



## Mortal Danger



*Archduke B. B. Bower of Schulmanicus was used to living in this serene environment: central Schulmanicus, ambling the friendly streets of Wirt, the capital.*



*He left his idyllic home in search of fame and glory on the eastern seas.*

He never expected to make landfall in a strange, hostile land. Now, as their prisoner, he is acutely aware of the imminent danger facing his homeland. An invasion force is on its way – and his people are completely unaware. He *had* to find some way to warn them. If he could just escape. But, that would not be easy. For he was in a high security prison in Queensferry. Escape would be most problematic.



*Escaping from this high security area requires a great deal of cunning- and even more luck. One false move and the archduke would certainly be dead. He needed to make plans – and fast.*

Luckily, the archduke is a pretty smart guy. He and some of his fellow prisoners from the expedition have been working on a plan. They noticed several idiosyncrasies about their captors. The guards, all members of the Cucaracha Cadre, kept the internment facility very dimly lit. Since the sky was smoggy most of the time, very few bright lights were ever seen; and, when they were, the guards were quite uncomfortable and searched for darker areas.

The archduke has been carefully noting other patterns exhibited by his captors. He examined shift changes and analyzed surveillance techniques with an eye toward plotting a means of escape. It proved quite difficult to compare notes with his fellow prisoners, since the expedition crew has been dispersed to multiple facilities and the few in his facility had few chances to communicate. He was on his own.

His sense of urgency was compounded when he overheard guards discussing an impending invasion of Schulmania. He heard their gloating, smug, self important comments, their bombastic statements of imminent victory, their sneers reflecting their complete disdain for his cherished homeland. Such impudence! They would pay for their insolence. He would see to that.

As his plan started coming together, he thought ahead to how he could warn his nation and what they could do to defend themselves against this militant, ruthless enemy. One night, he laid awake in his cell, unable to sleep – due to both his anxiety and the stench of petrochemicals hanging in the humid air – and thought of those who were counting on him to succeed. He decided that the time to act had come. In the morning he would initiate his plan. He did not sleep that night – but his mind was more at ease than any night since his months long ordeal began. He awaited the designated time.

As what passes for dawn in the perpetually smoggy Queensferry commenced, shift change for the guards was taking place. Bower knew that today his guard would be Elton J. Tinydancer, one of the least observant members of the guard force. Elton was a member of Don de Drüler's elite Team Ula, but was disgraced when de Drüler's forces made a poor showing in war games against Lord Smirque of Accolade. Elton's inattentiveness earned him a demotion to guard duty at the prison. He was a bitter, broken man who complained about his sorry lot in life at every opportunity. He often used his shift to regale the archduke with tales of his woes and litanies of who had wronged him at every turn. Through the bars, Archduke Bower heard all about how Elton was only valued for making coffee at the office and how he got passed up for promotion after promotion simply because of his complete lack of personality and productivity.

Today, as Elton droned on about how he was threatened with being sent to an Infestation Center if he didn't improve his performance, Archduke Bower deftly pawed the keyring on his belt and it fell off onto the floor, muffling its fall by his tail. He flicked his tail and the keys slid along the floor and into the cell. He removed the key he needed and quickly slid the keyring back out onto the floor outside the cell. He heard a pause in the drone and used it to say in his friendliest, most supportive tone "E. J., you'd better get those keys you dropped off of the floor or they will send you to the Infestation Center for sure." Elton looked down, surprised. He picked up the keys and thanked Bower, saying "You really saved me. I appreciate that." Bower replied "Likewise... and, you're welcome."

In an hour, it was time for Elton to file his first report. This would give the archduke a seven minute window of opportunity to get out of the cell, navigate through several corridors and out of a side door by a training area he spotted from his barred window. From there he would need to climb over some fences and evade detection until he could find a naval facility and commandeer a vessel. The clock starts now.

Out of the cell and down the corridor. Looking both ways as he scurries toward the exit. Keep a low body profile and watch for movement. Ears cocked and whiskers hyper sensitive. Quick turn toward the exit door. Heavy door doesn't budge. Push and push again. Finally, it creaks open. Slip through the opening. The door slams behind. Out in the open. But not free yet. As the door slams shut, an alarm sounds. Anticipated, though. They will check the cells first. Six minutes left.

Now to get some distance. He heard guards starting to stir. Soon his absence would be found. Across the field full of weapons to the next stop. Careful to look all around. Quickly moving from safe place to safe place. Even more careful to avoid detection. Five minutes left.



Crossing the field. Very carefully. Caution slows him down. Four minutes. Still not out. Nearly there. The end in sight. Three minutes. Now to slip past the wall. Two minutes. Clear! Off to find a boat to commandeer...

His absence had been detected. Alarms started wailing. Guards began pouring out. Tanks and weapons were activated. The dragnet was being spread.



Not a moment could be spared. Military and police units began fanning out to look for the escaped prisoner. Archduke Bower used a combination of stealth and climbing to evade ground level searches in the immediate vicinity. But, he knew that he needed to reach a naval base quickly or the sheer number of troops searching for him would flush him out into the open and certain death. For there would be no doubt as to the fate he would have if recaptured. He kept running.

He managed to leave this more military district and enter a more industrial one. His hopes of escaping detection increased. The choking petrochemical smoke made his lungs burn as he gasped for air. But he tried very hard to mask any ill effects. Since everyone else was used to “the smell of money being made” he did not want to stand out.



*In the haze, he spotted places to hide as helicopters began to form a search pattern above him. \*

He did not have much longer. He assumed military facilities would be locked down soon, preventing him from getting into an escape vessel. His pursuers were closing in on his position. Fortunately, sheer numbers do not ensure victory. Wily cats can escape many seemingly foolproof traps. He was going to have to be even more cunning than that time he escaped a phalanx of his staff to avoid a trip to the dreaded veterinarian's office. Archduke Bower continued to use his staggered vector approach to the shore, alternating low hiding places with higher ones. Occasionally, he doubled back on his trail to confuse the enemy. A pungent mix of smoke and salt guided him toward the shore. He crested a hill and noted his location: the intersection of Buggstone Drive and Fort Flystrip Terrace. Fort – this sounded promising. He veered in the direction of the fort and soon saw his prize.



*A ship! His way out was so close – but still under heavy guard. He would have to act fast.*

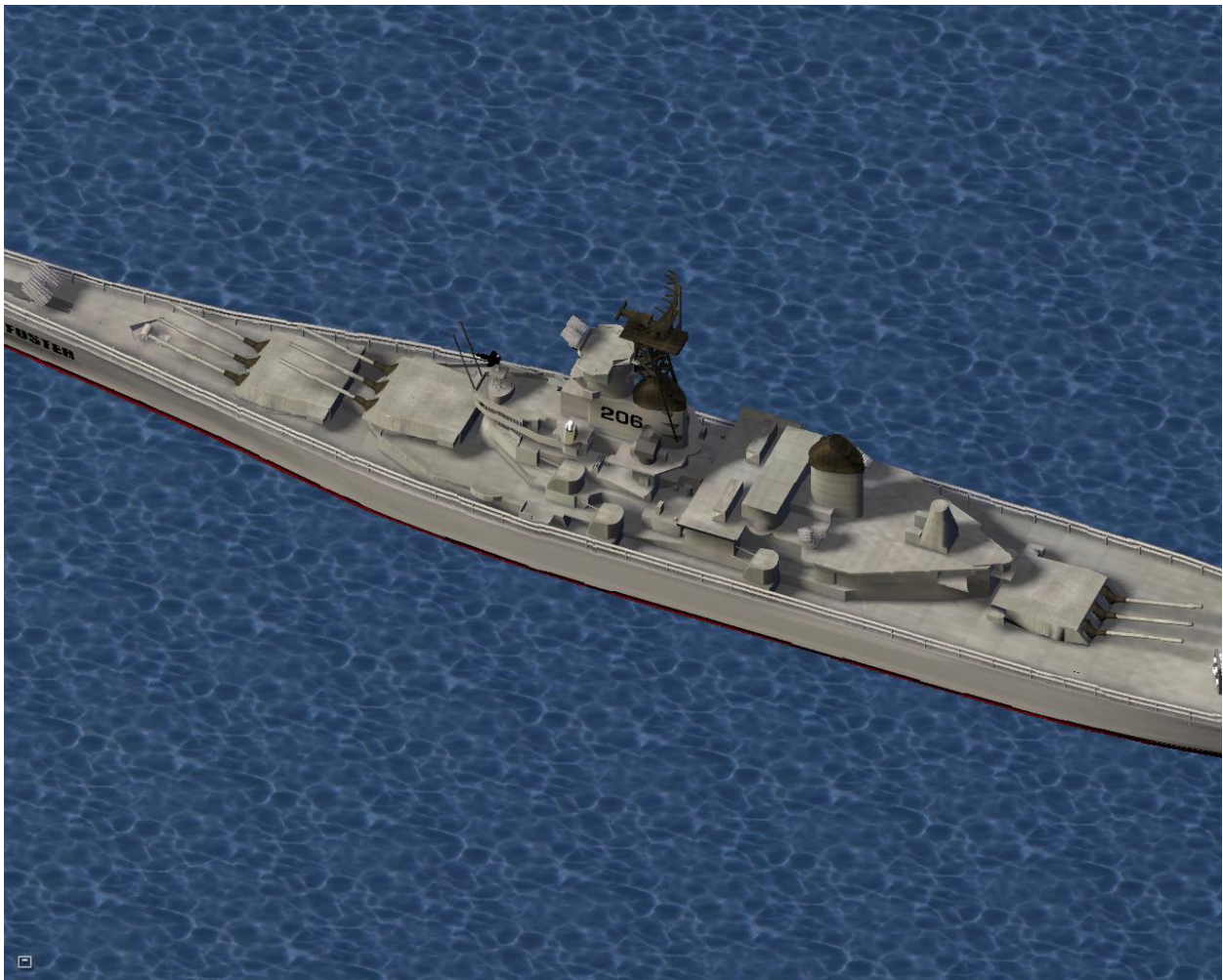
He would also have to stay calm. He remained in mortal danger until he set foot on his home soil. Until then, he needed to remain vigilant and ready to defend himself. He crept stealthily until he got near the barbed wire fences at the base's perimeter. As he climbed over, he was spotted by a squad of insectoid sentries. They came scurrying over to confront him. Faced with being challenged, Bower had to quickly decide how to deal with the lightly armed sentries. Without answering their challenges, he simply squished them and moved on.

Knowing that the squishing would confirm his whereabouts, he decided to try to board the most difficult to access ship, instead of the closest one. He felt that Queensferry's security forces would most likely board the closest ship and search it first. The one farthest out may pull out to sea before reinforcements arrived.

As he crept toward his destination, his peril increased. He would have to be out in the open on a wide expanse of flat concrete without good hiding places in order to make his final approach. To compound this situation, alarms were sounding at the far end of the base and the drone of helicopter gunships overhead was getting closer. They were nearly on his position – it was just a matter of time. This ship he had in mind was preparing for launch. As he headed toward it, he

overheard a broadcast indicating the ship was headed to join the invasion fleet in the west. This was a good sign for him – he would get on the right ship. Of course, it is a very *bad* sign for Schulmania.

He decided to run as fast as he could and jump for the ship before it left. Summoning all of his remaining strength, he ran headlong for the ship right across the open expanse of concrete. As he neared his destination, shots started ringing out, coming from nearly all around him. Unscathed, he jumped and found himself clawing to the side of the ship. Though his hold was precarious and he was vulnerable to land-based weapons fire, his position was strategically good. He could wait until the ship was searched and found to be clear before climbing aboard and hiding. Once he was on the open sea, he could steal an escape craft and head for home.



Once the ship was inspected and found to be cat free, it changed direction and headed out to sea. The tossing made the archduke's tenuous hold on the side of the ship even worse. He lost his grip on several occasions, only to regain a footing as he started to slide. At high noon, when the sailors retreated below deck to avoid the sun's glare, he climbed aboard and found a hiding place in the barrel of a gun. He pondered the irony of his placement as he prepared his next move. Odd, how he was seeking sanctuary inside of a gun which will be turned loose on his homeland.

Secure in his dark, warm hiding place, he slept for the first time in a long time. As he rested his exhausted body and mind, he dreamt of home, hoping to see it again soon – and see it intact.

From below, he could hear the enemy sailors having a grand time – eating, drinking, laughing. As the sun started to sink lower in the sky, they started coming back up from the lower decks and resumed their stations. As several officers came out, discussing their rendez-vous with the task force while sipping their Oil of Onimay, Bower saw his route of escape from the ship. About an hour later, as the ship prepared to join the fleet already in position, crew members were quite busy. No one noticed a small splash on the starboard side. Archduke Bower's plan had worked – he had traversed a good part of the ocean and escaped undetected.

