

Defender

by C.M. Harris

Natalie swaggered into the Zoltar Video Arcade & Movie Rental, right hand hovering over her invisible, low-slung laser pistol. Today she was Han Solo and her Sunday dress, still warm from her pre-pubescent body, lay in a heap at the bottom of her closet.

It was quiet in the arcade, save for the game consoles chirping along the far wall. No one at the front counter, it was just Natalie and the aliens, the asteroids and tanks, a faded library of empty VHS boxes collecting dust behind the counter. The wood paneling and carpet exuded its usual horse-poop smell of cigars and the remnants of hair comb sanitizer. Zoltar used to be a barbershop but all the farmers died off and now everybody goes to Command Performance up north at the Oak Square Mall for thirty dollar hair cuts.

Natalie strode over to the token machine. She fed a soft, five-dollar bill into the slot. It rolled back out, as if to mock her with its pale green tongue. After a few more tries, the machine stopped kidding around and twenty gold coins hissed into the change cup. She strolled past Defender and Tempest and stopped at Galaga, her favorite game. Aliens rained down the scuffed monitor, begging to be blown into a spray of pixels. Her top score remained unchallenged. A player named REG was climbing, but NAT still crowned the list.

Natalie plugged in four tokens, smacked the start button, flicked the joystick and let it *doink* back to center. Her right hand hovered over the fire button.

The stairwell door at the back of the arcade huffed open and a shadow crossed her periphery. She smelled the kid before she actually saw him. He was as aromatic as the boys who didn't bother to shower after P.E. And even if Natalie were in the mood to ignore this, say Hi, the first wave of alien bees was sweeping down. If she didn't kill all of them during their entrance, she could say goodbye to a bonus, the whole game for that matter.

Natalie's right hand blurred and she fragged all the bugs before they had a chance to land in formation. The machine hummed low notes: *Ooom. Ooom. Ooom.* Her chest loosened its grip as she hit her flow, the oncoming waves exploding with a satisfying rubber-ducky squeak: *weeko-weeko-weeko.* This could be an epic game, bonuses adding up. When Natalie was with the aliens her body was alert, focusing all energy into her eyes and hands. Time lost meaning. And the bugs kept coming.

Next to her, the new arrival stared into the Tempest game. The demo of spider-like aliens climbed a vortex of webbed vectors. How long had he been there, just hulking around like a dork? Maybe he didn't have any money.

Natalie looked up between levels twenty and twenty-one.

He smiled at her with big teeth, as if they knew each other. He had what was commonly referred to in junior high as the 'bullshit mustache'. Peach fuzz. It was dark against his pale skin. His eyes were a cat-like light green, his hair a wet black. He looked like he didn't belong in this time period. What if he was one of those Chester Molester types? After all, there were no witnesses.

Natalie jerked her stare back to the screen, began firing again.

"Hi," he said with a hoarse voice.

"Hey." She promised herself that if he came too close, she'd kick him in the knee.

"Can I watch?"

Heat filled Natalie's cheeks. "Free country." Or maybe she would punch him in the crotch and then sprint out the door, down the sidewalk and over to Cub foods where Dad was shopping.

He moved around behind her and landed in front of the game to her left.

"Defender's better," he said.

She jerked a shoulder. "It's all right."

In Defender, the spaceship rocketed horizontally as opposed to Galaga's vertical progression. In Defender, you piloted the ship up and down, backwards, forwards, exploring the

stratosphere above a mountainous terrain. Having that much control made Natalie uneasy.

The kid nodded. "*Way* more advanced. Feels like you're actually getting somewhere. And don't you love hyperspace? It's like you can feel it deep inside." He kicked the change box and the padlock rattled. "Got really good speakers in these things."

"Yeah." Natalie rolled eyes. Okay, she could easily take this idiot. No witnesses, after all.

"You're the first girl I've ever seen in here," he said.

"You're really good."

Natalie kept tapping away at the fire button.

"I live upstairs," he insisted. "Stepdad owns the block."

"Must be nice."

"I keep trying to get the high score but some guy keeps beating me." He sniffled. "Want some cum gum?"

Natalie blinked. "Huh?"

"You know, the gum that cums in your mouth."

Natalie had heard Freshen-Up called that before. It was bubble gum with a gooey liquid center. It sounded dirty somehow. How could gum come that was already there?

"Why, do I need it?"

The boy leaned in. "Want me to check?"

"No." Though she was adjusting to his odor.

"Here." The kid unwrapped the squishy cube and eased it into the side of her mouth. It felt like an invasion of Body Snatcher proportions and popped its goo before Natalie could get her tongue around it. She reached up to wipe her lip and missed botched the beginning of level twenty-four.

"Um, great."

"Whoa, you're about to beat NAT. What's your high score?"

Natalie chomped away at the syrupy gum. "A mil."

"No way, *you're* NAT?"

She could not hide the grin. "Yeah." And forgot she had no more reserve fighters. An enemy drop-ship swooped down and snatched her last ship. GAME OVER. *Beedle. Beedle. Beedle.* Then

Natalie botched the log-in. *NAG?* Now he would think she was lying.

He extended a hand. "I'm Reg."

She took it. It was soft, a little moist. "Okay, yeah, you're—"

"Way down at the bottom." Reg chuckled. "So, what's your real name?"

"You can just call me Nat."

Reg looked her up and down. "You don't go to school here."

"No. In Hedburg."

"You're kinda cute," he said.

She cringed. "Wow. Thanks."

"Wanna go on a walk?"

"Can't. Dad's picking me up soon."

The Galaga screen went blank before starting the demo. Just stars rising. Natalie's reflection stared back up at her. It was not the face it was supposed to be, all wry and clever. Instead, it was soft and pretty. Not even close to Han Solo. Too round. And the face next to it was the wrong face too. He was no Princess Leia. If he grew his hair out, shaved his lip and put on some deodorant, maybe.

And then she saw them. As if only his reflection could reveal it. The breasts. She turned and glanced down. The boy had slight, conical breasts under his Palm Trees & Sunset t-shirt.

Natalie quickly plugged more tokens into Galaga and started level one in rapid-fire mode, her throat closing off. She lost her first ship before level three.

"Man, your hand is fast," said this Reg—person.

"Thanks." Natalie gritted her teeth. "Gotta keep a light touch." *Shut up!*

Natalie's hands really were fast. And talented. There were many things those long, dexterous fingers got up to, not just video games, drawing and guitar playing, but what they got up to in bed at night. And in a Mr. Bubble bath. And sometimes in the garage just because she could. No matter what would happen in her life, there would always be that skill, that pleasure. Maybe it was why she

could keep up with the boys' high scores—the boys with their own fast hands. Someday her knuckles might be arthritic pearl onions like her grandmother's. But not today.

Natalie lost track of what level she was fighting.

Reg popped a bubble, blowing sweet breath at her. Next to them, Defender's stars striped into hyperspace. Warmth filled Natalie up to her neck. And it was there, right there in Zoltar Video Arcade & Movie Rental, that she realized what cum gum meant.

Duh.

Reg leaned closer, "Your pupils are so dark I can see the game in them. Cool. Little explosions inside."

"Gina!" A man's voice thundered from the back stairwell. "Get your ass up here!"

"Crap." Reg wheeled around, and stared at the back door. This revealed an ugly, green and purple crescent circling the hollow between Reg's right eye and nose, like a violent storm on a distant planet.

Natalie's hands trembled over the buttons. An alien dart hit her second ship and turned it into a roiling red cartoon cloud. A matching dart of energy locked her joints as if she'd been caught out as a dreamer with very little to lose and parents not all that bad.

Reg, *or maybe it's Regina, now that we're being honest*, began to stutter. "I'll b-b-be right up!"

"Now!"

An alien drop ship plucked Natalie's last fighter. Game Over. It took all her guts to plug another round of tokens into the machine and hit the Two Player button. "Join me?" Her first bite of non-pixelated bravery tasted a lot like stupidity. This girl-boy probably tasted it every day.

Reg's wincing smile brightened. "Wish I could." She took Nat's hand and shook it, her palm no longer moist. "It was nice to meet you Nat."

The boards creaked in the stairwell, began to rumble and then a tall, gaunt man pushed hard through the door and it slammed

on the wall. His fury subsided a bit when he saw Natalie. "I told you to get up—"

"Um, sir," Natalie said quickly, "she was showing me how to play."

The man's brow loosened and he chuckled, but didn't sound very happy. "Girl, you don't want nothing to do with Gina."

"Well, I already put the money in. Just this one? I need help. She's really good."

The man cocked a glance at Reg and nodded. "Up in five." He opened the stairwell door and left with much less bluster.

"Thanks for that." Reg peered out the front plate glass windows, which were covered in warped tint film. She sighed. "Cool. Mom's back."

Natalie's station wagon pulled in behind the woman's Duster. "Yeah, that's my Dad too. Take this round. I'll ask him to wait a sec."

On the ride home, rain pelted the roof of the station wagon. Natalie turned off the air conditioning to enjoy the earthen, metallic scent.

Her father opened a bag of pumpkin seeds and set it on the vinyl between them. "Saw Tim at the store." He de-shelled a seed with his front teeth, picked it out and flicked the wet husk in the ashtray. "Did you know he works there now?"

Natalie frowned; the shells were the best part. Salty. "Yeah."

"Well, he asked about you."

Natalie placed a bet on one of the raindrops racing up the windshield. If it joined that one next to it, they'd be sure to make it. If it didn't, the wiper would sweep them away.

"His birthday's gonna be at the Great Skate on Saturday," Dad said. "Wanted to know if you got the invitation."

The odometer ticked off another mile. The two raindrops merged and spit off the windshield.

"I'm sure Mom will be fine with it." Dad cast a sideways glance at his daughter. "They got an arcade there, don't they?"

Natalie shrugged. It was a little late to be dangling the possibility of video games before her. Galaga was just a money sucker. And some boys were girls. And there was never going to be a space ship parked in her driveway.

That evening Natalie slunk off to her bedroom to sketch. She locked the door, hunched over her desk and drew Han Solo with wider hips, feline eyes and a bullshit mustache. Then she tore the sheet from the pad, signed it NAT and hid it under her bed.

She lay there in the dark, unsure what to do with her fast hands. Up on the bookshelf, her X-Wing and Tie Fighter models stood poised in halted flight. In the middle of the room, a cardboard-backed photocopy of the Death Star hung from the ceiling by a piece of string. It spun in the vent breeze, intermittently revealing its lack of dimension.

