



Belle's Game

"Do you really think it's healthy for her to keep playing like that? Every day she plays; it looks like she's really trying to save the world."

"Maybe she is. We don't know why she plays, but she doesn't seem affected by it so why should anyone care?"

"Because most kids don't try conquering aliens before they can even begin kindergarten; most kids don't think they can save the world before they can tie their shoes."

"Of course she can tie her shoe."

"Don't be dense, you know what I mean. She's a little kid for God sakes, why would she be interested in a game like that?"

"Does it matter? It makes her happy to play. Why won't you leave her alone?"

"Because I think she's getting too engrossed in it – it can't be healthy!"

"You don't know what's healthy for her any more than I do. If she enjoys playing, it must be good in some way – let her enjoy herself. If she really is saving the world, you'd hate to be the guy who got in the way, right?"

Belle is a soldier. She's only five but every night she takes the controls to master a world where she can battle gruesome aliens in a last-chance effort to save humanity from their threat. She's only five but she can fire a machine gun as well as any other soldier and hurdle obstacles of unsurpassed complexity in her unending drive to defeat the aliens. She's only five so she must face all her battles on the computer screen – like Ender to his buggers, so is Belle to her monsters.

Belle plays her game with her grandfather every night, plugging a disk into the machine like a key to a new reality and wielding the controls as her legs, her arms, her weapon. Images play across the screen showing ladders and bloodstained walls and deep rivers of wastewater; speakers steadily issue forth a mixture of running footsteps, firing weapons, and dark music. She sits for hours pondering a way through a blocked hallway or across a deep ravine and never looks away except to ask for more information from her grandfather, watching from behind.

I remember visiting my grandparents as a little kid and I played with cards. Don't think I wasn't creative or exciting though – my cousin and I invented "Card Soup" one day, which was a game that lasted throughout my childhood. Admittedly, the game consisted entirely of us putting playing cards in a pot and calling it soup, but that's what kids do. Kids do not, as far as I'm concerned, battle evil monsters with laser bombs.

Some children are content to squabble their childhoods on tea parties and tinker toys and some are content to go through their whole lives without seeing a grenade explode. Some children don't

believe they should be responsible for the fate of humanity or charged with attacking aliens in face-to-face combat, risking their lives for the good of everyone else's. Belle does.

I'm not supposed to be old enough to say, "When I was your age..." but what choice have they left me? I got Lincoln Logs and Tinker Toys as a kid. I got boxes of wood and now I see kids in front of two-thousand dollar boxes of electronics tearing apart aliens with automatic weapons. Ya know, when I was your age we didn't have anything like that! We had to walk to school, uphill both ways.

"She'll be here soon. You should get the game ready."

"Wait until she's here. She'll come when it starts. Let her rest for a change. She'll be disappointed if she misses part of the action anyway"

"So tell her you were waiting for her to come; tell her you didn't start yet."

"She'll notice. She'll remember where I was before and she'll see that things have changed. If I start without her she'll be unhappy."

"But if you let her see that you can do it on your own, maybe she won't think she has to come every night anymore. Maybe she'll lose interest."

"Who says she wants to lose interest? Maybe she plays because she wants to play."

"Maybe you shouldn't play at all tonight; maybe you should give her a break."

Belle knows that every night she must play the game, even when others might forget and sit to relax and watch television or toy with a crossword puzzle. Belle remembers that the game is waiting exactly as she left it with puzzles still unsolved and obstacles still unconquered, all needing her attention as quickly as possible, lest her mission result in failure. Belle understands that the game cannot be won without her guidance and that humanity has little hope of finding anyone else with as good a chance at success as she has.

So every night as the sun drops behind the row of quiet New England homes in the distance she races from her lonely childhood life to her post as a heroic soldier. Every night she dances anxiously into the room and waits for her grandfather to prepare; to say that the game is ready for her conquest, for her skilled hand at the controls.

I had to learn computers in school and not even get used to having a mouse until later on. I had to learn to type in "secret code words" at the "command prompt" to get my computer games to run as a kid, and I always had to ask Dad for help. Now a five year old kid can just pop in a CD and be off and running with Steve from Blue's Clues dancing around on the screen. I'd like to see a modern kid left with no computer for a week just to see what'd happen – "This just in: Parents arrested for child abuse; daughter was deprived of computer time."

"Do you think she should play by herself?"

"How could she?"

"She's watched enough. She's done practically everything there is to do."

"Yes, but none of it well. She helps a little, but she can't really play; not without help."

"Do you think she would stop playing if she tried on her own and failed?"

"I think she would keep doing it until she got it right."

Belle's grandfather helps fight the war, nudging a control up or down, offering another weapon when it's needed, even guiding her through a difficult stretch on occasion. He helps because she is little and not as well equipped as an adult to carry out challenging maneuvers, but even when his hands are on the controls her voice oversees the action, shouting commands over the din of the fighting. Always her words guide the maneuvers; always her decisions determine the flow of the battle, always her choices result in the success or failure of humanity, the giving or taking of life.

"It's just a game. Why do you care so much."

"Because I don't think she believes it's just a game."