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## GRAFF

"Very funny," Mother said. "I try to be concerned, but it makes no difference to my genius children."

"It was all your genes that made us geniuses, Mom," said Peter. "We sure didn't get any from Dad."

"I heard that," Father said, not looking up from the news that was being displayed on the table while he ate.

"It would've been wasted if you hadn't."

The table beeped. Someone was at the door.

"Who is it?" Mother asked.

Father thumbed a key and a man appeared on his video. He was wearing the only military uniform that meant anything anymore, the I.F., the International Fleet.

"I thought it was over," said Father.

Peter said nothing, just poured milk over his cereal.

And Ender thought, Maybe I won't have to go to school today after all.

Father coded the door open and got up from the table. "I'll see to it," he said. "Stay and eat."

They stayed, but they didn't eat. A few moments later, Father came back into the room and beckoned to Mother.

"You're in deep poo," said Peter. "They found out what you did to that kid at school, and now they're gonna make you do time out in the Belt."

"I'm only six, moron, I'm a juvenile."

"You're a Third, turd. You've got no rights."

Valentine came in, her hair in a sleepy halo around her face. "Where's Mom and Dad? I'm too sick to go to school."

"Another oral exam, huh?" Peter said.

"Shut up, Peter," said Valentine.

"You should relax and enjoy it," said Peter. "It could be worse."

"I don't know how."

"It could be an anal exam."

"Hyuk hyuk," Valentine said. "Where are Mother and Father?"

"Talking to a guy from IF."

Instinctively she looked at Ender. After all, for years they had expected someone to come and tell them that Ender had passed, that Ender was needed.

"That's right, look at him," Peter said. "But it might be me, you know. They might have realized I was the best of the lot after all." Peter's feelings were hurt, and so he was being a snot, as usual.

The door opened. "Ender," said Father, "you better come in here."

"Sorry, Peter," Valentine taunted.

Father glowered. "Children, this is no laughing matter."

Ender followed Father into the parlor. The I.F. officer rose to his feet when they entered, but he did not extend a hand to Ender.

Mother was twisting her wedding band on her finger. "Andrew," she said, "I never thought you were the kind to get in a fight."

"The sister is our weak link. He really loves her."

"I know. She can undo it all, from the start. He won't want to leave her."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Persuade him that he wants to come with us more than he wants to stay with her."

"How will you do that?"

"I'll lie to him."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"Then I'll tell the truth. We're allowed to do that in emergencies. We can't plan for everything, you know."

Ender wasn't very hungry during breakfast. He kept wondering what it would be like at school. Facing Stilson after yesterday's fight. What Stilson's friends would do. Probably nothing, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't want to go.

"You're not eating, Andrew," his mother said.

Peter came into the room. "Morning, Ender. Thanks for leaving your slimy washcloth in the middle of the shower."

"Just for you," Ender murmured.

"Andrew, you have to eat."

Ender held out his wrists, a gesture that said, So feed it to me through a needle.

"The Stilson boy is in the hospital," Father said. "You really did a number on him. With your shoe, Ender. That wasn't exactly fair." Ender shook his head. He had expected someone from the school to come about Stilson, not an officer of the fleet. This was more serious than he had thought. And yet he couldn't think what else he could have done.

"Do you have any explanation for your behavior, young man?" asked the officer.

Ender shook his head again. He didn't know what to say, and he was afraid to reveal himself to be any more monstrous than his actions had made him out to be. I'll take it, whatever the punishment is, he thought. Let's get it over with.

"We're willing to consider extenuating circumstances," the officer said. "But I must tell you it doesn't look good. Kicking him in the groin, kicking him repeatedly in the face and body when he was down—it sounds like you really enjoyed it."

"I didn't," Ender whispered.

"Then why did you do it?"

"He had his gang there," Ender said.

"So? This excuses anything?"

"No."

"Tell me why you kept on kicking him. You had already won."

"Knocking him down won the first fight. I wanted to win all the next ones, too. So they'd leave me alone." Ender couldn't help it, he was too afraid, too ashamed of his own acts; though he tried not to, he cried again. Ender did not like to cry and rarely did; now, in less than a day, he had done it three times. And each time was worse. To cry in front of his mother and father and this military man, that was shameful. "You took away the monitor," Ender said. "I had to take care of myself, didn't I?"

"Ender, you should have asked a grown-up for help," Father began.

But the officer stood up and stepped across the room to Ender. He held out his hand. "My name is Graff, Ender. Colonel Hyrum Graff. I'm director of primary training at Battle School in the Belt. I've come to invite you to enter the school."

After all. "But the monitor—"

"The final step in your testing was to see what would happen when the monitor came off. We don't always do it that way, but in your case—"

"And he passed?" Mother was incredulous. "Putting the Stilson boy in the hospital? What would you have done if Andrew had killed him, given him a medal?"

"It isn't *what* he did, Mrs. Wiggin. It's *why*." Colonel Graff handed her a folder full of papers. "Here are the requisitions. Your son has been cleared by the I.F. Selective Service. Of course we already have your consent, granted in writing at the time conception was confirmed, or he could

not have been born. He has been ours from then, if he qualified."

Father's voice was trembling as he spoke. "It's not very kind of you, to let us think you didn't want him, and then to take him after all."

"And this charade about the Stilson boy," Mother said.

"It wasn't a charade, Mrs. Wiggin. Until we knew what Ender's motivation was, we couldn't be sure he wasn't another—we had to know what the action meant. Or at least what Ender believed that it meant."

"Must you call him that stupid nickname?" Mother began to cry.

"That's the name he calls himself."

"What are you going to do, Colonel Graff?" Father asked. "Walk out the door with him now?"

"That depends," said Graff.

"On what?"

"On whether Ender wants to come."

Mother's weeping turned to bitter laughter. "Oh, so it's voluntary after all, how sweet!"

"For the two of you, the choice was made when Ender was conceived. But for Ender, the choice has not been made at all. Conscripts make good cannon fodder, but for officers we need volunteers."

"Officers?" Ender asked. At the sound of his voice, the others fell silent. "Yes," said Graff. "Battle School is for training future starship captains and commodores of flotillas and admirals of the fleet."

"Let's not have any deception here!" Father said angrily. "How many of the boys at the Battle School actually end up in command of ships!"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Wiggin, that is classified information. But I can say that none of our boys who makes it through the first year has ever failed to receive a commission as an officer. And none has retired from a position of lower rank than chief executive officer of an interplanetary vessel. Even in the domestic defense forces within our own solar system, there's honor to be had."

"How many make it through the first year?" asked Ender.

"All who want to," said Graff.

Ender almost said, I want to. But he held his tongue. This would keep him out of school, but that was stupid, that was just a problem for a few days. It would keep him away from Peter—that was more important, that might be a matter of life itself. But to leave Mother and Father, and above all, to leave Valentine. And become a soldier. Ender didn't like fighting. He didn't like Peter's kind, the strong against the weak, and he didn't like his own kind either, the smart against the stupid.

"I think," Graff said, "that Ender and I should have a private conversation."

"No," Father said.

"I won't take him without letting you speak to him again," Graff said. "And you really can't stop me."

Father glared at Graff a moment longer, then got up and left the room. Mother paused to squeeze Ender's hand. She closed the door behind her when she left.

"Ender," Graff said, "if you come with me, you won't be back here for a long time. There aren't any vacations from Battle School. No visitors, either. A full course of training lasts until you're sixteen years old—you get your first leave, under certain circumstances, when you're twelve. Believe me, Ender, people change in six years, in ten years. Your sister Valentine will be a woman when you see her again, if you come with me. You'll be strangers. You'll still love her, Ender, but you won't know her. You see I'm not pretending it's easy."

"Mom and Daddy?"

"I know you, Ender. I've been watching the monitor disks for some time. You won't miss your mother and father, not much, not for long. And they won't miss you long, either."

Tears came to Ender's eyes, in spite of himself. He turned his face away, but would not reach up to wipe them.

"They do love you, Ender. But you have to understand what your life has cost them. They were born religious, you know. Your father was baptized with the name John Paul Wiczorek. Catholic. The seventh of nine children."

Nine children. That was unthinkable. Criminal.

"Yes, well, people do strange things for religion. You know the sanctions, Ender—they were not as harsh then, but still not easy. Only the first two children had a free education. Taxes steadily rose with each new child. Your father turned sixteen and invoked the Noncomplying Families Act to separate himself from his family. He changed his name, renounced his religion, and vowed never to have more than the allotted two children. He meant it. All the shame and persecution he went through as a child—he vowed no child of his would go through it. Do you understand?"

"He didn't want me."

"Well, no one *wants* a Third anymore. You can't expect them to be glad. But your father and mother are a special case. They both renounced their religions—your mother was a Mormon—but in fact their feelings are still ambiguous. Do you know what ambiguous means?"

"They feel both ways."

"They're ashamed of having come from noncompliant families. They conceal it. To the degree that your mother refuses to admit to anyone that she was born in Utah, lest they suspect. Your father denies his Polish ancestry, since Poland is still a noncompliant nation, and under international sanction because of it. So, you see, having a Third, even under the government's direct instructions, undoes everything they've been trying to do."

"I know that."

"But it's more complicated than that. Your father still named you with

legitimate saints' names. In fact, he baptized all three of you himself as soon as he got you home after you were born. And your mother objected. They quarreled over it each time, not because she didn't want you baptized, but because she didn't want you baptized Catholic. They haven't really given up their religion. They look at you and see you as a badge of pride, because they were able to circumvent the law and have a Third. But you're also a badge of cowardice, because they dare not go further and practice the noncompliance they still feel is right. And you're a badge of public shame, because at every step you interfere with their efforts at assimilation into normal complying society."

"How can you know all this?"

"We monitored your brother and sister, Ender. You'd be amazed at how sensitive the instruments are. We were connected directly to your brain. We heard all that you heard, whether you were listening carefully or not. Whether you understood or not. We understand."

"So my parents love me and don't love me?"

"They love you. The question is whether they want you here. Your presence in this house is a constant disruption. A source of tension. Do you understand?"

"I'm not the one who causes tension."

"Not anything you *do*, Ender. Your life itself. Your brother hates you because you are living proof that he wasn't good enough. Your parents resent you because of all the past they are trying to evade."

"Valentine loves me."

"With all her heart. Completely, unstintingly, she's devoted to you, and you adore her. I told you it wouldn't be easy."

"What is it like, there?"

"Hard work. Studies, just like school here, except we put you into mathematics and computers much more heavily. Military history. Strategy and tactics. And above all, the Battle Room."

"What's that?"

"War games. All the boys are organized into armies. Day after day, in zero gravity, there are mock battles. Nobody gets hurt, but winning and losing matter. Everybody starts as a common soldier, taking orders. Older boys are your officers, and it's their duty to train you and command you in battle. More than that I can't tell you. It's like playing buggers and astronauts—except that you have weapons that work, and fellow soldiers fighting beside you, and your whole future and the future of the human race depends on how well you learn, how well you fight. It's a hard life, and you won't have a normal childhood. Of course, with your mind, and as a Third to boot, you wouldn't have a particularly normal childhood anyway."

"All boys?"

"A few girls. They don't often pass the tests to get in. Too many centuries of evolution are working against them. None of them will be like Valentine, anyway. But there'll be brothers there, Ender."

"Like Peter?"

"Peter wasn't accepted, Ender, for the very reasons that you hate him."  
"I don't hate him. I'm just—"  
"Afraid of him. Well, Peter isn't all bad, you know. He was the best we'd seen in a long time. We asked your parents to choose a daughter next—they would have anyway—hoping that Valentine would be Peter, but milder. She was too mild. And so we requisitioned you."  
"To be half Peter and half Valentine."  
"If things worked out right."  
"Am I?"

"As far as we can tell. Our tests are very good, Ender. But they don't tell us everything. In fact, when it comes down to it, they hardly tell us anything. But they're better than nothing." Graff leaned over and took Ender's hands in his. "Ender Wiggin, if it were just a matter of choosing the best and happiest future for you, I'd tell you to stay home. Stay here, grow up, be happy. There are worse things than being a Third, worse things than a big brother who can't make up his mind whether to be a human being or a jackal. Battle School is one of those worse things. But we need you. The buggers may seem like a game to you now, Ender, but they damn near wiped us out last time. They had us cold, outnumbered and outweaponed. The only thing that saved us was that we had the most brilliant military commander we ever found. Call it fate, call it God, call it damnfool luck, we had Mazer Rackham."

"But we don't have him now, Ender. We've scraped together everything mankind could produce, a fleet that makes the one they sent against us last time seem like a bunch of kids playing in a swimming pool. We have some new weapons, too. But it might not be enough, even so. Because in the eighty years since the last war, they've had as much time to prepare as we have. We need the best we can get, and we need them fast. Maybe you're not going to work out for us, and maybe you are. Maybe you'll break down under the pressure, maybe it'll ruin your life, maybe you'll hate me for coming here to your house today. But if there's a chance that because you're with the fleet, mankind might survive and the buggers might leave you're forever—then I'm going to ask you to do it. To come with me."

Ender had trouble focusing on Colonel Graff. The man looked far away and very small, as if Ender could pick him up with tweezers and drop him in a pocket. To leave everything here, and go to a place that was very hard, with no Valentine, no Mom and Dad.

And then he thought of the films of the buggers that everyone had to see at least once a year. The Scathing of China. The Battle of the Belt. Death and suffering and terror. And Mazer Rackham and his brilliant maneuvers, destroying an enemy fleet twice his size and twice his firepower, using the little human ships that seemed so frail and weak. Like children fighting with grown-ups. And we won.

"I'm afraid," said Ender quietly. "But I'll go with you."

"Tell me again," said Graff.

"It's what I was born for, isn't it? If I don't go, why am I alive?"

"Not good enough," said Graff.

"I don't want to go," said Ender, "but I will."

Graff nodded. "You can change your mind. Up until the time you get in my car with me, you can change your mind. After that, you stay at the pleasure of the International Fleet. Do you understand that?"

Ender nodded.

"All right. Let's tell them."

Mother cried. Father held Ender tight. Peter shook his hand and said, "You lucky little pinheaded fart-eater." Valentine kissed him and left her tears on his cheek.

There was nothing to pack. No belongings to take. "The school provides everything you need, from uniforms to school supplies. And as for toys—there's only one game."

"Good-bye," Ender said to his family. He reached up and took Colonel Graff's hand and walked out the door with him.

"Kill some buggers for me!" Peter shouted.

"I love you, Andrew!" Mother called.

"We'll write to you!" Father said.

And as he got into the car that waited silently in the corridor, he heard Valentine's anguished cry. "Come back to me! I love you forever!"

# LAUNCH

"You're a monster."

"Thanks. Does this mean I get a raise?"

"Just a medal. The budget isn't inexhaustible."

They say that weightlessness can cause disorientation, especially in children, whose sense of direction isn't yet secure. But Ender was disoriented before he left Earth's gravity. Before the shuttle launch even began.

There were nineteen other boys in his launch. They filed out of the bus and into the elevator. They talked and joked and bragged and laughed. Ender kept his silence. He noticed how Graff and the other officers were watching them. Analyzing. Everything we do means something, Ender realized. Them laughing. Me not laughing.

He toyed with the idea of trying to be like the other boys. But he couldn't think of any jokes, and none of theirs seemed funny. Wherever their laughter came from, Ender couldn't find such a place in himself. He was afraid, and fear made him serious.

They had dressed him in a uniform, all in a single piece; it felt funny not to have a belt cinched around his waist. He felt baggy and naked, dressed like that. There were TV cameras going, perched like animals on the shoulders of crouching, prowling men. The men moved slowly, catlike, so the camera motion would be smooth. Ender caught himself moving smoothly, too.

He imagined himself being on TV, in an interview. The announcer asking him, How do you feel, Mr. Wiggin? Actually quite well, except hungry. Hungry? Oh, yes, they don't let you eat for twenty hours before the launch. How interesting. I never knew that. All of us are quite hungry, actually. And all the while, during the interview, Ender and the TV guy would sink along smoothly in front of the cameraman, taking long, lithe strides. The TV guy was letting him be the spokesman for all the boys, though Ender was barely competent to speak for himself. For the first time, Ender felt like laughing. He smiled. The other boys near him were laughing at the moment, too, for another reason. They think I'm smiling at their joke, thought Ender. But I'm smiling at something much funnier.

"Go up the ladder one at a time," said an officer. "When you come to an aisle with empty seats, take one. There aren't any window seats."

It was a joke. The other boys laughed.

Ender was near the last, but not the very last. The TV cameras did not give up, though. Will Valentine see me disappear into the shuttle? He thought of waving at her, of running to the cameraman and saying, "Can I tell Valentine good-bye?" He didn't know that it would be censored out of the tape if he did, for the boys soaring out to Battle School were all supposed to be heroes. They weren't supposed to miss anybody. Ender didn't know about the censorship, but he did know that running to the cameras would be wrong.

"With Ender, we have to strike a delicate balance. Isolate him enough that he remains creative—otherwise he'll adopt the system here and we'll lose him. At the same time, we need to make sure he keeps a strong ability to lead."

"If he earns rank, he'll lead."

"It isn't that simple. Mazer Rackham could handle his little fleet and win.

By the time this war happens, there'll be too much, even for a genius. Too many little boats. He has to work smoothly with his subordinates."

"Oh, good. He has to be a genius and nice, too."

"Not nice. Nice will let the buggers have us all."

"So you're going to isolate him."

"I'll have him completely separated from the rest of the boys by the time we get to the School."

"I have no doubt of it. I'll be waiting for you to get here. I watched the vids of what he did to the Stilson boy. This is not a sweet little kid you're bringing up here."

"That's where you're mistaken. He's even sweeter than he looks. But don't worry. We'll purge that in a hurry."

"Sometimes I think you enjoy breaking these little geniuses."

"There is an art to it, and I'm very, very good at it. But enjoy? Well, maybe. When they put back the pieces afterward, and it makes them better."

He walked the short bridge to the door in the shuttle. He noticed that the wall to his right was carpeted like a floor. That was where the disorientation began. The moment he thought of the wall as a floor, he began to feel like he was walking on a wall. He got to the ladder, and noticed that the vertical surface behind it was also carpeted. I am climbing up the floor. Hand over hand, step by step.

And then, for fun, he pretended that he was climbing *down* the wall. He did it almost instantly in his mind, convinced himself against the best evidence of gravity until he reached an empty seat. He found himself gripping the seat tightly, even though gravity pulled him firmly against it.

The other boys were bouncing on their seats a little, poking and pushing, shouting. Ender carefully found the straps, figured out how they fit together to hold him at crotch, waist, and shoulders. He imagined the ship dangling upside down on the undersurface of the Earth, the giant fingers of gravity holding them firmly in place. But we will slip away, he thought. We are going to fall off this planet.

He did not know its significance at the time. Later, though, he would remember that it was even before he left Earth that he first thought of it as a planet, like any other, not particularly his own.

"Oh, already figured it out," said Graff. He was standing on the ladder. "Coming with us?" Ender asked.

"I don't usually come down for recruiting," Graff said. "I'm kind of in charge there. Administrator of the School. Like a principal. They told me I had to come back or I'd lose my job." He smiled.

Ender smiled back. He felt comfortable with Graff. Graff was good. And he was principal of the Battle School. Ender relaxed a little. He would have a friend there.

Adults helped the other boys belt themselves in place, those who hadn't done as Ender did. Then they waited for an hour while a TV at the front of the shuttle introduced them to shuttle flight, the history of space flight, and their possible future with the great starships of the I.F. Very boring stuff. Ender had seen such films before.

Except that he had not been belted into a seat inside the shuttle. Hanging upside down from the belly of Earth.

The launch wasn't bad. A little scary. Some jolting, a few moments of panic that this might be the first failed launch since the early days of the shuttle. The movies hadn't made it plain how much violence you could experience, lying on your back in a soft chair.

Then it was over, and he really was hanging by the straps, no gravity anywhere.

But because he had already reoriented himself, he was not surprised when Graff came up the ladder backward, as if he were climbing down to the front of the shuttle. Nor did it bother him when Graff hooked his feet under

a rung and pushed off with his hands, so that suddenly he swung upright, as if this were an ordinary airplane.

The reorientations were too much for some. One boy gagged; Ender understood then why they had been forbidden to eat anything for twenty hours before the launch. Vomiting in null gravity wouldn't be fun.

But for Ender, Graff's gravity game was fun. And he carried it further, imagining that Graff was actually hanging upside down from the center aisle, and then picturing him sticking straight out from a side wall. Gravity could go any which way. However I want it to go. I can make Graff stand on his head and he doesn't even know it.

"What do you think is so funny, Wiggin?"

Graff's voice was sharp and angry. What did I do wrong, thought Ender. Did I laugh out loud?

"I asked you a question, soldier!" barked Graff.

Oh yes. This is the beginning of the training routine. Ender had seen some military shows on TV, and they always shouted a lot at the beginning of training before the soldiers and the officer became good friends.

"Yes sir," Ender said.

"Well answer it, then!"

"I thought of you hanging upside down by your feet. I thought it was funny."

It sounded stupid, now, with Graff looking at him coldly. "To you I suppose it is funny. Is it funny to anybody else here?"

Murmurs of no.

"Well why isn't it?" Graff looked at them all with contempt. "Scumbraains, that's what we've got in this launch. Pinheaded little morons. Only one of you had the brains to realize that in null gravity directions are whatever you conceive them to be. Do you understand that, Shafts?"

The boy nodded.

"No you didn't. Of course you didn't. Not only stupid, but a liar too. There's only one boy on this launch with any brains *at all*, and that's Ender Wiggin. Take a good look at him, little boys. He's going to be a commander when you're still in diapers up there. Because he knows how to think in null gravity, and you just want to throw up."

This wasn't the way the show was supposed to go. Graff was supposed to pick on him, not set him up as the best. They were supposed to be against each other at first, so they could become friends later.

"Most of you are going to ice out. Get used to that, little boys. Most of you are going to end up in Combat School, because you don't have the brains to handle deep-space piloting. Most of you aren't worth the price of bringing you up here to Battle School because you don't have what it takes. Some of you might make it. *Some* of you might be worth something to humanity. But don't bet on it. I'm betting on only one."

Suddenly Graff did a backflip and caught the ladder with his hands, then

swung his feet away from the ladder. Doing a handstand, if the floor was down. Dangling by his hands, if the floor was up. Hand over hand he swung himself back along the aisle to his seat.

"Looks like *you've* got it made here," whispered the boy next to him. Ender shook his head.

"Oh, won't even talk to me?" the boy said.

"I didn't ask him to say that stuff," Ender whispered.

He felt a sharp pain on the top of his head. Then again. Some giggles from behind him. The boy in the next seat back must have unfastened his straps. Again a blow to the head. Go away, Ender thought. I didn't do anything to you.

Again a blow to the head. Laughter from the boys. Didn't Graff see this? Wasn't he going to stop it? Another blow. Harder. It really hurt. Where was Graff?

Then it became clear. Graff had deliberately caused it. It was worse than the abuse in the shows. When the sergeant picked on you, the others liked you better. But when the officer prefers you, the others hate you.

"Hey, fart-eater," came the whisper from behind him. He was hit on the head again. "Do you like this? Hey, super-brain, is this fun?" Another blow, this one so hard that Ender cried out softly with the pain.

If Graff was setting him up, there'd be no help unless he helped himself. He waited until he thought another blow was about to come. Now, he thought. And yes, the blow was there. It hurt, but Ender was already trying to sense the coming of the next blow. Now. And yes, right on time. I've got you, Ender thought.

Just as the next blow was coming, Ender reached up with both hands, snatched the boy by the wrist, and then pulled down on the arm, hard.

In gravity, the boy would have been jammed against Ender's seat back, hurting his chest. In null gravity, however, he flipped over the seat completely, up toward the ceiling. Ender wasn't expecting it. He hadn't realized how null gravity magnified the effects of even a child's movements. The boy sailed through the air, bouncing against the ceiling, then down against another boy in his seat, then out into the aisle, his arms flailing until he screamed as his body slammed into the bulkhead at the front of the compartment, his left arm twisted under him.

It took only seconds. Graff was already there, snatching the boy out of the air. Deftly he propelled him down the aisle toward the other man. "Left arm. Broken, I think," he said. In moments the boy had been given a drug and lay quietly in the air as the officer ballooned a splint around his arm.

Ender felt sick. He had only meant to catch the boy's arm. No. No, he had meant to hurt him, and had pulled with all his strength. He hadn't meant it to be so public, but the boy was feeling exactly the pain Ender had

meant him to feel. Null gravity had betrayed him, that was all. I am Peter. I'm just like him. And Ender hated himself.

Graff stayed at the front of the cabin. "What are you, slow learners? In your feeble little minds, haven't you picked up one little fact? You were brought here to be *soldiers*. In your old schools, in your old families, maybe you were the big shot, maybe you were tough, maybe you were smart. But we chose the best of the best, and that's the only kind of kid you're going to meet now. And when I tell you Ender Wiggin is the best in this launch, take the hint, my little dorkings. Don't mess with him. Little boys have died in Battle School before. Do I make myself clear?"

There was silence the rest of the launch. The boy sitting next to Ender was scrupulously careful not to touch him.

I am not a killer, Ender said to himself over and over. I am not Peter. No matter what Graff says, I'm not. I was defending myself. I bore it a long time. I was patient. I'm not what he said.

A voice over the speaker told them they were approaching the school; it took twenty minutes to decelerate and dock. Ender lagged behind the others. They were not unwilling to let him be the last to leave the shuttle, climbing upward in the direction that had been down when they embarked. Graff was waiting at the end of the narrow tube that led from the shuttle into the heart of the Battle School.

"Was it a good fight, Ender?" Graff asked cheerfully.

"I thought you were my friend." Despite himself, Ender's voice trembled. Graff looked puzzled. "Whatever gave you that idea, Ender?"

"Because you—" Because you spoke nicely to me, and honestly. "You didn't lie."

"I won't lie now, either," said Graff. "My job isn't to be friends. My job is to produce the best soldiers in the world. In the whole history of the world. We need a Napoleon. An Alexander. Except that Napoleon lost in the end, and Alexander flamed out and died young. We need a Julius Caesar, except that he made himself dictator, and died for it. My job is to produce such a creature, and all the men and women he'll need to help him. Nowhere in that does it say I have to make friends with children."

"You made them hate me."

"So? What will you do about it? Crawl into a corner? Start kissing their little backsides so they'll love you again? There's only one thing that will make them stop hating you. And that's being so good at what you do that they can't ignore you. I told them you were the best. Now you damn well better be."

"What if I can't?"

"Then too bad. Look, Ender, I'm sorry if you're lonely and afraid. But the buggers are out there. Ten billion, a hundred billion, a million billion of them, for all we know. With as many ships, for all we know. With weapons we can't understand. And a willingness to use those weapons to wipe

us out. It isn't the world at stake, Ender. Just us. Just humankind. As far as the rest of the biosphere is concerned, we could be wiped out and it would adjust, it would get on with the next step in evolution. But humanity doesn't want to die. As a species, we have evolved to survive. And the way we do it is by straining and straining and, at last, every few generations, giving birth to genius. The one who invents the wheel. And light. And flight. The one who builds a city, a nation, an empire. Do you understand any of this?"

Ender thought he did, but wasn't sure, and so said nothing.

"No. Of course not. So I'll put it bluntly. Human beings are free except when humanity needs them. Maybe humanity needs you. To do something. Maybe humanity needs *me*—to find out what you're good for. We might both do despicable things, Ender, but if humankind survives, then we were good tools."

"Is that all? Just tools?"

"Individual human beings are all tools, that the others use to help us all survive."

"That's a lie."

"No. It's just a half truth. You can worry about the other half after we win this war."

"It'll be over before I grow up," Ender said.

"I hope you're wrong," said Graff. "By the way, you aren't helping yourself at all, talking to me. The other boys are no doubt telling each other that old Ender Wiggin is back there licking up to Graff. If word once gets around that you're a teachers' boy, you're iced for sure."

In other words, go away and leave me alone. "Goodbye," Ender said. He pulled himself hand over hand along the tube where the other boys had gone.

Graff watched him go.

One of the teachers near him said, "Is that the one?"

"God knows," said Graff. "If Ender isn't him, then he'd better show up soon."

"Maybe it's nobody," said the teacher.

"Maybe. But if that's the case, Anderson, then in my opinion God is a bugger. You can quote me on that."

"I will."

They stood in silence a while longer.

"Anderson."

"Mmm."

"The kid's wrong. I *am* his friend."

"I know."

"He's clean. Right to the heart, he's good."

"I've read the reports."

"Anderson, think what we're going to do to him."

Anderson was defiant. "We're going to make him the best military commander in history."

"And then put the fate of the world on his shoulders. For his sake, I hope it isn't him. I do."

"Cheer up. The buggers may kill us all before he graduates."

Graff smiled. "You're right. I feel better already."