

SKYWAKE **INVASION**

JAMIE RUSSELL



WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2021 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2021 Jamie Russell
Cover illustration © 2021 Matt Griffin

The right of Jamie Russell to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Berkeley Oldstyle

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-9751-2

www.walker.co.uk



O

MAKE MINE A SKINNY LATTE ... TO GO

Right after she fired it, the alien plasma rifle glowed in Casey's hands. It was big. It was heavy. Most of all, though, it was hot. It crackled with a tingling, electrical heat that made the hairs on the backs of her hands stand to attention like soldiers on parade.

She looked at the hole she'd just blasted in the side of Starbucks. A perfect circle, like when she used a pencil and compass in Mr Donovan's maths class. She could see right through it into the pizza restaurant next door. The remaining bricks, sliced in half by the plasma rifle's searing blast, burned red like charcoal in a barbecue. Wisps of black smoke curled above what was left of the baristas' station.

A hulking alien soldier stood beside the hole. It wore heavy, black armour and a curved metal helmet that obscured its face. Two blood-red mechanical eyes

were set in the helmet. They stared at her angrily.

If she'd been a little more accurate, the hole would have been smack bang in the middle of the alien's armoured chest.

But you weren't accurate, Casey thought to herself. *You totally choked.*

It was true. The minute she'd picked up the plasma rifle, her body had flooded with fear and adrenaline. She'd pulled the trigger too early and the heavy weapon had jerked out of her hands. Her shot – the shot that was going to save her life – had gone wide and destroyed the wall instead.

And that was why she was now standing in a ruined Starbucks being eyeballed by an alien soldier. This thing had travelled thousands of light years from some distant corner of interstellar space to invade Earth and had almost been taken out by a fifteen-year-old girl.

She guessed it wasn't very happy.

"Um..." Casey muttered, letting the hand holding the rifle drop to her side. She desperately wanted to say some last words before she was vaporized. But her mind had gone blank. The only thing she could think of was a four-letter word. She didn't want that on her gravestone.

The alien filled the silence himself. She decided it was a “him”, even though she couldn’t actually see who, or what, was inside the bulky combat suit.

“*Rth’he calfu mort,*” he said in a mechanical voice. The tone sounded insulting, like he was saying, *You should have aimed better, you stupid girl.*

“Yeah.” Casey grimaced. “I guess you’re right.”

The alien raised his plasma rifle. It hummed in his large hands. Casey stared down the barrel. It was as black as death. She knew he wouldn’t choke.

She closed her eyes and swore under her breath. *If the alien dude can’t speak English, she decided, then it probably doesn’t count...*

1

IRL – IN REAL LIFE

Casey hadn't woken up that morning expecting to die, but she had been ready to kill. Her younger brother, Pete, had stormed into her room while she was still asleep, ignoring the sign on her door that clearly said: WARNING: NO STUPID PEOPLE BEYOND THIS POINT. He jumped on her bed, making the mattress bounce up and down like a dinghy in rough seas.

“Casey, wake up! The tournament's all over the news!” he yelled. “They said it's happening in other cities too: New York, Madrid, Johannesburg, Seoul and that one in the Middle East with the enormous skyscrapers.”

Casey cracked open a single, sleep-encrusted eye and glared at him. Pete was compact and wiry with a mop of shaggy black hair. At eleven he was four years younger than her and he had been born prematurely,

making him small for his age. But what he lacked in size he made up for in excitability.

“What time is it?” Casey asked. Her mouth felt dry and scratchy.

“I don’t know. Probably about six.”

She groaned and tried to pull the duvet over her head. It only came up as far as her nose because Pete was weighing it down. She lay back and glared at him over the covers.

“They had a special segment about eSports on the local news,” he continued. “The presenters were totally clueless. But they showed some *SkyWake* footage and they interviewed Xander Kane. You know, the pro-player who makes all those YouTube videos?”

Casey knew who Xander Kane was. Pete was obsessed with him.

“Why are you up so early?” she demanded. “You never get up at six. Not even at Christmas.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Pete told her. “I kept dreaming I was hiding in the vents on the dropship map. I was the last man standing and all I had was a psi grenade. Just as they found me, I woke up. Anyway, come on. We’ve got to get over there.”

“There’s no rush,” she yawned. “The tournament doesn’t start for hours.” Her hair, which she’d recently

dyed with blue streaks in the same style as her favourite gaming YouTuber, was a tangled mess. She stuck out her bottom lip and blew some sky-coloured strands out of her face.

“But people are already queuing up,” Pete said, bouncing off the bed in a wild flurry of limbs. “There’ll be over two hundred players in London alone.”

“Oh yeah? But how many good ones?” Casey asked.

“None as good as you,” Pete said. And he meant it.

“Shame I’m not competing, then,” Casey replied, swinging her legs out of bed and heading for the door. Pete followed her.

“Wait, *what*? Why not? They sent you a VIP invite and everything!”

“Because if I meet my team, they’ll find out who I really am.”

“They already know who you are. You’re Casey Flow,” he said, using her gamertag: **CASEY_FLOW**. “The best *SkyWake* player I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, but here’s the thing. They all think Casey Flow is a boy.”

For the first time that morning, Pete was lost for words. He stood there on the landing, trying to process what his sister had just said. Casey shut the bathroom door in his face.

“Well, today’s going to be *really* interesting,” he muttered to himself.

SkyWake – always one word, always a capital “S” and “W” – was the gaming phenomenon of the year. The online team shooter had arrived out of nowhere back in January as a free-to-play download. By February, it had hit twenty million players worldwide. It kept on growing month after month and its mysterious developers, Area 51, had reputedly made millions from merchandise sales alone.

Casey had been playing since the start, and like her brother she had even begun to dream about it. She could draw each of the game’s maps – the beach assault, the weapons factory, the dropship and the alien city – from memory. There was something incredibly immersive about the game’s level design.

The invitation from Area 51 had arrived a week ago, pinged into her inbox from out of the blue. The highest-ranked teams in the UK were being invited to take part in a global eSports tournament to find *SkyWake*’s best of the best. Casey’s team was among those picked to compete.

Over breakfast, as her mum buzzed around her getting ready to leave for work, Casey watched the

news on TV. Footage from *SkyWake* flashed up on-screen.

“I wish you wouldn’t waste your time on these silly games,” her mum complained as she filled a travel mug with coffee. She was always a little testy when she had to work a Saturday shift. “All that shooting and killing isn’t good for you.” She smoothed down her nurse’s uniform and then gave Casey one of her serious stares. “Plus, I don’t want you meeting people you’ve been talking to online.”

“We’re just going to look around,” Casey assured her. “We’re not meeting anyone. We’re not even going to play.”

Pete looked sideways at her, uncertain whether she was telling the truth or not.

“Are any of your friends going?” her mum asked.

Casey shook her head. None of her friends were big gamers. But Pete was. At least she’d have some company if he tagged along. Mum snapped the lid shut on her mug and glanced at the clock.

“Just make sure you stay together,” she told Casey firmly. “Pete’s your responsibility. I’m trusting you to keep him safe.”

“Why is she always in charge?” Pete moaned, slipping his cereal bowl into the sink. “Just because

she's old enough to have a phone and dye her hair silly colours."

"It's one colour," Casey said sharply. "Bubblegum Blue."

Pete snorted in derision. "It makes you look like an anime character."

Their mum glanced at the clock again. She looked tired and pale. Casey suddenly felt sorry for her.

"At least her hair will make her easy to spot in the crowd," she told Pete, kissing him goodbye. She winked at Casey and then hurried out of the door. By the time Casey noticed she'd forgotten her coffee, it was too late to go after her.

Later that morning, Casey sat on the bus twiddling the army dog tags she always wore round her neck. They had belonged to her dad, an officer in the Royal Engineers. She'd started wearing them as a necklace after he'd died. She liked to let her fingers run over the letters that spelled out his full name: *Michael Charles Henderson*.

She sensed Pete watching her.

"What are you thinking about?" he demanded.

"I was just wondering what Dad would have thought about *SkyWake*," Casey said, slipping the dog tags back under her hoodie. "I think he'd have loved

it. It's as if it was made for him."

Their dad had been an avid video-game player and collector. He'd taught Casey and Pete everything he knew about games, from *Pac-Man* to *Halo*. Which was a lot.

Pete scowled. He didn't like talking about their dad. He still missed him so much, and if he was truthful, he was jealous that his sister had spent more time with him in the weeks before he died than he had.

"Well, *I* wonder what he'd think about you lying to your team," Pete replied. "Good leaders are supposed to be honest with their squads. I don't get why you didn't just tell them you were a girl."

Casey sighed and turned to face him. "Boys can freak out when they hear a girl in team chat," she explained. "All I have to do is say, *We're getting flanked*, or, *I need healing*, and they go, *OMG! Are you a gurrll?* and, *You suck. Go and play with your Barbies!*"

"Boys really say that to you?" Pete asked, shocked and annoyed on her behalf.

"Only some of them. But the sexist ones are usually the loudest."

"Well –" he shrugged – "I guess that's why the game has a mute button. If you don't like what they're saying, just block them."

“But *SkyWake* is a team shooter,” Casey snapped, exasperated. “If you mute everyone, you can’t work together. And if you can’t work together, you can’t win. I was just playing about with a voice changer when I realized everyone acted different when they thought I was a boy. So I kept using it. People always assume Casey is a boy’s name anyway.”

“So no one on your team knows you’re a girl?”

Casey shook her head. She’d started using the voice changer before she met the players who’d become her *SkyWake* clan, so they’d only ever known her as a boy. It seemed silly now. Her teammates were good guys, but by the time she realized that, it was too late to tell them the truth without making it into a big drama. She’d never expected to meet them, but then the invites arrived for a gaming tournament in London. In real life.

And IRL there is nowhere to hide.