

## THIRD

"I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."

"That's what you said about the brother."

"The brother tested out impossible. For other reasons. Nothing to do with his ability."

"Same with the sister. And there are doubts about him. He's too malleable. Too willing to submerge himself in someone else's will."

"Not if the other person is his enemy."

"So what do we do? Surround him with enemies all the time?"

"If we have to."

"I thought you said you liked this kid."

"If the buggers get him, they'll make me look like his favorite uncle."

"All right. We're saving the world, after all. Take him."

The monitor lady smiled very nicely and tousled his hair and said, "Andrew, I suppose by now you're just absolutely sick of having that horrid monitor. Well, I have good news for you. That monitor is going to come out today. We're going to take it right out, and it won't hurt a bit."

Ender nodded. It was a lie, of course, that it wouldn't hurt a bit. But since adults always said it when it *was* going to hurt, he could count on that statement as an accurate prediction of the future. Sometimes lies were more dependable than the truth.

"So if you'll just come over here, Andrew, just sit right up here on the examining table. The doctor will be in to see you in a moment."

The monitor gone. Ender tried to imagine the little device missing from the back of his neck. I'll roll over on my back in bed and it won't be pressing there. I won't feel it tingling and taking up the heat when I shower.

And Peter won't hate me anymore. I'll come home and show him that the monitor's gone, and he'll see that I didn't make it, either. That I'll just be a normal kid now, like him. That won't be so bad then. He'll forgive me that I had my monitor a whole year longer than he had his. We'll be—

Not friends, probably. No, Peter was too dangerous. Peter got so angry. Brothers, though. Not enemies, not friends, but brothers—able to live in the same house. He won't hate me, he'll just leave me alone. And when he wants to play buggers and astronauts, maybe I won't have to play, maybe I can just go read a book.

But Ender knew, even as he thought it, that Peter wouldn't leave him alone. There was something in Peter's eyes, when he was in his mad mood, and whenever Ender saw that look, that glint, he knew that the one thing Peter would *not* do was leave him alone. I'm practicing piano, Ender. Come turn the pages for me. Oh, is the monitor boy too busy to help his brother? Is he too smart? Got to go kill some buggers, astronaut? No, no, I don't *want* your help. I can do it on my own, you little bastard, you little *Third*.

"This won't take long, Andrew," said the doctor. Ender nodded.

"It's designed to be removed. Without infection, without damage. But there'll be some tickling, and some people say they have a feeling of something *missing*. You'll keep looking around for something, something you were looking for, but you can't find it, and you can't remember what it was. So I'll tell you. It's the monitor you're looking for, and it isn't there. In a few days that feeling will pass."

The doctor was twisting something at the back of Ender's head. Suddenly a pain stabbed through him like a needle from his neck to his groin. Ender felt his back spasm, and his body arched violently backward; his head struck the bed. He could feel his legs thrashing, and his hands were clenching each other, wringing each other so tightly that they arched.

"Deedee!" shouted the doctor. "I need you!" The nurse ran in, gasped. "Got to relax these muscles. Get it to me, now! What are you waiting for!" Something changed hands; Ender could not see. He lurched to one side and fell off the examining table. "Catch him!" cried the nurse. "Just hold him steady—"

"You hold him, doctor, he's too strong for me—"

"Not the whole thing! You'll stop his heart—"

Ender felt a needle enter his back just above the neck of his shirt. It burned, but wherever in him the fire spread, his muscles gradually unclenched. Now he could cry for the fear and pain of it.

"Are you all right, Andrew?" the nurse asked.

Andrew could not remember how to speak. They lifted him onto the table. They checked his pulse, did other things; he did not understand it all. The doctor was trembling; his voice shook as he spoke. "They leave these things in the kids for three years, what do they expect? We could have switched him off, do you realize that? We could have unplugged his brain for all time."

"When does the drug wear off?" asked the nurse.

"Keep him here for at least an hour. Watch him. If he doesn't start talking in fifteen minutes, call me. Could have unplugged him forever. I don't have the brains of a bugger."

He got back to Miss Pumphrey's class only fifteen minutes before the closing bell. He was still a little unsteady on his feet.

"Are you all right, Andrew?" asked Miss Pumphrey.

He nodded.

"Were you ill?"

He shook his head.

"You don't look well."

"I'm OK."

"You'd better sit down, Andrew."

He started toward his seat, but stopped. Now what was I looking for? I can't think what I was looking for.

"Your seat is over there," said Miss Pumphrey.

He sat down, but it was something else he needed, something he had lost. I'll find it later.

"Your monitor," whispered the girl behind him.

Andrew shrugged.

"His monitor," she whispered to the others.

Andrew reached up and felt his neck. There was a bandaid. It was gone. He was just like everybody else now.

"Washed out, Andy?" asked a boy who sat across the aisle and behind him. Couldn't think of his name. Peter. No, that was someone else.

"Quiet, Mr. Stilson," said Miss Pumphrey. Stilson smirked.

Miss Pumphrey talked about multiplication. Ender doodled on his desk, drawing contour maps of mountainous islands and then telling his desk to display them in three dimensions from every angle. The teacher would know, of course, that he wasn't paying attention, but she wouldn't bother him. He always knew the answer, even when she thought he wasn't paying attention.

In the corner of his desk a word appeared and began marching around the perimeter of the desk. It was upside down and backward at first, but Ender knew what it said long before it reached the bottom of the desk and turned right side up.

## THIRD

Ender smiled. He was the one who had figured out how to send messages and make them march—even as his secret enemy called him names, the method of delivery praised him. It was not *his* fault he was a Third. It was the government's idea, they were the ones who authorized it—how else could a Third like Ender have got into school? And now the monitor was gone. The experiment entitled Andrew Wiggin hadn't worked out after all. If they could, he was sure they would like to rescind the waivers that had allowed him to be born at all. Didn't work, so erase the experiment.

The bell rang. Everyone signed off their desks or hurriedly typed in reminders to themselves. Some were dumping lessons or data into their computers at home. A few gathered at the printers while something they wanted to show was printed out. Ender spread his hands over the child-size keyboard near the edge of the desk and wondered what it would feel like to have hands as large as a grown-up's. They must feel so big and awkward, thick stubby fingers and beefy palms. Of course, they had bigger keyboards—but how could their thick fingers draw a fine line, the way Ender could, a thin line so precise that he could make it spiral seventy-nine times from the center to the edge of the desk without the lines ever touching or overlapping. It gave him something to do while the teacher droned on about arithmetic. Arithmetic! Valentine had taught him arithmetic when he was three.

"Are you all right, Andrew?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll miss the bus."

Ender nodded and got up. The other kids were gone. They would be waiting, though, the bad ones. His monitor wasn't perched on his neck, hearing what he heard and seeing what he saw. They could say what they liked. They might even hit him now—no one could see them anymore, and so no one would come to Ender's rescue. There were advantages to the monitor, and he would miss them.

It was Stilson, of course. He wasn't bigger than most other kids, but he was bigger than Ender. And he had some others with him. He always did.

"Hey Third."

Don't answer. Nothing to say.

"Hey, Third, we're talkin to you, Third, hey bugger-lover, we're talkin to you."

Can't think of anything to answer. Anything I say will make it worse. So will saying nothing.

"Hey, Third, hey, turd, you flunked out, huh? Thought you were better than us, but you lost your little birdie, Thirdie, got a bandaid on your neck."

"Are you going to let me through?" Ender asked.

"Are we going to let him through? Should we let him through?" They all laughed. "Sure we'll let you through. First we'll let your arm through, then your butt through, then maybe a piece of your knee."

The others chimed in now. "Lost your birdie, Thirdie. Lost your birdie, Thirdie."

Stilson began pushing him with one hand; someone behind him then pushed him toward Stilson.

"See-saw, marjorie daw," somebody said.

"Tennis!"

"Ping-pong!"

This would not have a happy ending. So Ender decided that he'd rather not be the unhappiest at the end. The next time Stilson's arm came out to push him, Ender grabbed at it. He missed.

"Oh, gonna fight me, huh? Gonna fight me, Thirdie?"

The people behind Ender grabbed at him, to hold him.

Ender did not feel like laughing, but he laughed. "You mean it takes this many of you to fight one Third?"

"We're *people*, not *Thirds*, turd face. You're about as strong as a fart!" But they let go of him. And as soon as they did, Ender kicked out high and hard, catching Stilson square in the breastbone. He dropped. It took Ender by surprise—he hadn't thought to put Stilson on the ground with one kick. It didn't occur to him that Stilson didn't take a fight like this seriously, that he wasn't prepared for a truly desperate blow.

For a moment, the others backed away and Stilson lay motionless. They were all wondering if he was dead. Ender, however, was trying to figure out a way to forestall vengeance. To keep them from taking him in a pack tomorrow. I have to win this now, and for all time, or I'll fight it every day and it will get worse and worse.

Ender knew the unspoken rules of manly warfare, even though he was only six. It was forbidden to strike the opponent who lay helpless on the ground; only an animal would do that.

So Ender walked to Stilson's supine body and kicked him again, viciously, in the ribs. Stilson groaned and rolled away from him. Ender walked around him and kicked him again, in the crotch. Stilson could not make a sound; he only doubled up and tears streamed out of his eyes.

Then Ender looked at the others coldly. "You might be having some idea of ganging up on me. You could probably beat me up pretty bad. But just remember what I do to people who try to hurt me. From then on you'd be wondering when I'd get you, and how bad it would be." He kicked Stilson

in the face. Blood from his nose spattered the ground nearby. "It wouldn't be this bad," Ender said. "It would be worse."

He turned and walked away. Nobody followed him. He turned a corner into the corridor leading to the bus stop. He could hear the boys behind him saying, "Geez. Look at him. He's wasted." Ender leaned his head against the wall of the corridor and cried until the bus came. I am just like Peter. Take my monitor away, and I am just like Peter.

## 2

# PETER

"All right, it's off. How's he doing."

"You live inside somebody's body for a few years, you get used to it. I look at his face now, I can't tell what's going on. I'm not used to seeing his facial expressions. I'm used to feeling them."

"Come on, we're not talking about psychoanalysis here. We're soldiers, not witch doctors. You just saw him beat the guts out of the leader of a gang."

"He was thorough. He didn't just beat him, he beat him deep. Like Mazer Rackham at the—"

"Spare me. So in the judgment of the committee, he passes."

"Mostly. Let's see what he does with his brother, now that the monitor's off."

"His brother. Aren't you afraid of what his brother will do to *him*?"

"You were the one who told me that this wasn't a no-risk business."

"I went back through some of the tapes. I can't help it. I like the kid. I think we're going to screw him up."

"Of course we are. It's our job. We're the wicked witch. We promise gingerbread, but we eat the little bastards alive."

"I'm sorry, Ender," Valentine whispered. She was looking at the bandaid on his neck.

Ender touched the wall and the door closed behind him. "I don't care. I'm glad it's gone."

"What's gone?" Peter walked into the parlor, chewing on a mouthful of bread and peanut butter.

Ender did not see Peter as the beautiful ten-year-old boy that grown-ups saw, with dark, thick, tousled hair and a face that could have belonged to Alexander the Great. Ender looked at Peter only to detect anger or boredom, the dangerous moods that almost always led to pain. Now as Peter's eyes discovered the bandaid on his neck, the telltale flicker of anger appeared.

Valentine saw it too. "Now he's like us," she said, trying to soothe him before he had time to strike.

But Peter would not be soothed. "Like us? He keeps the little sucker till he's six years old. When did you lose yours? You were three. I lost mine before I was five. *He* almost made it, little bastard, little bugger."

This is all right, Ender thought. Talk and talk, Peter. Talk is fine.

"Well, now your guardian angels aren't watching over you," Peter said. "Now they aren't checking to see if you feel pain, listening to hear what I'm saying, seeing what I'm doing to you. How about that? How about it?" Ender shrugged.

Suddenly Peter smiled and clapped his hands together in a mockery of good cheer. "Let's play buggers and astronauts," he said.

"Where's Mom?" asked Valentine.

"Out," said Peter. "I'm in charge."

"I think I'll call Daddy."

"Call away," said Peter. "You know he's never in."

"I'll play," Ender said.

"You be the bugger," said Peter.

"Let him be the astronaut for once," Valentine said.

"Keep your fat face out of it, fart mouth," said Peter. "Come on upstairs and choose your weapons."

It would not be a good game, Ender knew. It was not a question of winning. When kids played in the corridors, whole troops of them, the buggers never won, and sometimes the games got mean. But here in their flat, the game would start mean, and the bugger couldn't just go empty and quit the way buggers did in the real wars. The bugger was in it until the astronaut decided it was over.

Peter opened his bottom drawer and took out the bugger mask. Mother had got upset at him when Peter bought it, but Dad pointed out that the war wouldn't go away just because you hid bugger masks and wouldn't let your kids play with make-believe laser guns. Better to play the war games, and have a better chance of surviving when the buggers came again.

If I survive the games, thought Ender. He put on the mask. It closed him in like a hand pressed tight against his face. But this isn't how it feels to be a bugger, thought Ender. They don't wear this face like a mask, it *is* their face. On their home worlds, do the buggers put on human masks, and play?

And what do they call us? Slimies, because we're so soft and oily compared to them?

"Watch out, Slimy," Ender said.

He could barely see Peter through the eyeholes. Peter smiled at him. "Slimy, huh? Well, bugger-wugger, let's see how to break that face of yours."

Ender couldn't see it coming, except a slight shift of Peter's weight; the mask cut out his peripheral vision. Suddenly there was the pain and pressure of a blow to the side of his head; he lost balance, fell that way.

"Don't see too well, do you, bugger?" said Peter.

Ender began to take off the mask. Peter put his toe against Ender's groin. "Don't take off the mask," Peter said.

Ender pulled the mask down into place, took his hands away.

Peter pressed with his foot. Pain shot through Ender; he doubled up.

"Lie flat, bugger. We're gonna vivisect you, bugger. At long last we've got one of you alive, and we're going to see how you work."

"Peter, stop it," Ender said.

"Peter, stop it. Very good. So you buggers can guess our names. You can make yourselves sound like pathetic, cute little children so we'll love you and be nice to you. But it doesn't work. I can see you for what you really are. They meant you to be human, little Third, but you're really a bugger, and now it shows."

He lifted his foot, took a step, and then knelt on Ender, his knee pressing into Ender's belly just below the breastbone. He put more and more of his weight on Ender. It became hard to breathe.

"I could kill you like this," Peter whispered. "Just press and press until you're dead. And I could say that I didn't know it would hurt you, that we were just playing, and they'd believe me, and everything would be fine. And you'd be dead. Everything would be fine."

Ender could not speak; the breath was being forced from his lungs. Peter might mean it. Probably didn't mean it, but then he might.

"I do mean it," Peter said. "Whatever you think, I mean it. They only authorized you because I was so promising. But I didn't pan out. You did better. They think you're better. But I don't want a better little brother, Ender. I don't want a Third."

"I'll tell," Valentine said from the doorway.

"No one would believe you."

"They'd believe me."

"Then you're dead, too, sweet little sister."

"Oh, yes," said Valentine. "They'll believe that. I didn't know it would kill Andrew. And when he was dead, I didn't know it would kill Valentine too."

The pressure let up a little.

"So. Not today. But someday you two won't be together. And there'll be an accident."

"You're all talk," Valentine said. "You don't mean any of it."  
"I don't?"

"And do you know why you don't mean it?" Valentine asked. "Because you want to be in government someday. You want to be elected. And they won't elect you if your opponents can dig up the fact that your brother and sister both died in suspicious accidents when they were little. Especially because of the letter I've put in my secret file in the city library, which will be opened in the event of my death."

"Don't give me that kind of crap," Peter said.

"It says, I didn't die a natural death. Peter killed me, and if he hasn't already killed Andrew, he will soon. Not enough to convict you, but enough to keep you from ever getting elected."

"You're his monitor now," said Peter. "You better watch him, day and night. You better be there."

"Ender and I aren't stupid. We scored as well as you did on everything. Better on some things. We're all such wonderfully bright children. You're not the smartest, Peter, just the biggest."

"Oh, I know. But there'll come a day when you aren't there with him, when you forget. And suddenly you'll remember, and you'll rush to him, and there he'll be, perfectly all right. And the next time you won't worry so much, and you won't come so fast. And every time, he'll be all right. And you'll think that I forgot. Even though you'll remember that I said this, you'll think that I forgot. And years will pass. And then there'll be a terrible accident, and I'll find his body, and I'll cry and cry over him, and you'll remember this conversation, Vally, but you'll be ashamed of yourself for remembering, because you'll know that I changed, that it really was an accident, that it's cruel of you even to remember what I said in a childhood quarrel. Except that it'll be true. I'm gonna save this up, and he's gonna die, and you won't do a thing, not a thing. But you go on believing that I'm just the biggest."

"The biggest asshole," Valentine said.

Peter leaped to his feet and started for her. She shied away. Ender pried off his mask. Peter flopped back on his bed and started to laugh. Loud, but with real mirth, tears coming to his eyes. "Oh, you guys are just super, just the biggest suckers on the planet earth."

"Now he's going to tell us it was all a joke," Valentine said.

"Not a joke, a game. I can make you guys believe anything. I can make you dance around like puppets." In a phony monster voice he said, "I'm going to kill you and chop you into little pieces and put you into the garbage hole." He laughed again. "Biggest suckers in the solar system."

Ender stood there watching him laugh and thought of Stilson, thought of how it felt to crunch into his body. This is who needed it. This is who should have got it.

As if she could read his mind, Valentine whispered, "No, Ender."

Peter suddenly rolled to the side, flipped off the bed, and got in position for a fight. "Oh, yes, Ender," he said. "Any time, Ender."

Ender lifted his right leg and took off his shoe. He held it up. "See there, on the toe? That's blood, Peter. It's not mine."

"Ooh. Ooh, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die. Ender squished a capper-tiller and now he's gonna squish me."

There was no getting to him. Peter was a murderer at heart, and nobody knew it but Valentine and Ender.

Mother came home and commiserated with Ender about the monitor. Father came home and kept saying it was such a wonderful surprise, they had such fantastic children that the government told them to have three, and now the government didn't want to take any of them after all, so here they were with three, they still had a Third . . . until Ender wanted to scream at him, I know I'm a Third, I know it, if you want I'll go away so you don't have to be embarrassed in front of everybody, I'm sorry I lost the monitor and now you have three kids and no obvious explanation, so inconvenient for you, I'm sorry sorry sorry.

He lay in bed staring upward into the darkness. On the bunk above him, he could hear Peter turning and tossing restlessly. Then Peter slid off the bunk and walked out of the room. Ender heard the hushing sound of the toilet clearing; then Peter stood silhouetted in the doorway.

He thinks I'm asleep. He's going to kill me.

Peter walked to the bed, and sure enough, he did not lift himself up to his bed. Instead he came and stood by Ender's head.

But he did not reach for a pillow to smother Ender. He did not have a weapon.

He whispered, "Ender, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know how it feels, I'm sorry, I'm your brother, I love you."

A long time later, Peter's even breathing said that he was asleep. Ender peeled the bandaid from his neck. And for the second time that day he cried.