

CANCEL THE INVASION

by David Larsen

“Glorious leader,” Ash wrote on his padlet. Was that the right way to start? Maybe “Esteemed leader”? “God-like leader”? That might be going too far, but it was so important to get the leader’s attention. A cricket ball bounced off his head. He blinked and looked up.

Human books had taught Ash that a bat was a flying mammal. Some bats could turn into blood-drinking humans. Blood-drinking humans were called vampires. A bat was also a weapon used for striking round red projectiles called balls. A ball was also a kind of dance. You could not hit a dance with a bat, even when a bat was a weapon and not a flying mammal. So why call dances balls? Human languages were as strange as humans.

“I wasn’t looking, Dad always says I have to look, I just hit the ball as hard as I could, are you OK?” The young human was looking at him with wide eyes. Could this young human be a vampire? She had a bat. Perhaps she was a vampire! It was entirely possible.

Ash attempted a reassuring smile. He was not sure he had mastered smiles. The young human yelped and leapt backwards and fell over.

“I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, are you OK?” It was a young human. She was nine or ten, he thought. It was hard to be sure. She was running towards him. She was holding a bat!



Probably his smile had been a little off. But really, she had no cause for concern. Ash's skull was made of titanium, and in any case, his brain was under his rib cage, next to his heart. A much more sensible place than in his head. So the cricket ball could not have hurt him, and the girl had no need to feel bad. He could not tell her this. It was kind of her to worry. (But what if she was a vampire? This could all be a plan to get close to him so she could suck his blood. Not that he had any blood. But still. It was alarming.)

"Your teeth!" said the girl, getting up. Ash had forgotten about the teeth. Human ones were not quite as pointy or as blue as his. "I'm sorry, that was rude," she went on. "I didn't mean to jump. Are you OK?"

He was going to have to talk to her. He was very bad at this part. Probably the invasion committee should have sent a different advance scout. "I," Ash said. He took a long breath. "Am," he added. Almost there, almost there ... "Fine!" he finished. A sentence! He had managed a full sentence! Except a fine was a thing you had to pay when you broke the law. Human language was so difficult. He had better smile again to show her he was friendly and not a law breaker. No! He remembered his teeth just in time. The young human was looking puzzled. Perhaps he should smile after all?

Now two more humans were running over, wearing worried looks. They were both small, so they were both dangerous, and one of them had another bat. Even worse, the other was holding a book! If they were vampires, he could be in real trouble. Or they could be superheroes. Or wizards! So many terrifying possibilities. Perhaps stopping at the park to write his message had been an error. But it would have taken so long to get back to the ship, where he could write in private. The invasion fleet was to be launched in three hours. They had to be warned!



Ash rose to his feet, folding the padlet in two and slipping it into his sleeve-pouch. His scout garments had been carefully designed to cover his double set of knees, but he hoped none of the young humans noticed his legs were bendier than theirs. "Must," he said, "go." He bowed, pressing his palms together as humans did. Some humans. Possibly not most humans in this country. It was hard to keep all their countries straight. "Most." He straightened up. "Kind." He stopped himself from smiling again. "Of." This was the longest exchange he'd ever had with a human. It was exhausting. "You."

All three of them were staring with open mouths. This could be so their vampire fangs were able to thrust out of their gums. They were about to attack!

No. He must not panic. He wheeled round and strode off.

"Are you *sure* you're OK?" the first young human called after him.



Ash found another bench under some trees. A few older humans were strolling about, but there were none of the young ones. He flipped out his padlet and tried to calm his thoughts. "Mighty leader," he began. That was the proper tone. "Mighty leader, this least of your servants writes in greatest urgency. I was sent among the humans to learn their ways and prepare for your conquest. I have studied them. They are far more deadly than we supposed. They have a secret weapon, which I fear we cannot match. It is called *fiction*."

He paused. This was the hard part. It was like trying to explain that water was no longer wet. It made his head hurt. But his duty was clear. He pushed on. "*Fiction* is kept in things called *books*, which in turn are kept in buildings known as *lie-berries*. This is partly because fiction is a sort of fruit for the mind and partly because it is full of things called *lies*. We do not have lies. They are difficult to explain."



He took another deep breath. One of the strolling humans, a craggy-nosed man with white hair sprouting from his jaw and none on the top of his head, was getting rather close. Ash ignored him.

“Lies are things that are not true. Sometimes humans say ‘I am a vampire,’ which means an awful human bat. Or ‘I can fly faster than a speeding bullet.’ Or ‘I have a magic wand. It will turn you into a frog.’ Almost all the humans’ books about their children celebrate these horrible powers. When anything can be a lie, anything can be true!”

The man with the hairy jaw and the curious nose was looking at him. He was leaning on a stick. He had bright blue eyes. Ash hurried to finish his message before the man could try to talk to him. Delay now would be disastrous.

“Mighty leader, it is not for me to direct your path. But I beg you to consider this vital news. Great warriors may be hidden in every playground on this planet. Imagine young boys with lightning bolts on their heads and wands in their pockets; imagine young girls with capes and laser eyes! If our armies come here, they will be doomed.” He added his personal identifier code and pressed send. The padlet screen flickered, and the message text turned green: it had sent properly. He breathed a sigh of vast relief.



“Very good!” said the old human, still leaning on his stick. “Very wise. I hoped you had the sense to do that.” His voice was as large and craggy as his nose.

“I,” began Ash. “What?” He had no idea what to say. “Who?”

“No one important,” said the old man. There was a dry tone in his voice that Ash had heard before. Leaders used it when speaking to very stupid underlings. “You’ve done well. Now you go on about your day.”

Then the old man turned into a hawk and flew off into the trees.



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