



The Harbinger

As Archduke Bower drifted away from the enemy fleet, he thought back to his months of imprisonment in the inhospitable land of Queensferry. What terrible fortune to have sailed across the sea in search of adventure and discovery only to have ended up there. Of all places to encounter, what a terrible first contact. Lost in his thoughts and mentally drained, it took him a while to look at the ships headed towards his homeland.



When he did, he was relieved to see them headed away from his location. On second thought, if they were separating from his position, it was because they were faster than him.

His valiant struggle would be for naught if they reached Schulmania first. He *had* to find some way to gain speed – and quickly. Using the teacup’s remaining momentum, he thrust his weight to one side and veered toward a support ship not far away. Not only was it the closest place for him to get on board a ship, but it was also the ship least likely to be heavily armed – for once, a fortuitous combination for the star-crossed archduke.



He saw the name of the ship, the QFS Stinger, and shrugged. He would get close enough to jump out and swim to the ship and climb aboard. After that, he would await whatever opportunity provided.

Drifting about as close to the ship as the turbulent wake would allow, Archduke Bower jumped overboard and swam vigorously toward the ship’s keel. Not being a fan of water, he cringed when the cold, salty water enveloped him. But, he labored forward in a steely, determined manner. In a short time, he was clinging onto the keel as well as he could with his claws. As he began his precarious ascent to the deck, he wondered what the ship’s crew would be like and how he would be able to defeat them.

His armed strained and sore; he finally grasped the edge of the deck and hoisted himself slowly up. So far, he was not seen. Quick scurry to hide in the shadow of a hatch. Still not seen. Only a few crew members on deck. Need to gain elevation, survey the area. Glance each way. The coast is clear. Run to the next niche. Wait... wait... wait... voices approaching. Still and silent; wait more and don't move or even breathe. Listen... and wait.

The voices grew louder as the two drew closer.



Have we received orders on where to lay the mines?



Not yet. Col. Tigh will arrive shortly by helicopter with the map.



I don't think we will need to lay all of the mines we brought. After all, we are defending against wooden vessels.



Col. Tigh says he wants no surprises. So, we lay all 3,000 mines.



Certainly, sir. You know, it never ceases to amaze me how inferior cultures, all of whom envy our luxurious life of leisure, continue to attack our nation and try to steal what they cannot have. I am glad that we have this mission to civilize this backward nation and share with them the all-encompassing love of BuggUla.



Speaking of which, it is nearly time for our daily inspirational broadcast from home. As if we needed some sort of pep talk before we lay waste to our ruthless and remorseless enemies. Mwa ah ah ah ah hhhhhhh.



Might we put the broadcast on the shipwide system, so that all hands may hear it?



That is an excellent idea, Crewman Pincer. That will keep the crew engaged while we await the colonel's return.



From screens and speakers: “Live from 1313 Mockingbird Lane, home of our beloved leader, BuggUla, this is the Daily Inspirational Message. And now, prostrate yourselves and prepare to be dazzled. Presenting Its Excellency, Buggula...”



Greetings and joy to you all from Mockingbird Lane. We trust that all are basking in the love and harmony which characterizes our peaceful and joyous land. After this address, it will be time to take your daily dose of Oil of Onimay. It pleases us to provide you, our beloved citizens of Queensferry, with this gift of sustenance. As you savor it, remember that we love you. Today, friends, we are pleased to announce that your trials and tribulations are nearing an end. The source of your sufferings – personal as well as professional – has been the insidious plot of foreign nations to subvert our perfect society. Their sinister schemes have

attempted to destabilize our peaceful and stable society. But, unlike our neighbors in Duloc, we shall prevail. As we speak, armed forces of our most serene nation are taking up positions to deliver retributions to our enemies. Death to all! Death to all! Task Force Death Star 2 has been dispatched west across the Buggulan Ocean to confront the evil aggressors. All hail the mighty Queensferry military! Soon, the vicious oppressors who have sought to cripple and ruin our nation will be made to pay. Death to all! Death to all! Each of us has sacrificed in order to protect our noble land from enemies far and wide. Our sacrifices must not be in vain. All hail, victory in BuggUla! All hail! ...

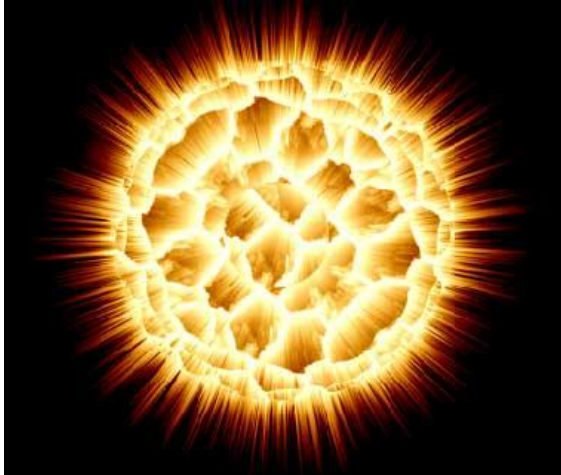
The transmission continued as the crew remained spellbound. Archduke Bower, on the other hand, noticed that the helicopter had arrived on deck and he saw his chance to flee. He sprang from his hiding place and ran over to the helicopter, blades still whirring.



He grabbed some controls, unfamiliar with their function, and hoped he could get it to fly away.

The copter lurched to and from and nearly clipped the ship's control center as it spun into motion. Finally, he got some height as he swerved up and down and around and around. The dizzying flight path eventually evened out, just before careening into the water. Of course, such an erratic acrobatic display is certain to gain attention. Crew members reported the craft's unauthorized departure immediately. The ship, being lightly armed, was unable to respond. But, the carrier leading the task force was radioed to intercept and shoot down the escaping craft.

Within two minutes, two Bugg-13 fighter planes had been launched in pursuit of the archduke in his PAD-3 helicopter. The archduke was unaware that he was being followed until he saw a missile fly by and explode just a few feet off of the craft.



He abandoned his course of flying due west at top speed and resumed flying erratically. Hopefully, he would shake his followers and still make progress toward home. After 8 missiles nearly missed him, the barrage stopped. Perhaps they were out of ammunition? Bower decided to not test his luck. Having gained a somewhat better feel for the controls, he lowered the helicopter to just about 20 feet above the water. He resumed his path due west- toward home. Within just a few minutes, missiles began to explode nearby again. And, machine gun fire sprayed the helicopter, resulting in multiple punctures and creating a fuel leak. As smoke started to pour from the rear of the craft, Bower made his move.

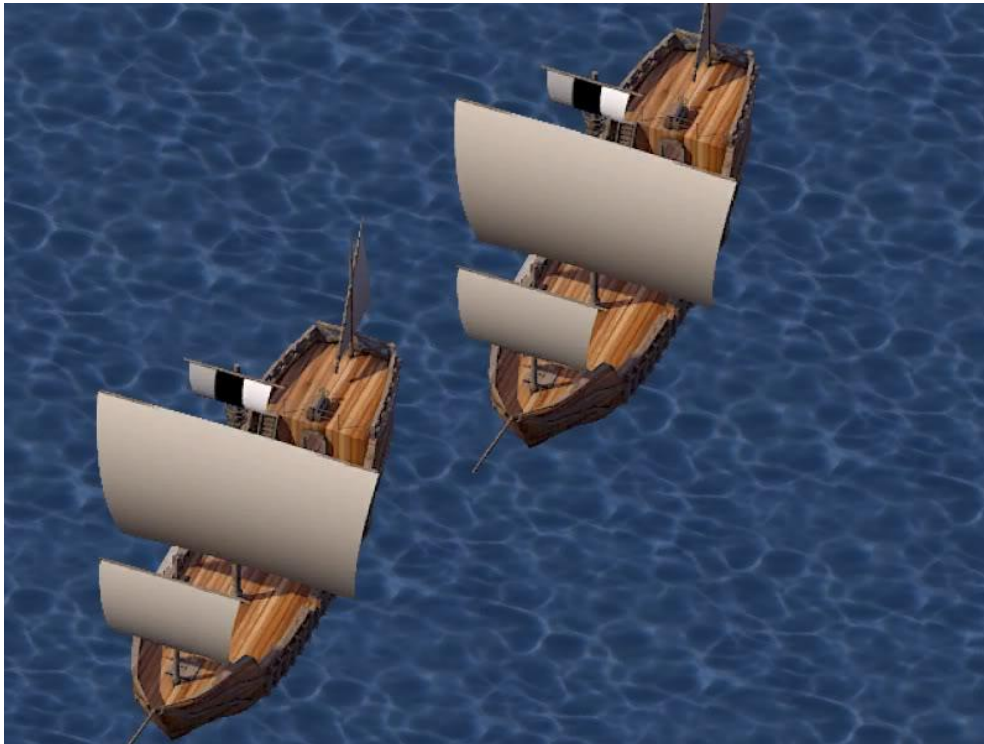


He jumped from the craft as it was hit by three missiles and blew apart. Flaming wreckage flew in all directions. Bower surfaced and was promptly hit by debris on the head.

Bleeding and bruised, he clawed his way onto one of the floating metal panels and wondered just how close he was to getting home. No more bullets or missiles meant that Queensferry military forces now assume that he is dead. If he could just find a way to get the rest of the way home, he could warn Schulmania. But, he needed to act quickly. But, how?

As he drifted, he thought through various scenarios to warn Schulmania. Hours passed and day turned into night and back into day. Injured, cold and hungry, the archduke wondered if he still had enough strength left to complete the journey. He knew that all of Schulmania was counting on him, but he was becoming so weak that he might not be able to hang on long enough to finish his mission. In the distance, he saw a small form on the water. Perhaps it was a small island. Or maybe a ship. He knew that the Queensferry fleet was well behind him, so if it was a ship, it would be a friendly one. With no way to propel himself in that direction, he thought about trying to signal, in hopes that it was a friendly ship who would come to his aid.

He pried a corner of his floating metal panel to expose the shiny metal to the light. With it, he tried to flash a signal in the correct direction. With any luck, the flashing light would be seen and someone would come to investigate. He flashed for more than an hour before tiring. He rested, but did not sleep. He was in somewhat of a stupor. He had fitful dreams of a rescue and saving Schulmania. Noises. Noises? Definitely noises. Were they part of his dream or were they real? With great effort, he opened his eyes and shook his head. Eventually, the blurriness faded and he could see what was definitely a pair of ships – and they were much closer.



As the vessels drew closer, he heard one call out to him: “Ahoy there, are you alright?” This was no dream. Archduke Bower would be safe at last.

Brought aboard the U.S.S. Reliant, the archduke was fed and given a warm blanket while his wounds were being treated. As he warmed, he started to spin for his increasingly terrified rescuers a tale of woe, misery and destruction about to come. The captain cast aside his fishing nets and reversed course. They would sail back to Schulmania as quickly as possible and warn the nation about what fate awaits them.