
SKYWAKE
INVASION

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WALKER
BOOKS

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For Isobel and Alice,
my favourite co-op partners

0

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, pinging 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 gurrrrl?* 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.

2

TRICK OF THE LIGHT

The West Point shopping centre was the biggest indoor mall in Europe. Spread over eight floors, it had chain restaurants and pop-up food stalls, a cinema, a skating rink, a gym and even an indoor garden with real plants. It would take three hours to walk around the whole of it … longer if you actually stopped in any of the hundreds of shops.

Today was busier than usual, as the Saturday crowds were joined by hundreds of *SkyWake* fans arriving for the tournament. Several TV news vans, easy to spot because of the satellite dishes on their roofs, were parked in the restricted area of the outdoor car park. Reporters and their camera operators stood near by, broadcasting live. Casey was excited to recognize a couple of them from TV. They seemed a lot shorter in the flesh.

"Look at all these people," Pete whispered in amazement, pushing through the crowd with Casey trailing behind, struggling to keep up. He was so small and wiry he could scoot through the gaps between the adults with ease.

Casey looked up at the shopping centre as they approached. It had so many floors it made her neck hurt. Up on the roof were a bunch of mobile phone masts and three banks of black solar panels. The company that owned the building had recently announced that it was going carbon-neutral.

It was while Casey was staring at the panels that she saw something odd. She wasn't sure if it was a shimmer or a glimmer. Or maybe a ripple. But whatever it was, it caught her eye.

"Did you see that?" she asked. But her brother had gone on ahead. Casey stopped and looked up again, ignoring the impatient shoppers jostling around her in both directions. The same strange ripple moved across the rooftop. It was as though something was deflecting the light, bending it in unexpected directions. For a moment, she thought she glimpsed the outline of something vast and curved. It dazzled her eyes a little, like sunlight reflecting off a lake.

When she blinked, it vanished.

As she stepped backwards to get a better view, she bumped into a man carrying a cardboard tray of takeaway coffees. Milky suds splashed over his olive-green polo shirt.

"I'm so sorry!" she said, expecting him to be mad. To her surprise, he ignored the mess.

"Did you see something up there?" he asked in a deep, gravelly voice. He had salt-and-pepper hair that was shaved close to his skull in a buzz cut. A purple birth mark, or perhaps a scar, stretched up his neck. The way he stood, stomach in and back straight, was familiar. It was what her dad used to call a "military bearing".

"I thought I did," Casey replied. She glanced at the roof again. There was nothing to see now. "It's like there was something moving up there, on top of the building."

"The reflection off the solar panels does that sometimes," the man told her, shielding his eyes with his free hand as he scrutinized the roof. "It's like a heat haze in the desert. It can make you see things that aren't there. But it's really just a trick of the light."

Casey stared at him, uncertain why he was telling her all this. Then she looked back at the crowd. Pete was almost at the main entrance.

"I have to go," she said. "I'm really sorry about spilling your coffee."

The buzz-cut man ignored her, still staring up at the rooftop.

Casey left him to it and joined the sea of people heading towards the main entrance, where a couple of stressed-out security guards were trying to maintain order. They were clearly overwhelmed by the size of the crowds.

Before she went inside, she looked over her shoulder to see if the man was still there. He was walking towards a black minivan, carrying his soggy tray of coffees. As he approached the vehicle, its rear doors opened. Inside, Casey glimpsed a man and a woman sitting in front of a bank of computer equipment. They were crumpled and sweaty and the man needed a shave. They looked like they'd been in there for a while.

Casey wondered if they were a news crew, although their van didn't have a TV station logo on it. The buzz-cut man climbed in and the van doors slammed shut.

Something about it made Casey feel uneasy. She looked around for Pete, remembering her mum's instructions. Whatever happened today, she wasn't going to let her little brother out of her sight.

* * *

The *SkyWake* tournament was happening on the first floor. At the top of the escalators, Casey and Pete were greeted by a giant alien hanging from the ceiling. Its squid-like tentacles stretched out in every direction. A few confused-looking shoppers stood underneath it, staring up at its enormous, bulbous head. They clearly had no idea what it was. That was the thing about video games. Most adults didn't know anything about them.

"This. Is. Amazing," Pete whispered under his breath. The alien was one of the Bactu, an ancient race of extra-terrestrials. They were one of *SkyWake*'s two main factions. Pete reached out to touch the dangling tentacles. He wasn't quite tall enough.

Casey headed over to the sports hall where the eSports arena had been set up. The entrance had been dressed to resemble a military checkpoint. Sandbags were piled high on either side of the doorway with black camouflage netting strung over the top. A long line of gamers queued to get inside while a bored-looking young woman in a *SkyWake* T-shirt checked their invitations on her tablet.

Behind her stood two hulking Arcturian soldiers, the sworn enemy of the Bactu. They wore black armour and carried enormous plasma rifles in their

gloved hands. Their mechanical eyes, set deep in their their helmets, burned red.

"Look at those outfits," Pete whispered, staring at the soldiers in awe as he caught up with his sister.

"They must be professional cosplayers," Casey said, admiring the level of detail on their suits. She wondered how the costume designers had managed to mimic the fiery gaze that gave the Arcturians their "Red Eye" nickname.

Her phone buzzed.

"Who is it?" Pete asked, straining to see the screen as she read the message.

"It's Cheeze."

CH33ZEMUNK3Y was one of the players in her online clan.

"Cheese? Like cheddar?"

"No, like *cheezing*. When you exploit a glitch in a game."

"Don't you know his real name?"

Casey shook her head. "I don't know any of their names. Just their gamertags." Her face clouded as she read the message. "He says they're waiting for me in Starbucks."

"Let's get over there, then."

She pulled him back. "No. I don't want to meet

them. We're just going to watch."

"But they're expecting you!"

"They're expecting a guy," Casey replied. Saying it out loud, it all seemed so stupid. She wished she'd never pretended she was anyone other than herself. "They're going to be mad if they find out I've been lying to them all this time."

The queue moved forward.

"Name?" asked the bored-looking woman in a tone that sounded like it was the nine-hundredth time that day she'd asked the same question.

"Casey Henderson. My gamertag is Casey Flow."

The woman arched her eyebrows slightly and scrolled through her list.

"Have you got your VIP invite?"

Casey took out her phone and pulled up the invitation she'd received. The woman scanned the QR code embedded in it and her tablet beeped.

"Clan name?"

"Ghost Reapers. This is my brother. He's my plus one," she added, gesturing towards Pete, who was still staring at the Red Eye cosplayers. He reached out a hand to touch one of them and then jumped in fright when the soldier spun around and pointed his plasma rifle at him.

"Ignore those idiots," the woman said, exasperated. "I've been trying to get them to talk all morning, but they must be method actors or something. They're staying totally in character." She rolled her eyes and handed Casey two plastic badges hanging on blue lanyards. "Your passes."

Casey's badge was stamped with a QR code along with the word COMPETITOR in blocky, futuristic writing. Pete's badge was blank with SPECTATOR stamped on it. Both were branded with the familiar *SkyWake* logo, two fiery suns rising above the horizon of an alien planet.

Casey slipped her lanyard around her neck.

"Can you tell me something?" she asked the woman. "What happens if a team captain doesn't play? Do you disqualify the whole team or just the captain? Could someone else take my place?"

The woman stared at Casey as if she was talking a foreign language.

"I'm just paid to work here today, hon." She shrugged. "If you want answers, talk to Lee over there. He's in charge." She pointed towards a man who was pacing up and down, having a heated argument with someone on his phone.

"I never ordered any cosplayers," Casey overheard

him saying crossly. “Fine. Well, just don’t try and bill me for them later. I’ll be checking the invoices.”

Casey turned back to quiz the woman some more, but she was already waving a new gamer forwards with a shout of, “Next!”

Casey and Pete stepped aside. Casey’s phone buzzed. Cheeze again.

Casey! Where r u?!

“What are you going to do?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know,” Casey muttered, pocketing her phone and pulling the sleeves of her hoodie down over her hands. She’d got herself into a right mess. What had she been thinking?

“They won’t care who you are,” Pete reassured her, “just how well you play.”

Casey bit her lip. “Maybe if I don’t show up they’ll find a replacement for me,” she suggested doubtfully. She knew that wouldn’t be possible. Not this close to the start.

They were just a few metres away from the coffee shop. She stared at the familiar logo. Pete followed her gaze and smiled slyly to himself.

“Oh well,” he said, “it’s probably better if we don’t go. Mum’s always warning us about people you meet online. They could be serial killers or anything.”

"I guess we could just go and see what they look like…" Casey said. Pete grinned. "But we won't introduce ourselves," she added firmly. "They won't even know who we are unless we tell them. They've never seen either of us before."

"We'll be like spies," Pete said, his imagination running away with him. "Or undercover cops."

"Whatever happens," Casey warned her little brother, "don't give me away."

"Promise," he told her, his face suddenly serious.

In the months since *SkyWake*'s first release, Casey had spent hours leading her team on the battlefield. Shoulder to shoulder, they had fought against the Bactu hordes. Together they had celebrated wild victories and tasted the bitterness of defeat. Through it all they had been a team, a unit, a band of brothers (and one secret sister).

Now, though, as she stood in the doorway of the crowded coffee shop, she realized that she didn't have a clue what any of them looked like. It didn't help that everyone in the coffee shop seemed to be wearing *SkyWake* merch. Everywhere she turned, she saw T-shirts and caps and messenger bags, all emblazoned with the game's logo. She noticed there were plenty of

cool-looking gamer girls among the crowd too. Casey bet they didn't use voice changers.

She scanned the faces of the customers, trying to match them to the voices she knew so well. But it was impossible.

"You know," Pete said in a low voice, as she checked out the customers, "maybe you're the one making assumptions."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe they've been trolling you. Maybe they all use voice changers too. Maybe the whole team are girls!"

For the first time that morning, Casey laughed.

"Don't you know anything about them?" Pete asked.

"I know Cheeze lives in Birmingham – he's good with computers. Fish is from Glasgow – he's always in a bad mood but he's the best tank player I've ever seen. Elite is from London – he wants to be a rapper and keeps getting mugged on the bus. Spock's Brain is from Leeds and—"

"Wait," interrupted Pete. "Whose brain?"

"Spock," Casey said, "like Mr Spock from *Star Trek*. He's a big sci-fi nerd."

"Is that it? Don't you know anything else about them?"

"I know they all love *SkyWake*."

"Look around," Pete told her. "This is *SkyWake* Central."

Her phone buzzed again, insistent.

Casey???!!!!!! Why aren't you answering me???

"Give it to me," said Pete, snatching it from her. "I'll message him."

"Don't you dare!" Casey warned, trying to grab the phone. Pete dodged her, his fingers already typing a message on the screen.

"I'll say you're stuck in traffic and we'll see whose phone buzzes when I reply. Then at least you'll know what they look like…"

"Just give me the phone!" Casey hissed. Her fury stopped Pete in his tracks.

"Fine," he said sulkily, a little hurt. "I was just trying to help."

He was about to pass her the handset when it burst into life with an incoming call.

BRRRRRRIIIINNNNGGGG!

The ringtone was so loud that several people stopped talking and looked over. Pete fumbled with the phone, trying to mute it.

It was too late. They'd been spotted.

"Casey!" a voice shouted. It belonged to a boy

in a lime-green wheelchair wearing a skateboarder hoodie and holding a phone to his ear. He rolled over to them, propelling himself with his hands, on which he wore fingerless, black leather gloves. Casey saw that his wheelchair was covered in pouches holding a laptop, cables and an electrical toolkit. It looked like a mobile computer repair shop.

"We've been looking for you everywhere!" the boy said, excited. "I'm Cheeze."

Casey was about to reply when she realized that he wasn't talking to her. He was looking directly at Pete.

"You *are* Casey Flow, aren't you?" Cheeze asked, sensing his hesitation.

For an awkward moment nobody said anything. Then a voice spoke.

"Yes, I'm Casey," it said.

But it wasn't Casey who was speaking – it was Pete.

And for some reason, Casey didn't do anything to stop him.