesizing green skin, who plainly enjoyed his job. Photo sapiens were bisexual nudists, designed to adore humans. Flying about in an airship full of human females was a Greenie guy's idea of heaven.

"Are you SinBad the sand sailor?" asked the lady in white and gold.

"Yes." He was the notorious O-mad outcast, facing offworld law at last. Until he met Tiffany, aerial authorities had not touched him.

Despite it all, he could not help wondering what his captor was like between sleeping furs. He was a guy, a sex offender for Issus' sake -- he had to wonder. Her ladyship's beautifully biosculpted face was as inscrutable as her SuperCats. SinBad could not tell if she was ten or thirty, Barsoom years -- twenty to sixty Earth years. SinBad was twenty-two himself, and had assumed Tiffany was in her teens, though now he was not so sure.

His captor turned to Tiffany. "And you?"

"Tiffany Panic, your highness."

"Ah, the air hostess." Her ladyship smiled thinly. "My correct title is Lady Kadara, Guardian of the North. I serve the Jed of Horiz." Horiz was a seaport on the North Polar Sea, thousands of haads away. What was she doing here?

"Our noble lord of Horiz is extending the rule of law south of the equator. Past Exhume and Hastor, as far south as possible...."

From polar sea to polar sea. Ambitious, but hardly SinBad's business. His was smuggling.

"...beginning by arresting you."

SinBad was not totally surprised. "What for?"

"Theft of cargo. Attack on a wind wagon. Illegal transport of a sex worker, by a sex offender." Lady Kadara shook her white head in dismay. "No wonder they call you SinBad."

Her battle-armored SuperCats smirked. So did the Greenie.

"But I am not carrying contraband." Aside from the drugs that went into him and Tiffany. Kadara grabbed him on the one day that he was not riding dirty.

"We have 3Vs of the incident. Your sandboat is plainly IDed."

Tiffany spoke up. "He was not in it."

"Really?" Kadara seemed surprised.

"He was wounded in my defense. Winged men stole his sand sailer, using it to rob the wagon -- while I tended his foot." A total lie, yet Tiffany told it so well, SinBad half believed her.

Lady Kadara was not so easily fooled. "How did he get his sand craft back?"

"They returned it when they were done."

"How courteous."

"I thought so." Tiffany had a knack for telling soothing lies that men liked to hear. An invaluable talent for an air hostess.

"You know you are being transported by a sex offender."

There was no denying that. "He admitted as much."

"That alone is criminal," Kadara contended. Legally, SinBad could not come within a thousand sofads of a commercial sex outlet. Which included Tiffany.

"Except, that I am on medical leave," Tiffany explained coyly.

"What?"

"I fell out of Erotopia, injuring myself too much to work."

"So you have not serviced him?" Lady Kadara could not believe it. An air hostess traveling with a sex maniac, and nothing happened. SinBad barely believed it himself.

"I am not even licensed for surface work," Tiffany added, making their whole criminal odyssey sound scrupulously legal.

Kadara turned back to SinBad. "Is this true?"

"I try to live within the terms of my parole." Which covered sex offenses, not drug smuggling, or aerial robbery.

"So you are not being paid at all?"

"Apparently."

Both SuperCats gave him toothy grins. They were paid upfront.

Lady Kadara could see she was being conned, but Tiffany was her only witness. Offplanet law relied on truth testing and brain scans, which did not exist on Barsoom. Greenies never lied, and expected humans to do the same. \_Jeddara\_'s commander reluctantly capitulated. "Since you are not my prisoners, please be my guests."

Kadara dined them royally on roast zitidar, garnished with skeel nuts. Afterward, smiling Amazons propped his hurt foot on pillows, and fed him sweet sompus slices, happy to entertain a man, even a lame, unemployed sex criminal.

It turned out that Tiffany was not the only air hostess aboard. Kadara had picked up a runaway Red girl from Amour, one of the lesser palaces, a quiet dark-haired local, named Jem.

Tiffany fussed over her newfound companion, coaxing the Red girl's story out of her. Jem of Amour had been taken in war from a desert tribe, then sold into sex slavery. That was bad. Being in the same airship with an enslaved sex worker violated SinBad's parole, as Kadara quickly noted. "This girl is qualified for surface work, so you will not want to stay aboard."

"Right." Because of one black-haired teenager, he had to leave this soft billet, with free food, and

unlimited women. Why couldn't Jem be a Greenie? But Jem was a Red girl from Barsoom, Apache most likely. He was Huron, before the tribe expelled him.

Now the Northerners did not want him either. Kadara set him down on the open sward, two hundred haads from where they'd left his sandboat. Tiffany gave him a hug at the gangway, saying, "Sorry I cannot kiss you goodbye."

Even the hug was frowned on. Kissing him was a flat out violation of her license, and his parole. SinBad watched the silver airship lift off and head north, then he turned about and limped southward. He had no more meds, and the Aymads would want what was left of their shipment. Just thinking about the long walk back to the sand sail made his foot hurt horribly.

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### \_Pleasure Palace\_

SinBad limped along, knowing the Aymads would now be charging him double time for every xat he delayed. This hobbling forced march was not just life or death, he would be paying for each painful step. Thanks to Tiffany. And the Massingales. He expected trouble from the Massingales. Why did pretty women cost so much? If he had half the money he had spent on blondes, he would not have to smuggle. Which would horrify the Aymads, and their many customers. Cut-rate offworld meds were immensely popular.

He could use some miracle meds right now. His foot hurt, and Tiffany was not here to tend it. He missed her already. Tiffany had been a fresh breeze, blowing through his dull life, upsetting everything. Without her, work became a dead bore that left him poorer than before -- forced to do yet another run for the "Number Ones."

He never made it to his sand sail. By mid-afternoon, black wings circled overhead.

Massingales, again. He stopped and waited, having nothing to hide -- one beauty of being broke.

Joe made a low pass, asking, "Why you walking?"

"You got a bum leg," Jeramie reminded him.

"We can give you a lift," Joe suggested. "For a price."

He shrugged. "Sorry, I don't have a pill."

They both laughed, turning slow circles around him. Joe shook his head. "You could not have used up all the meds you were carrying. You're not hurt that bad."

"We still owe you for that," Jeramie added. "The bolt in your boot was aimed at us."

Joe agreed. "Sorry you were slow at getting away."

"We'll give you a ride back to your sail."

SinBad ceased limping, and waited. So long as he knew where a fortune in pharmaceuticals lay buried, the Massingales were his best friends. Whether he wanted or not.

Presently, his ride appeared, the Massingale airship, poking over the dunes to the west. Cobbled together from stolen parts, the airship was a semi-rigid gas bag, married to an old silverskinned lander with a lifting body hull. Heat shield, gravity drive, and life-support system had been sold off long ago. The

former spaceship was crammed with loot, crawling with cats, and patrolled by pit bulls.

Both Massingales had beautiful dark-haired girlfriends, Alyssa and Randi Lynn, who ran the ship when their men were away. Despite their high-flying lifestyle, the hard-charging brothers attracted smart, scarily efficient young women.

Another reason neither Massingale was especially tempted by easy-going blonde Tiffany, whose helpless offworld ways made her barely worth kidnapping, unless you were in the business. On Barsoom, Red girls did you right, but blondes got you busted. Like Tiffany did to him.

Neither girl was even into her teens, Barsoom years, but they knew how to handle SinBad, smiling, tending to his foot, and plying him with wine, working on all his weaknesses at once. Which he thoroughly enjoyed, though they were just softening him up for their boyfriends.

Shedding their wings, the brothers sympathized with SinBad's difficulties. "You look like shit. And your offworld girlfriend is in big trouble."

"Real big trouble," Alyssa agreed.

SinBad already guessed that. "She's not my girlfriend."

"Yer slippin', SinBad." Joe shook his head sadly.

"Gotta change your name," Jeramie suggested. Both girlfriends smiled, not the least afraid of tending to a notorious sex criminal. Who'd just struck out with an air hostess.

"What's happening to her?" SinBad asked warily.

"She's being shipped back to her owners." Jeramie patted his favorite pitbull. "Folks you stole her from."

Terrible news, but probably true. Joe and Jeramie had friends everywhere, mostly ne'er-do-wells and pretty young women, who were half the population aboard a pleasure palace. Getting Tiffany back offworld was going to be SinBad's one good deed, to balance against all the bad ones.

"You didn't tell us she was so valuable," Joe observed.

Wonder why. "You were set on robbing that wind jammer."

"We still owe you for that," Joe reminded him. "And we'll make it up."

"How?" Beware of Massingales doing favors.

"We can save your girlfriend."

"For a fee."

"Like the meds I was delivering to the Aymads?" SinBad suggested.

"Exactly."

Damn. He kept forgetting that. Tiffany was going to cost him everything. His cargo, his employers, his criminal reputation. Hopefully not his life, though that too could go, when the Aymads found out how badly he'd cheated them.

Or he could let Tiffany die. That would be the easy way out. He would feel horrible. Both Massingales

would be disappointed. So would their pretty, attentive girlfriends. Only the Aymads would be pleased -- though not a lot. They expected him to put them first.

"Okay, I'll do it." Screw the Aymads. They would hate him either way, but he would feel far worse if Tiffany was dead.

Jeramie arched an eyebrow. "That so?"

"Sure. Get me Tiffany, and I'll give you the meds."

"Sounds like a deal," Joe declared.

It sounded like disaster, yet every other choice was worse.

It took days for the Massingales' makeshift airship to catch up with Erotopia, drifting with the prevailing easterlies, between Exhume and Kobol, a thousand haads behind Lesser Helium, currently propelled by the same wind system.

Coming up from the southeast, the Massingales timed their arrival for dusk, so they would hang in the gloaming, nearly invisible, with the pleasure palace silhouetted in the last of the light. Erotopia was a huge inflated raft of hydrogen, divided into cylindrical cells, capped by a gleaming glass superstructure, with shaggy hanging gardens, and long dangling strings of pavilions that stabilized the floating structure.

SinBad studied their target. "Where is Tiffany?"

"Where is your cargo?" Jeramie replied.

"I will tell you when I have her." He meant to pay the Massingales at the last possible moment.

Joe nodded. "Fair enough."

First SinBad got his wings, a borrowed pair, that had belonged to Joe. "Before I outgrew them."

Joe's girlfriend adjusted the straps, checking the trim, and making sure SinBad's feet were in the tail stirrups. She was beautiful, but all business, saying without a hint of flirtation, "How firm is it in the crotch? I can tighten it for you."

"Feels just fine," he deadpanned back.

"Good. Otherwise you can get tail flutter."

Not the good kind, either. In no time he was perched on the airship's fantail, alongside Joe and Jeramie, surveying the pleasure palace. They had their rapiers, while SinBad was unarmed, afraid he would stab himself in a fast landing. Flying and fighting was not his forte. He asked, "How do you even know she is still there?" Or where Tiffany was being kept.

Both brothers grinned. "We GPS tagged the two of you, on that bluff above the wagon track. Just in case."

Leave skulking to the pros. They had no trouble finding him, alone and afoot.

"So, let's go." Joe gave him a shove, and he was airborne.

Instinctively, he spread his borrowed wings, flapping furiously. Automatic trim tabs and power flaps kept him from stalling. Primaries bit into the dark air, pulling him forward with each power stroke.

"Stop flailing," Jeramie advised.

"Soar." Joe showed how, diving to gain speed, then climbing with sure steady strokes.

SinBad did his best, sculling with his wrists to keep up airspeed, riding the air instead of batting at it. Luckily, Joe's old wings practically flew themselves.

Thuria was down, so Erotopia had just a small airship on watch, which the Massingales easily avoided, winging their way toward one of the trailing pavilions -- which had a flier on guard, perched on a swing above it.

He too was no match for the Massingales. Joe spilled air, perfectly imitating the drunken swoop of a hard partying flier. A part he knew by heart. Brushing the pavilion eaves, Joe went into a tumbling spin. That brought the flier off his perch, spiraling after the fallen "patron."

This clueless watch bird had no hope of catching Joe, letting SinBad concentrate on landing. Not easy for a beginner.

But he did it, flaps wide, feathers spread, spoilers out, feet down. With a sudden thud, Sinbad stood teetering on the broad pavilion balcony.

"Come on," Jeramie called from inside the pleasure pavilion. "This is not a social call."

Too true. SinBad entered, and there was Tiffany, asleep again, in a gilded cage, wearing a crisp new low-cut uniform. At least her owners did not mean to toss her overboard. Yet.

Jeramie's bolt cutters made quick work of the lock. "So, what are your cargo's coordinates?"

"When we get her outside." As soon as he gave up those coordinates, the Massingales would be off at near light speed, leaving him with Joe's old wings. And a stolen air hostess.

Or so he hoped. Folding his wings, SinBad eased into the cage, picking Tiffany up off the floor. Her eyes shot open. "SinBad?"

"Good guess." Nice she remembered him.

"What are you doing?"

"Rescuing you."

"Just me?" Tiffany seemed underwhelmed.

"Afraid so." He already had his arms full. "Ready for a night flight?"

"I suppose."

Taking that as a yes, he slid her bare legs into his harness straps and looped his flight belt around her waist, bringing their centers of gravity snugly together. Delightful sensation. Then he dived off the pavilion balcony, disappearing into the warm dark Barsoomian night.

As SinBad gained airspeed, Jeramie appeared alongside, flying wing-tip to wing-tip with him. "What are the coordinates?"

He rattled off the numbers, and Jeramie dived after Joe, saying, "You owe us a pair of wings."

So much for the Massingales. SinBad pulled up, borrowed wings beating on battery power, now that the sun had set. That too would slow his escape.

Tiffany asked, "What about Jem?"

Jem? "Jem who?"

"Jem from Amour."

Right. Jem who'd got him thrown off the \_Jeddara\_.

"She needs saving too."

Who did not? "They will not kill her."

"How do you know?" Tiffany shot back.

He did not. Rather than continue the aerial argument, he asked, "Do you even know where she is?"

"I'll show you." Tiffany directed him to another hanging pavilion, below the one she had been in. Live music from a Greenie band drifted out of an open veranda.

"There's a party going on in there." From the sounds of it a big one.

"So?" Tiffany did not see the problem.

Setting her down on a corner of the veranda, he asked, "How am I supposed to get Jem out?"

"Use this." Tiffany handed him a mini sleep grenade.

"Where did this come from?" Raised offworld letters ran around the pin. PEACE CORPS.

"Kept it hidden behind my hostess badge."

No wonder he'd missed it. "Hi! I'm Tiffany," and I have a bomb. Triggering the grenade, he tossed it through an open window. Music ceased, as SinBad waited for the anesthetic cloud to dissipate. Then he hyperventilated, held his breath, and stepped inside.

Strewn around him were the remains of a bacchanal, halted in mid-orgy, the blindfolded band, a trio of naked clients, a rainbow of sleeping air hostesses, red, white, black, and green, in various states of undress -- all completely comatose. As if the frenzy of enjoyment was just too exhausting.

He retrieved the grenade, tossing that tiny evidence bomb out the window. Escapades like this -- drugging everyone in a flying cathouse to make off with an enslaved teenage air hostess -- were what got him called SinBad.

Next he scooped up Jem, who had lost the top of her air hostess uniform, along with the hip boots, making the young Red girl weigh even less. All this activity hurt his leg horribly.

SinBad felt the pavilion tilt, followed by an exchange of greetings outside. Tiffany was saying "Kaor" to someone.

Shit. Some flier had landed on the veranda, and Tiffany was chatting him up. Still holding his breath, SinBad edged over to the window to see.

Out on the starlit veranda, the flier who went after Joe had returned, and somehow tracked them here.

He was standing with wings folded, talking to Tiffany, and cradling a repeating crossbow.

Which beat the sleeping air hostess SinBad was cradling. He ducked his head back inside. What to do?

First breathe. Setting Jem down beside the window, SinBad slid over to the back of the pavilion, where he stuck his head out a rear window.

Dark, terraformed air never tasted so sweet. Now think. He could wiggle out the window onto the veranda, then come around behind the flier. Assuming Tiffany could keep him talking.

Arming himself with a champagne bottle, SinBad climbed out the window and crept along the veranda. At the corner, he hefted the bottle, then stepped around, hoping the flier was still facing the other way.

He found the flier stretched out at Tiffany's feet, as peaceful as the party in the pavilion. He lowered his bottle. "What did you hit him with?"

Tiffany replied coyly, "A kiss."

Sedative lipstick. Usually associated with more sleazy pleasure palaces, where customers ended up robbed, then rolled over the side.

"Where's Jem?" she asked. "What's the champagne for?"

"Premature celebration." He set down the bottle, held his breath again, and limped back into the pavilion, returning with Jem slung over his shoulder. "That better?"

Tiffany smiled. "I'd kiss you, but I want you awake."

Relieved he'd never taken liberties with Tiffany, SinBad strapped the two women to him as best he could. Feeling like far too small a flight to rate two air hostesses, SinBad spread his wings and stepped off the veranda. Bye-bye Erotopia.

Tiffany asked, "Where are we headed?"

"The ground." This overloaded, every direction was down.

"Is that wise?" Tiffany wondered.

"Probably not." He tilted his primaries, turning into a long slow spin, spiraling down through the hot Barsoomian night. Band music and the bright lights of Erotopia dwindled overhead.

Blackness lay below. "What's down there?" Tiffany asked.

"You're the air hostess."

Tiffany hugged him tighter. "So you don't know?"

"Don't count on sand dunes." Like the ones that broke her last fall from Erotopia. "Not at this latitude."

No open bodies of water either. Which meant no trees. No major canal lines, no cities. Another of the big blank spots that abounded on Barsoom. Luckily, it was probably flat.

His wings gave a terrain warning -- "LOW ALTITUDE. PREPARE TO LAND." SinBad spread his flaps, dropped his feet, then Barsoom slammed into him.

Hitting with his good leg, he rolled across mossy sward, folding his wings to shield the women. Much of



the planet still had its original terraforming vegetation, springy reddish moss that scavenged water and broke up rocks. Perfect for soft landings. Unless a sleeping air hostess lands on your lame leg. SinBad howled aloud.

"Shush," Tiffany whispered, lifting Jem off his leg. "They could hear..."

"Not unless they turn down the music." Aerial bands played as Erotopia drifted off downwind. Pre-atomic blues, mixed with centuries-old 3V jingles. Culture crawled to Barsoom at light speed.

Unscrewing a ring setting, Tiffany exposed a hypo-needle and gave Jem an injection.

"What's that?" Drugging pretty teenagers always aroused his professional interest.

"Antidote." Tiffany resealed the ring.

"You're a cop?"

"Peace Corps." Just like on the grenade.

"I had no notion." No wonder they threw her over the side. In the pleasure business, the Peace Corps was as popular as a drug resistant STD.

Tiffany smiled, showing straight even teeth. "A lot of guys are surprised."

That explained the sleep-bombs and good-night kiss. Peace Corps did not kill people, they just went after those who did. "What are you doing here?"

"Investigating exploitation of underage natives by offworld corporations," Tiffany explained. "You can do what you want on your own worlds, but it is a crime to murder, abuse, or torture inhabitants of another planet for profit. And against Navy antislaving regs. Greenies won't police the pleasure palaces, so someone must."

"If you say so." Greenies did not care what humans did offplanet, even half a haad offplanet. Policing humans on Barsoom was bad enough, thanks to humans like him.

"We need a witness," Tiffany explained. "Who can be truthtested, and brain scanned. Otherwise it is he-said, she-said."

Human witness. SinBad arched an eyebrow. "Greenies do not count?"

"Absolutely." Testimony by bio-engineered beings counted far less than fingerprints off a toaster.

Jem's eyes fluttered, and she asked in Apache, "Where are we?"

Good question. When Jem had fallen asleep, she was starring in a high-flying orgy. Now she lay half-naked on the mossy ochre sward, with Cluros shining overhead, and Thuria due up soon. "We are a hundred haads south of Exhume."

Flat, featureless sward faded into darkness in every direction. "We have to hide," he added. "Thuria rise is in half a zode."

Jem immediately understood. Apache girls played hide-and-seek with Thuria all their lives. "We should head downwind."

More Apache thinking. SinBad agreed. It meant heading west, instead of straight north to Exhume, but

that threw off pursuit, and put possible predators up ahead, while forcing fliers from Erotopia to work their way upwind.

He set off downwind, limping behind Jem and Tiffany, trusting in Apache senses and blonde ambition.

At first it worked. After twenty or thirty xats, Jem held out her hands, then slowly lowered them, palms down. SinBad threw himself face down in the sward. Closing his eyes, he listened. Hearing nothing.

SinBad listened harder, finally hearing the whump of propellers, slowly growing louder, as an airship churned her way upwind. Erotopia was looking for them.

Lots of luck. Antelope fed on sward moss. So did springbok and moropus. Dire wolves fed on them, and jackals cleaned up afterward. There were so many human-sized infrared sources and heat trails hereabouts that examining them all was hopeless.

Whoever piloted the airship agreed. Propeller sounds passed laboriously overhead, then slowly faded upwind.

Jem called out softly, "Let's go."

They set out again, across the flat sward. Jem no longer headed straight downwind, casting about instead, checking out streams and low spots. Tiffany dropped back to ask, "Where are we going?"

"We are looking for cover," SinBad explained. "Thuria will be up soon." Too soon. Slavers had high-powered optical scanners designed to work by Thuria light. If you could see Thuria, Slavers could see you. And Tiffany was just what they wanted. Jem too.

Finally they found a shallow draw, with an overhanging bank big enough to hide them from Thuria. There they slept and rested, while Barsoom's nearer moon raced overhead.

At seven xats past the eighth zode, Thuria set. This time they headed straight north. Rigel, Barsoom's north star, could not be seen at this latitude, but Betelgeuse was up, a great yellowish-red beacon, pointing the way to Exhume.

Beyond some low hills, mossy ochre sward gave way to sandy short-grass steppe, dotted with thorn trees. Barsoom's few forests lay mainly along the equator. Halfway through the ninth zode, Thuria rose again, and they sheltered beneath a spreading thorn tree. Betelgeuse was down by now, but the red lights of Exhume beanstalk poked above the northern horizon, pointed at the stars.

Within sight of their goal, Jem sat up and sniffed the air, saying, "They're coming."

Who's coming? SinBad sat up and sniffed. He smelled it too, a faint catbox odor borne by the night wind. "Ba'aths?"

Ba'aths were black-maned Barsoomian lions, bigger than any earthly cat, with saberteeth and gleaming green eyes. Jem shook her head. "Ba'aths do not stalk downwind. SuperCats."

Made sense. Lions would not waste a stalk. SuperCats were paid either way. And these knew that their prey dared not run when Thuria was up.

First light shone in the east, spilling slowly over the steppe. SinBad crouched behind the thorn tree, straining his eyes.

There they were, tall figures spread out in the short grass, backlit by dawn light. Homo smilodon

stalked upright, just like humans. These carried repeating crossbows.

Shit. He had been so close. Why couldn't it be ba'aths? Why did he have to be lame? And unarmed? "Who is it?" Tiffany asked.

"Erotopia has found us." Or maybe it was the Aymads, looking for him. By now they had burned both their employers.

He hunkered down, watching the SuperCats come on, hoping they did not have the scent yet. No such luck. They were converging on the thorn tree, crossbows at the ready. Tiffany whispered, "Don't worry."

"Why not?"

"We'll deal with them."

"You will?" He turned to see Tiffany putting lipstick on Jem. Then freshening up her own.

"SuperCats don't kiss." Saberteeth made liplocks awkward.

Smiling, Tiffany slipped a hypo-ring on Jem's finger, showing the Red girl how to use it. That was more useful. Unless you were facing a dozen armed bio-engineered killers. "Just lie low," Tiffany advised, squeezing his hand. "You have been wonderful. This is my problem, not yours."

Too true. Leave it to the Peace Corps.

"Sorry, I cannot kiss you good-bye," Tiffany added.

He understood.

Taking Jem's hand, Tiffany strolled out to meet the advancing SuperCats. Warily the cat circle closed on them.

SinBad tensed, worried for Tiffany. Jem too. He had been putty in their hands, taking insane risks for their sake, but these were hunting cats, bred to be better than humans.

Three hypersonic missiles streaked silently down from orbit, exploding in a triangular pattern just above the SuperCats. Osiris orbit-to-surface missiles, armed with sleep gas. SinBad recognized the white puffs of anesthetic, followed by triple sonic booms, arriving well after the missiles hit.

Silence settled over the pre-dawn plain. Thuria shone down on Tiffany and Jem, lying amid sleeping SuperCats. SinBad cowered under the thorn tree, peering through the short grass.

Presently a silver ship fell out of the sky, a stripped down Fornax Skylark, with strap-on antimatter boosters. Someone's fancy gravity yacht that now fairly screamed "Slaver." As soon as she set down, men in gas masks emerged, stepping over the SuperCats, then scooping up Jem and Tiffany, taking them back to the ship.

Slavers overpowered anyone. So pretty women, young girls, and graceful boys hid from Thuria. Blame it on the Greenies, who forced Barsoom to make do with homemade weapons, like bows, slings, and hand-forged rapiers.

He watched the Skylark seal herself and take off, with both his air hostesses aboard. Easy come, easy go.

Leaving some sleeping SuperCats, who would soon be awake and angry, at him. He had to go, but

where? Away from Hastor and some very mad Aymads, that was for sure. By now, his sand sail was even further off. That left Exhume.

SinBad climbed to the top of the thorn tree, no easy feat. Going out on a prickly limb, he leaped off, flapping his solar wings. Stored power lifted him into the air, where he found a thermal, rising off a bare patch in the plain. Spiraling upward, he gained a couple of haads in height, then headed north, aiming at the base of Exhume beanstalk.

He almost made it. Landing several haads short of Exhume, he limped the rest of the way.

Exhume beanstalk stretched up into orbit, providing free transport to a geosynch point, connecting Barsoom to the cosmos. SinBad dragged himself up the Avenue of Offworlders, past swank hotels, cheap bars, curio shops, Outback brothels, and airship docks, offering service to Erotopia and the Heliums.

Having neither the time or credit for offplanet pleasures, he staggered straight to the lift shaft, entering the negative-g zone, rising up alongside hungover tourists and hopeful emigrants, headed offplanet.

SinBad got off at a platform ten haads up, where the view was terrific and the air was okay, thin but breathable. SinBad spread his wings and dived off the beanstalk, soaring from thermal to thermal, using long ridgelines, prevailing winds, and hot dark patches of red-orange sward, headed for his sand sail, thousands of haads to the southwest.

Fifty haads out, he spotted a flier following him, lower down, half a haad back, sporting pink and black primaries. Erotopia colors. So long as he had height advantage, SinBad was not much worried. When night came, he would shake this pursuer, then find somewhere to roost and rest.

His pursuers did not wait for dark. Soon he spied a silver airship coming up behind him, closing fast. Eros was written on its nose. More pink and black fliers emerged from the forward gondola.

Dumping air, SinBad dove into a stoop, folding his wings back, sacrificing height for speed. His one hope was to go to ground. Somewhere down there, he would find a place to hide.

But he never got the chance. Suddenly a big silver shape came between him and safety. It was the Slaver ship, returning for him. What in Issus for? He was not that attractive.

SinBad backed off, feathers spread, flaps down, braking frantically.

An airlock opened on the silver ship. Jem stood at the lock door, wearing what was left of her air hostess costume, waving at him.

She did not have to ask twice. Pulling in his flaps, SinBad beat hard with his primaries, propelling himself into the lock. He landed in a heap, piled against the inner hatch.

Jem shut the lock and the ship took off, headed for orbit. Struggling out of bent wings, he wiggled to his feet, feeling the here-we-go sensation given off by gravity drive. Barsoom fell away beneath them.

Cycling the inner hatch, Jem stepped onto the ship's control deck. Tiffany lay on the command couch, giving him her sweetest air hostess smile. "Welcome to the Draco..."

Slavers named their ships for dragons, to better prey on other vessels.

"...formally the Fornax Star. Missing more than a century."

A twice stolen antique that Tiffany flew easily. There was no end to her talents. He stepped through the inner hatch. "Where's the crew?"

"Asleep."

Figures. Waking up in a Navy brig was a hazard of slaving. "Where are we headed?"

Tiffany engaged the antimatter boosters. "Away from Thuria."

How like a man, he had forgotten the nearer moon was up. SinBad checked the aft screens. Thuria loomed big and round behind them. Slavers had seen the whole rescue, and knew they had lost a ship. Two dots separated from the nearer moon's cratered surface, headed their way, swiftly closing the gap. "Who's that?"

"\_Hiryu\_ and \_Salamander\_, two high-g Slaver starships, based on Thuria."

"Can they catch us?"

"With ease." Tiffany did not seem worried. She never did. Peace Corps training. No wonder folks hated her. Personally, SinBad found pretty, fearless women endearing -- if somewhat unnerving. Tiffany Panic had dragged him halfway across Barsoom, and now totally offplanet, to face new and different dangers.

Alarms blared, "RADAR LOCK, HELLHOUNDS ENGAGED."

\_Salamander\_ got ready to fire anti-ship missiles, while \_Hiryu\_ hung back, covering the attack. Forward screens showed Tiffany was shaping straight for Cluros, Thuria's stogy consort. A last bit of Barsoom. Beyond Cluros lay hundreds of millions of haads of vacuum.

Jasoom, the main Greenie world, was on the far side of the system. Not that Greenies were much good in ship-to-ship actions. Photo sapiens lacked the killer edge that made humans the most fearsome species in this part of the spiral arm.

At the rate the Slavers were closing, \_Draco\_ would not even make Cluros, much less Jasoom. Tiffany calmly ignored commands to throttle back and be boarded. "They want this ship intact, and us alive. Hellhound locks are just a bluff."

"HELLHOUNDS AWAY."

Some bluff. Gravity drive missiles streaked toward them, at ten times \_Draco\_'s acceleration. \_Salamander\_ signaled, "DISENGAGE BOOSTERS. PREPARE TO BE BOARDED."

Tiffany ignored the Slaver commands, saying, "I am blonde, but not that blonde. We have an old family motto for just this situation."

"What is that?"

"Don't panic, Panic."

"HELLHOUNDS CLOSING FAST."

He could see that. Be boarded, or be blown apart. SinBad left it to Tiffany. Slavers would kill him either way.

Cluros loomed ahead of them, another icy cratered ball, unused by Slavers, since it was small, and slow, and far from the surface. With fewer places to hide.

"HELLHOUND IMPACT ONE HUNDRED SECONDS."

SinBad saw a large blip, the size of a Navy corvette, separate from Cluros, firing anti-missiles.

"ANTI-MISSILES CLOSING AHEAD. HELLHOUND IMPACT FIFTY SECONDS."

"What's that?"

"\_Tarzana\_," Tiffany explained, "the suburb-class corvette that brought me insystem. She has been hiding on Cluros ever since."

Waiting for the Slavers to make a mistake. Like this one. \_Tarzana\_ was more than a match for any two Slavers, carrying an arsenal full of missiles, and a reinforced company of marines. \_Hiryu\_ and \_Salamander\_ peeled off in opposite orbits, knowing that even a Navy corvette could not go two ways at once.

"HELLHOUND IMPACT TWENTY SECONDS."

SinBad did the math in his head. Twenty-something tals. Hearing it in seconds made the missile sound even closer.

"Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, sixteen..."

He gripped Tiffany's free hand as she swung the helm to port.

"Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen..."

"ANTI-MISSILES PASSING TO STARBOARD." Good news. Tiffany gave him a squeeze.

"Twelve, eleven..."

SinBad held his breath.

"HELLHOUNDS DESTROYED." Impact alarms ceased. \_Tarzana\_'s anti-missiles had taken out the Hellhounds. With tals to spare. He exhaled, "We did it."

"You did it." Tiffany smiled up at him. "You got me and my witness off Barsoom. Without you, I would be lying dead on a sand dune."

How true. Without thinking, they kissed.

\* \* \* \*

He awoke flat on his back, staring up at a bulkhead, with Tiffany bending over him, no longer at the controls. "The ship? Don't you have to..."

Tiffany shook her blonde head. "It's over."

"Over?" That seemed awfully quick.

"\_Salamander\_'s been disabled by a missile burst, and boarded by marines."

"\_Hiryu\_?"

"Got away," she was sorry to say. "If anything else happens, the ship will tell me."

He had been out for awhile. Just as well. Win or lose, battles were best slept through -- making for less stress, and a lower profile. Tiffany ran her hand over his cheek, saying, "Sorry I kissed you."

"I am not." He would have felt like a bigger fool if they'd never kissed.

And that was all he would get. Peace Corps whores only put out in the line of duty. Tiffany would bring perfect strangers to the heights of ecstasy, repeatedly, because it was part of her cover. All he got was a drugged kiss. Not that he was complaining. One heartfelt kiss from Tiffany, was better than a free pass to a pleasure palace.

By now he knew women thought this was just fine, pleasing men "on the job" because that was business, while drawing a strict circle around "personal" relationships. SinBad much preferred crime.

He and Jem split the Navy reward for returning the Draco and capturing its crew. More offworld credit than the whole Huron nation had ever seen. Issus knew what he would do with it. And he got a free ride back to his sand sail, still sitting on the sward south of Hastor.

Tiffany produced a box of meds, matching the one the Massingales got, paid for by the Peace Corps. She tucked it into the cargo bay of his sand sail, then gave him a long, drug free, kiss. When they were done tongue wrestling, Tiffany told him, "Take care."

"If you insist," SinBad replied. He popped his sail and set out again, with the wind on his port beam, rolling over red-orange sward bordered by sand, headed north for Hastor.