

ENDER IN EXILE

Orson Scott Card

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To
BAYDON HILTON
JORDAN HILTON
RICKY FENTON

Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio:
you continue to earn my trust and admiration
as fellow travelers on the twisted path of life.

ENDER IN EXILE

CHAPTER 1

To: jpwiggin@gso.nc.pub, twiggin@uncg.edu
From: hgraff%educadmin@ifcom.gov
Subj: When Andrew Returns Home

Dear John Paul and Theresa Wiggin,

You understand that during the recent attempt by the Warsaw Pact to take over the International Fleet, our sole concern at EducAdmin was the safety of the children. Now we are finally able to begin working out the logistics of sending the children home.

We assure you that Andrew will be provided with continuous surveillance and an active bodyguard throughout his transfer from the I.F. to American government control. We are still negotiating the degree to which the I.F. will continue to provide protection after the transfer.

Every effort is being made by EducAdmin to assure that Andrew will be able to return to the most normal childhood possible. However, I wish your advice about whether he should be retained here in isolation until the conclusion of the inquiries into EducAdmin actions during the late campaign. It is quite likely that testimony will be offered that depicts Andrew and his actions in damaging ways, in order to attack EducAdmin through him (and the other children). Here at IFCOM we can keep him from hearing the worst of it; on Earth, no such protection will be possible and it is likelier that he will be called to "testify."

Hyrum Graff

Theresa Wiggin was sitting up in bed, holding her printout of Graff's letter. "Called to 'testify.'" Which means putting him on exhibit as—what, a hero? More likely a monster, since we already have various senators decrying the exploitation of children."

"That'll teach him to save the human race," said her husband, John Paul.

"This is not a time for flippancy."

"Theresa, be reasonable," said John Paul. "I want Ender home as much as you do."

"No you don't," said Theresa fiercely. "You don't ache with the need for him every day." Even as she said it she knew she was being unfair to him, and she covered her eyes and shook her head.

To his credit, he understood and didn't argue with her about what he did and did not feel. "You can never have the years they've taken, Theresa. He's not the boy we knew."

"Then we'll get to know the boy he is. Here. In our home."

"Surrounded by guards."

"*That's* the part I refuse to accept. Who would want to hurt him?"

John Paul set down the book he was no longer pretending to read. "Theresa, you're the smartest person I know."

"He's a child!"

"He won a war against incredibly superior forces."

"He fired off *one* weapon. Which he did not design or deploy."

"He got that weapon into firing range."

"The formics are gone! He's a hero, he's not in danger."

"All right, Theresa, he's a hero. How is he going to go to middle school? What eighth-grade teacher is ready for him? What school dance is he going to be ready for?"

"It will take time. But here, with his family—"

"Yes, we're such a warm, welcoming group of people, a love nest into which he'll fit so easily."

"We *do* love each other!"

"Theresa, Colonel Graff is only trying to warn us that Ender isn't *just* our son."

"He's nobody *else's* son."

"You *know* who wants to kill our son."

"No, I don't."

"Every government that thinks of American military power as an obstacle to their plans."

"But Ender isn't going to *be* in the military, he's going to be—"

"This week he won't be in the American military. Maybe. He won a war at the age of twelve, Theresa. What makes you think he won't be drafted by our benevolent and democratic government the moment he gets back to Earth? Or put into protective custody? Maybe they'll let us go with him and maybe they won't."

Theresa let the tears flow down her cheeks. "So you're saying that when he left here we lost him forever."

"I'm saying that when your child goes off to war, you will never get him back. Not as he was, not the same boy. Changed, if he comes back at all. So let me ask you. Do you want him to go where he's in the greatest danger, or to stay where he's relatively safe?"

"You think Graff is trying to get us to tell him to keep Ender with him out there in space."

"I think Graff cares what happens to Ender, and he's letting us know—without actually saying it, because every letter he sends can be used against him in court—that Ender is in terrible danger. Not ten minutes after Ender's victory, the Russians made their brutal play for control of the I.F. Their soldiers killed thousands of fleet officers before the I.F. was able to force their surrender. What would they have done if they had won? Brought Ender home and put on a big parade for him?"

Theresa knew all of this. She had known it, viscerally at least, from the moment she read Graff's letter. No, she had known it even before, had known it with a sick dread as soon as she heard that the Formic War was over. He would not be coming home.

She felt John Paul's hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off. His hand returned, stroking her arm as she lay there, facing away from him, crying because she knew she had already lost the argument, crying because she wasn't even on her own side in their quarrel.

"We knew when he was born that he didn't belong to us."

"He *does* belong to us."

"If he comes home, his life belongs to whatever government has the power to protect him and use him—or kill him. He's the single most important asset surviving from the war. The great weapon. That's all he'll be—that and such a celebrity he can't possibly have a normal childhood anyway. And would we be much help, Theresa? Do we understand what his life has been for the past seven years? What kind of parents can we be to the boy—the man—that he's become?"

"We would be *wonderful*," she said.

"And we know this because we're such perfect parents for the children we have at home with us."

Theresa rolled onto her back. "Oh, dear. Poor Peter. It must be killing him that Ender might come home."

"Take the wind right out of his sails."

"Oh, I'm not sure of that," said Theresa. "I bet Peter is already figuring out how to exploit Ender's return."

"Until he finds out that Ender is much too clever to be exploited."

"What preparation does Ender have for *politics*? He's been in the military all this time."

John Paul chuckled.

"All right, yes, of course the military is just as political as government."

"But you're right," said John Paul. "Ender's had protection there, people who intended to exploit him, yes, but he hasn't had to do any bureaucratic fighting for himself. He's probably a babe in the woods when it comes to maneuvering like that."

"So Peter really could use him?"

"That's not what worries me. What worries me is what Peter will do when he finds out that he *can't* use him."

Theresa sat back up and faced her husband. "You can't think *Peter* would raise a hand against Ender!"

"Peter doesn't raise his *own* hand to do anything difficult or dangerous. You know how he's been using Valentine."

"Only because she lets him use her."

"Exactly my point," said John Paul.

"Ender is *not* in danger from his own family."

"Theresa, we have to decide: What's best for Ender? What's best for Peter and Valentine? What's best for the future of the world?"

"Sitting here on our bed, in the middle of the night, the two of us are deciding the fate of the world?"

"When we conceived little Andrew, my dear, we decided the fate of the world."

"And had a good time doing it," she added.

"Is it good for Ender to come home? Will it make him happy?"

"Do you really think he's forgotten us?" she asked. "Do you think Ender doesn't care whether he comes home?"

"Coming home lasts a day or two. Then there's *living* here. The danger from foreign powers, the unnaturalness of his life at school, the constant infringements on his privacy, and let's not forget Peter's unquenchable ambition and envy. So I ask again, will Ender's life here be happier than it would be if . . ."

"If he stays out in space? What kind of life will *that* be for him?"

"The I.F. has made its commitment—total neutrality in regard to anything happening on Earth. If they have Ender, then the whole world—every government—will *know* they'd better not try to go up against the Fleet."

"So by not coming home, Ender continues to save the world on an ongoing basis," said Theresa. "What a useful life he'll have."

"The point is that nobody *else* can use him."

Theresa put on her sweetest voice. "So you think we should write back to Graff and tell him that we don't want Ender to come home?"

"We can't do anything of the kind," said John Paul. "We'll write back that we're eager to see our son and we don't think any bodyguard will be necessary."

It took her a moment to realize why he seemed to be reversing everything he'd said. "Any letters we send Graff," she said, "will be just as public as the letter he sent us. And just as empty. And we do nothing and let things take their course."

"No, my dear," said John Paul. "It happens that living in our own house, under our own roof, are two of the most influential formers of public opinion."

"But John Paul, officially we don't know that our children are sneaking around in the nets, manipulating events through Peter's network of correspondents and Valentine's brilliantly perverse talent for demagoguery."

"And they don't know that we have any brains," said John Paul. "They seem to think they were left at our house by fairies instead of having our genetic material throughout their little bodies. They treat us as convenient samples of ignorant public opinion. So . . . let's give them some public opinions that will steer

them to do what's best for their brother."

"What's best," echoed Theresa. "We don't know what's best."

"No," said John Paul. "We only know what seems best. But one thing's certain—we know a lot more about it than any of our children do."

* * * * *

Valentine came home from school with anger festering inside her. Stupid teachers—it made her crazy sometimes to ask a question and have the teacher patiently explain things to her as if the question were a sign of Valentine's failure to understand the subject, instead of the teacher's. But Valentine sat there and took it, as the equation showed up in the holodisplay on everybody's desk and the teacher covered it point by point.

Then Valentine drew a little circle in the air around the element of the problem that the teacher had not addressed properly—the reason why the answer was not right. Valentine's circle did not show up on all the desks, of course; only the teacher's computer had that capability.

So the teacher then got to draw his own circle around that number and say, "What you're not noticing here, Valentine, is that even *with* this explanation, if you ignore *this* element you still can't get the right answer."

It was such an obvious ego-protective cover-up. But of course it was obvious only to Valentine. To the other students, who were barely grasping the material anyway (especially since it was being explained to them by an unobservant incompetent), it *was* Val who had overlooked the circled parenthetical, even though it was precisely because of that element that she had asked her question in the first place.

And the teacher gave her that simpering smile that clearly said, You aren't going to defeat me and humiliate me in front of this class.

But Valentine was not trying to humiliate him. She did not care about him. She simply cared that the material be taught well enough that if, God forbid, some member of the class became a civil engineer, his bridges wouldn't fall down and kill people.

That was the difference between her and the idiots of the world. They were all trying to look smart and keep their social standing. Whereas Valentine didn't care about social standing, she cared about getting it right. Getting the truth—when the truth was gettable.

She had said nothing to the teacher and nothing to any of the students and she knew she wouldn't get any sympathy at home, either. Peter would mock her for caring about school enough to let that clown of a teacher get under her skin. Father would look at the problem, point out the correct answer, and go back to his work without ever noticing that Val wasn't asking for *help*, she was asking for commiseration.

And Mother? She would be all for charging down to the school and *doing* something about it, raking the teacher over the coals. Mother wouldn't even *hear* Val explaining that she didn't want to shame the teacher, she just wanted somebody to say, "Isn't it ironic, that in this special advanced school for really bright kids, they have a teacher who doesn't know his own subject!" To which Val could reply, "It sure is!" and then she'd feel better. Like somebody was on her side. Somebody *got* it and she wasn't alone.

My needs are simple and few, thought Valentine. Food. Clothing. A comfortable place to sleep. And *no idiots*.

But of course a world with no idiots would be lonely. If she herself were even allowed there. It's not as if

she never made mistakes.

Like the mistake of ever letting Peter rope her into being Demosthenes. He *still* thought he needed to tell her what to write every day after school—as if, after all these years, she had not completely internalized the character. She could write Demosthenes' essays in her sleep.

And if she needed help, all she had to do was listen to Father pontificate on world affairs—since he seemed to echo all of Demosthenes' warmongering jingoistic demagogic opinions despite claiming never to read the columns.

If he knew his sweet naive little daughter was writing those essays, he'd poop petunias.

She fumed into the house, headed straight for her computer, scanned the news, and started writing the essay she knew Peter would assign her—a diatribe on how the I.F. should not have ended the hostilities with the Warsaw Pact without first demanding that Russia surrender all her nukes, because shouldn't there be *some* cost to waging a nakedly aggressive war? All the usual spewings from her Demosthenes anti-avatar.

Or am I, as Demosthenes, Peter's *real* avatar? Have I been turned into a virtual person?

Click. An email. Anything would be better than what she was writing.

It was from Mother. She was forwarding an email from Colonel Graff. About Ender having a bodyguard when he came home.

"I thought you'd want to see this," Mother had written. "Isn't it just THRILLING that Andrew's homecoming is SO CLOSE?"

Stop shouting, Mother. Why do you use caps for emphasis like that? It's so—junior high school. It's what she told Peter more than once. Mother is such a *cheerleader*.

Mother's epistle went on in the same vein. It'll take NO time at ALL to get Ender's room back into shape for him and now there doesn't seem to be any reason to put off cleaning the room a SECOND longer unless what do you think, would Peter want to SHARE his room with his little brother so they could BOND and get CLOSE again? And what do you think Ender will want for his VERY FIRST meal home?

Food, Mother. Whatever it is will definitely be "SPECIAL enough to make him feel LOVED and MISSED."

Anyway. Mother was so naive to take Graff's letter at face value. Val went back and read it again. Surveillance. Bodyguard. Graff was sending her a warning, not trying to get her all excited about Ender's homecoming. Ender was going to be in danger. Couldn't Mother see that?

Graff asked if they should keep Ender in space till the inquiries were over. But that would take months. How could Mother have gotten the idea that Ender was coming home so soon it was time to clear out the junk that had gotten stacked in his room? Graff was asking her to request that he *not* be sent home just yet. And his reason was that Ender was in danger.

Instantly the whole range of dangers that Ender faced loomed before her. The Russians would assume that Ender was a weapon that America would use against them. The Chinese would think the same—that America, armed with this Ender-weapon, might become aggressive about intruding into China's sphere of influence again. Both nations would breathe easier if Ender were dead. Though of course they'd have to make it look like the assassination had been carried out by some kind of terrorist movement. Which

meant that they wouldn't just snipe Ender out of existence, they'd probably blow up his school.

No, no, no, Val told herself. Just because that's the kind of thing Demosthenes would say doesn't mean it's what *you* have to think!

But the image of somebody blowing Ender up or shooting him or whatever method they used—all the methods kept flashing through her mind. Wouldn't it be ironic—yet typically human—for the person who saved the human race to be assassinated? It was like the murder of Abraham Lincoln or Mohandas Gandhi. Some people just didn't know who their saviors were. And the fact that Ender was still a kid wouldn't even slow them down.

He can't come home, she thought. Mother will never see it, I could never say it to her, but . . . even if they weren't going to assassinate him, what would his life be like here? Ender was never one to seek fame or status, and yet everything he did would end up on the vids with people commenting on how he did his hair (Vote! Like it or hate it?) and what classes he was taking in school (What will the hero be when he grows up? Vote on the career *you* think The Wiggin should prepare for!).

What a nightmare. It wouldn't be coming home. They could never bring Ender home anyway. The home he left didn't exist. The kid who was taken out of that home didn't exist either. When Ender was here—not even a whole year ago—when Val went to the lake and spent those hours with him, Ender seemed so old. Playful sometimes, yes, but he felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. Now the burden had been taken off—but the aftermath would cling to him, would tie him down, tear down his life.

The years of childhood were gone. Period. Ender didn't get to be a little boy growing up into an adolescent in his father's and mother's house. He was already an adolescent now—in years and hormones—and an adult in the responsibilities he'd borne.

If school feels empty to *me*, how will it feel to Ender?

Even as she finished writing her essay on Russia's nukes and the cost of defeat, she was mentally structuring another essay. The one explaining why Ender Wiggin should not be brought back to Earth because he'd be the target of every crank and spy and paparazzo and assassin and a normal life would be impossible.

She didn't write it, though. Because she knew there was a huge problem: Peter would hate it.

Because Peter already had his plans. His online persona, Locke, had already started laying the groundwork for Ender's homecoming. It was clear to Valentine that when Ender returned, Peter intended to come out of the closet as the real author of the Locke essays—and therefore the person who came up with the terms of the truce that was still holding between the Warsaw Pact and the I.F. Peter meant to piggyback on Ender's fame. Ender saved the human race from the formics, and his big brother Peter saved the world from civil war in the aftermath of Ender's victory. Double heroes!

Ender would hate the notoriety. Peter was so hungry for it that he intended to steal as much of Ender's as he could get.

Oh, he'd never admit that, thought Valentine. Peter will have all kinds of reasons why it's for Ender's own good. Probably the very reasons I've thought of.

And since that's the case, am I doing just what Peter does? Have I come up with all these reasons for Ender not to come home, solely because in my heart I don't want him here?

At that thought, such a wave of emotion swept over her that she found herself weeping at her homework

table. She wanted him home. And even though she understood that he couldn't really come home—Colonel Graff was right—she still yearned for the little brother who was stolen from her. All these years with the brother I hate, and now, for the sake of the brother I love, I'll work to keep him from . . .

From me? No, I don't have to keep him from *me*. I hate school, I hate my life here, I hate hate hate being under Peter's thumb. Why should I stay? Why shouldn't I go out into space with Ender? At least for a while. I'm the one he's closest to. I'm the only one he's *seen* in the past seven years. If he can't come home, one bit of home—me—can come to him!

It was all a matter of persuading Peter that it wasn't in his best interest to have Ender come back to Earth—without letting Peter *know* that she was trying to manipulate him.

It just made her tired, because Peter wasn't easy to manipulate. He saw through everything. So she had to be quite forthright and honest about what she was doing—but do it with such subtle overtones of humility and earnestness and dispassion and *whatever* that Peter could get past his own condescension toward everything she said and decide that he had thought that way all along and . . .

And is my real motive that I want to get off planet myself? Is this about Ender or about me getting free?

Both. It can be both. And I'll tell Ender the truth about that—I won't be giving up *anything* to be with him. I'd rather be with him in space and never see Earth again than stay here, with or without him. Without him: an aching void. With him: the pain of watching him lead a miserable, frustrated life.

Val began to write a letter to Colonel Graff. Mother had been careless enough to include Graff's address. That was almost a security breach. Mother was so naive sometimes. If she were an I.F. officer, she would have been cashiered long ago.

* * * * *

At dinner that night, Mother couldn't stop talking about Ender's homecoming. Peter listened with only half his attention, because of course Mother couldn't see past her personal sentimentality about her "lost little boy coming back to the nest" whereas Peter understood that Ender's return would be horribly complicated. So much to prepare for—and not just the stupid bedroom. Ender could have Peter's own bed, for all he cared—what mattered was that for a brief window of time, Ender would be the center of the world's attention, and *that* was when Locke would emerge from the cloak of anonymity and put an end to the speculation about the identity of the "great benefactor of humanity who, because of his modesty in remaining anonymous, cannot receive the Nobel prize that he so richly deserves for having led us to the end of the last war of mankind."

That from a rather gushy fan of Locke's—who also happened to be the head of the opposition party in Great Britain. Naive to imagine even for a moment that the brief attempt by the New Warsaw Pact to take over the I.F. was the "last war." There's only one way to have a "last war," and that's to have the whole of Earth under a single, effective, powerful, but popular leader.

And the way to introduce that leader would be to find him on camera, standing beside the great Ender Wiggin with his arm flung across the hero's shoulders because—and who should be surprised by this?—the "Boy of War" and the "Man of Peace" are brothers!

And now Father was blathering about something. Only he had addressed something to Peter directly and so Peter had to play the dutiful son and listen as if he cared.

"I really think you need to commit to the career you want to pursue *before* your brother gets home, Peter."

"And why is that?" asked Peter.

"Oh, don't pretend to be so naive. Don't you realize that Ender Wiggin's brother can get into *any college he wants?*"

Father pronounced the words as if they were the most brilliant ever spoken aloud by someone who had not yet been deified by the Roman senate or sainted by the Pope or whatever. It would never occur to Father that Peter's perfect grades and his perfect score on all the college-entry tests would already get him into any school he wanted. He didn't have to piggyback on his brother's fame. But no, to Father everything good in Peter's life would always be seen as flowing from Ender. Ender Ender Ender Ender what a stupid name.

If Father's thinking this way, no doubt everybody else will, too. At least everybody below a certain minimum intelligence.

All Peter had been seeing was the publicity bonus that Ender's homecoming would offer. But Father had reminded him of something else—that everything he did would be discounted in people's minds precisely because he was Ender the Great's older brother. People would see them standing side by side, yes—but they'd wonder why Ender's brother had not been taken into Battle School. It would make Peter look weak and inferior and vulnerable.

There he'd stand, noticeably taller, the brother who stayed home and didn't do anything. "Oh, but I wrote all the Locke essays and shut down the conflict with Russia before it could turn into a world war!" Well, if you're so smart, why weren't *you* helping your little brother save the human race from *complete destruction?*

Public relations opportunity, yes. But also a nightmare.

How could he use the opportunity Ender's great victory offered, yet not have it *look* like he was nothing but a hanger-on, sucking at his brother's fame like a remora? How ghastly if his announcement sounded like some sad kind of me-too-ism. Oh, you think my brother's cool? Well, I'll have you know that I saved the world *too*. In my own sad, needy little way.

"Are you all right, Peter?" asked Valentine.

"Oh, is something wrong?" asked Mother. "Let me look at you, dear."

"I'm not taking my shirt off or letting you use a rectal thermometer on me, Mother, because Val is hallucinating and I look just fine."

"I'll have you know that if and when I start hallucinating," said Val, "I can think of something better than seeing your face looking pukish."

"What a great commercial idea," said Peter, almost by reflex now. "Choose Your Own Hallucination! Oh, wait, they have that one—they call it 'illegal drugs.'"

"Don't sneer at us needy ones," said Val. "Those who are addicted to ego don't need drugs."

"Children," said Mother. "Is *this* what Ender will find when he comes home?"

"Yes," said Val and Peter simultaneously.

Father spoke up. "I'd like to think he might find you a bit more mature."

But by now Peter and Val were laughing uproariously. They couldn't stop, so Father sent them from the table.

* * * * *

Peter glanced through Val's essay on Russian nukes. "This is so boring."

"I don't think so," said Valentine. "They have the nukes and that keeps other countries from slapping them down when they need it—which is often."

"What's this thing you've got against Russia?"

"It's Demosthenes who has something against Russia," said Val with fake nonchalance.

"Good," said Peter. "So Demosthenes will not be worried about Russian nuclear weapons, he'll be worried about Russia getting its hands on the most valuable weapon of them all."

"The Molecular Disruption Device?" asked Val. "The I.F. will never bring it within firing range of Earth."

"Not the M.D. Device, you poor sap. I'm referring to our brother. Our civilization-destroying junior sib."

"Don't you dare talk about him with scorn!"

Peter's expression turned into a mocking simper. But behind his visage there was anger and hurt. She still had the power to get to him, just by making it clear how much more she loved Ender.

"Demosthenes is going to write an essay pointing out that America must get Andrew Wiggin back to Earth immediately. No more delays. The world is too dangerous a place for America not to have the immediate services of the greatest military leader the world has ever known."

Immediately a fresh wave of hatred for Peter swept over Valentine. Partly because she realized *his* approach would work far better than the essay she had already written. She hadn't internalized Demosthenes as well as she thought. Demosthenes would absolutely call for Ender's immediate return and enlistment in the American military.

And that would be as destabilizing, in its own way, as a call for forward deployment of nukes. Demosthenes' essays were watched very carefully by the rivals and enemies of the United States. If he called for Ender to come home at once, they would all start maneuvering to keep Ender in space; and some, at least, would openly accuse America of having aggressive intentions.

It would then be Locke's place, in a few days or weeks, to come up with a compromise, a statesmanlike solution: Leave the kid in space.

Valentine knew exactly why Peter had changed his mind. It was that stupid remark of Father's at dinner—his reminder that Peter would be in Ender's shadow, no matter what he did.

Well, even political sheep sometimes said something that had a good result. Now Val wouldn't even have to persuade Peter of the need to keep Ender away from Earth. It would be all his idea instead of hers.

* * * * *

Theresa once again sat on the bed, crying. Strewn about her were printouts of the Demosthenes and Locke essays that she knew would keep Ender from returning home.

"I can't help it," she said to her husband. "I know it's the right thing—just as Graff *wanted* us to

understand it. But I thought I'd see him again. I really did."

John Paul sat beside her on the bed and put his arms around her. "It's the hardest thing we ever did."

"Not giving him up in the first place?"

"That was hard," said John Paul, "but we didn't have a choice. They were going to take him anyway. This time, though. You know that if we went on the nets and put up vids of us pleading for our son to come home—we'd have a pretty good chance."

"And our little boy is going to wonder why we *don't* do it."

"No he's not."

"Oh, you think he's so smart he'll figure out what we're doing? Why we're doing *nothing*?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he doesn't know us," said Theresa. "He doesn't know what we think or feel. As far as he can tell, we've forgotten all about him."

"One thing I feel good about, in this whole mess," said John Paul. "We're still good at manipulating our genius children."

"Oh, that," said Theresa dismissively. "It's easy to manipulate your children when they're absolutely sure you're stupid."

"What makes me saddest," said John Paul, "is that Locke is getting credit for caring about Ender more than anybody. So when his identity does come out, it'll look as though he loyally stepped in to protect his brother."

"He's our boy, that Peter," said Theresa. "Oh, what a piece of work he is."

"I have a philosophical question. I wonder if what we call 'goodness' is actually a maladaptive trait. As long as most people have it, and the rules of society promote it as a virtue, then the *natural* rulers have a clear field of action. It's because of Ender's goodness that it's Peter we'll have at home on Earth."

"Oh, Peter's good," said Theresa bitterly.

"Yes, I forgot," said John Paul. "It's for the good of the human race that he'll become ruler of the world. An altruistic sacrifice."

"When I read his simpering essays I want to claw his eyes out."

"He's our son, too," said John Paul. "As much a product of our genes as Ender or Val. And we did goad him into this."

Theresa knew he was right. But it didn't help. "He didn't have to enjoy himself so much, did he?"

CHAPTER

2

To: hgraff%educadmin@ifcom.gov
From: demosthenes@LastBestHopeOfEarth.pol
Subj: You know the truth

You know who decides what to write. No doubt you can even guess why. I'm not going to try to defend my essay, or how it's being used by others.

You once used the sister of Andrew Wiggin to persuade him to go back into space and win that little war you were fighting. She did her job, didn't she? Such a good girl, fulfills all her assignments.

Well I have an assignment for her. You once sent her brother to her, for comfort and company. He'll need her again, more than ever, only he can't come to her. No house by the lake this time. But there's no reason she can't go out into space to be with him. Enlist her in the I.F., pay her as a consultant, whatever it takes. But she and her brother need each other. More than either of them needs Life On Earth.

Don't second-guess her on this. Remember that she's smarter than you are, and she loves her younger brother more than you do, and besides, you're a decent man. You know this is right and good. You always try to bring about what's right and good, don't you?

Do us both a favor. Take this letter and shred it and stick it where the sun don't shine.

Your devoted and humble servant—everybody's devoted and humble servant—the humble and devoted servant of truth and noble jingoism—Demosthenes.

How does a thirteen-year-old admiral spend his days?

Not commanding a ship—that was made plain to Ender from the day he received his commission. "You have a rank commensurate with your achievements," said Admiral Chamrajnagar, "but you will have duties commensurate with your training."

What was his training? To play at virtual war on the simulator. Now there was no one left to fight, so he was trained for . . . nothing.

Oh, one other thing: to lead children into combat, to squeeze the last ounce of effort and concentration and talent and intelligence from them. But the children had no purpose here, and one by one, they were going home.

They each came to Ender to say good-bye. "You'll be home soon," said Hot Soup. "They've got to prepare a hero's welcome." He was heading to Tactical School, to complete the bits of work remaining before he could earn his high school diploma. "So I can get into college right away."

"Fifteen-year-olds always do great in college," said Ender.

"I have to concentrate on my studies," said Han Tzu. "Finish college, find out what I'm supposed to do with my life, and then find someone to marry and start a family."

"Get on with the cycle of life?" said Ender.

"A man without a wife and babies is a menace to civilization," said Han Tzu. "One bachelor is an irritation. Ten thousand bachelors are a war."

"I love it when you recite Chinese wisdom."

"I'm Chinese, so I get to make it up." Han Tzu grinned at him. "Ender, come see me. China's a beautiful

country. More variety inside China than in the rest of the world."

"I will if I can," said Ender. He didn't have the heart to point out that China was full of human beings, and that the mix of good and bad, strong and weak, courageous and fearful was bound to be about the same as in any other country or culture or civilization . . . or village, or house, or heart.

"Oh, you'll be able to!" said Han Tzu. "You led the human race to victory, and everyone knows it. You can do whatever you want!"

Except go home, said Ender silently. Out loud, he answered, "You don't know my parents."

He had meant it to be in the same jocular tone that Han Tzu was using, but nothing came out right these days. Maybe there was a moroseness in him that colored all his speech without his knowing it. Or maybe it was Han Tzu who couldn't hear a joke coming from Ender's mouth; maybe he and the other kids all had too many memories of how it was near the end, when they worried that Ender might be losing his mind.

But Ender knew that he wasn't losing it. He was finding it. The deep mind, the utter soul, the heartlessly compassionate man—able to love others so deeply he can understand them, yet remain so detached that he can use that knowledge to destroy them.

"Parents," said Han Tzu joylessly. "Mine's in prison, you know. Or maybe he's out now. He set me up to cheat on my test, to make sure I got in here."

"You didn't need to cheat," said Ender. "You're the real thing."

"But my father needed to bestow it on me. It was no good if I earned it myself. It's how he made himself feel necessary. I understand that now. My plan is to be a better father than him. I am the Good Man-Parent!"

Ender laughed and then embraced him and they said good-bye. But the conversation stuck with him. He realized that Han Tzu would take his training and turn himself into the perfect father. And much of what he had learned in Battle School and here in Command School would probably serve him well. Patience, absolute self-control, learning the capabilities of those under you so you can make up for their deficits through training.

What was I trained for?

I am Tribal Man, thought Ender. The chief. They can trust me utterly to do exactly what's right for the tribe. But that trust means that I am the one who decides who lives and dies. Judge, executioner, general, god. That's what they trained me for. They did it well; I performed as trained. Now I scan the help wanted ads on the nets and can't find a single job on offer for which those are the qualifications. No tribes applying for chieftains, no villages in search of a king, no religions in search of a warrior-prophet.

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Officially, Ender was never supposed to have been informed of the court martial proceedings against ex-colonel Hyrum Graff. Officially, Ender was too young and too personally involved and the juvenile psychologists declared, after several tedious psychological evaluations, that Ender was too fragile to be exposed to the consequences of his own actions.

Oh, right, *now* you're worried.

But that's what the trial was going to be about, wasn't it? Whether Graff and other officials—but mostly

Graff—acted properly in the use they made of the children who were put in their care. It was all being taken very seriously, and from the way adult officers fell silent or looked away when Ender came into a room, Ender was reasonably sure that there had been some terrible consequence of something he had done.

He came to Mazer just before the trial began and laid out his hypotheses about what was really going on. "I think Colonel Graff is being put on trial because they're holding him responsible for things I did. But I doubt that it's because I blew up the formics' home world and destroyed an entire sentient species—they approve of that."

Mazer had nodded wisely but said nothing—his normal mode of response, left over from his days as Ender's trainer.

"So it's something else I did," said Ender. "I can think of only two things I've done that they'd put a man on trial for letting me do them. One was a fight I was in at Battle School. A bigger kid cornered me in a bathroom. He'd been bragging that he was going to beat me till I wasn't so smart anymore, and he brought his gang with him. I shamed him into fighting me alone, and then I put him down in a single move."

"Really," said Mazer.

"Bonzo Madrid. Bonito de Madrid. I think he's dead."

"Think?"

"They took me out of Battle School the next day. They never spoke of him. I assumed that meant I had really hurt him. I think he's dead. That's the kind of thing they'd hold a court martial for, isn't it? They have to account to Bonzo's parents for why their son is dead."

"Interesting line of thought," said Mazer. Mazer said that whether his guesses were right or wrong, so Ender didn't try to interpret it. "Is that all?" asked Mazer.

"There are governments and politicians that would like to discredit me. There's a move to keep me from coming back to Earth. I read the nets, I know what they're saying, that I'll just be a political football, a target for assassins, or an asset that my country will use to conquer the world or some such nonsense. So I think there are those who intend to use Graff's court martial as a way to publish things about me that would ordinarily be kept under seal. Things that will make me look like some kind of monster."

"You do know that it sounds suspiciously like paranoia, to think that *Graff's* trial is about *you*."

"Which makes it all the more appropriate that I'm in this loony bin," said Ender.

"You understand that I can't tell you anything," said Mazer.

"You don't have to," said Ender. "I'm also thinking that there was another boy. Years ago. When I was just little. He was hardly that much bigger than me. But he had a gang with him. I talked him out of using them—made it personal, one-on-one. Just like Bonzo. I wasn't a good fighter then. I didn't know how. All I could do was go crazy on him. *Hurt* him so bad he'd never dare to come after me again. Hurt him so bad that his gang would leave me alone, too. I had to *be* crazy in order to scare them with how crazy I was. So I think that incident is going to be part of the trial, too."

"Your self-absorption is really quite sweet—you really are convinced you're the center of the universe."

"Center of the court martial," said Ender. "It's about me, or people wouldn't be so anxious to keep me

from knowing about it. The absence of information *is* information."

"You kids are so smart," said Mazer, with just enough sarcasm to make Ender smile.

"Stilson's dead, too, isn't he," said Ender. It wasn't really a question.

"Ender, not everyone you fight with dies." But there was just a titch of hesitation *after* he said it. And so Ender knew. Everyone he had fought with—really *fought*—was dead. Bonzo. Stilson. And all the formics, every hive queen, every bugger, every larva, every egg, however they reproduced, it was over.

"You know," said Ender quietly, "I think about them all the time. How they'll never have any more children. That's what being alive is, isn't it? The ability to replicate. Even people without children, their bodies are still making new cells all the time. Replicating. Only that's over for Bonzo and Stilson. They never lived long enough to reproduce. Their line is cut off. *I* was nature, red in tooth and claw, for them. I determined their unfitness."

Ender knew even as he said it that this was unfair. Mazer was under orders not to discuss these matters with him and even if he guessed right, not to *confirm* them. But ending the conversation would confirm it, and even denying the truth had confirmed it. Now Ender was practically forcing him to speak, to reassure him, to answer his perceived need. "You don't have to respond," said Ender. "I'm not really as depressed as I sound. I don't blame myself, you know."

Mazer's eyes flickered.

"No, I'm not insane," said Ender. "I regret their deaths. I know that I'm *responsible* for killing Stilson and Bonzo and all the formics in the universe. But I'm not to blame. I didn't seek out Stilson or Bonzo. They came to *me*, with a threat of real damage. A credible threat. Tell them that in the court martial. Or run the recording you're doubtless making of this conversation. My intention was not to kill them, but my intention was definitely to stop them from damaging me. And the only way to do that was to act brutally. I'm sorry that they died from their injuries. I'd undo that if I could. But I didn't have the skill to hurt them enough to prevent future attacks, and yet not kill them. Or whatever it was that I did to them. If they're mentally damaged or crippled, I'll do what I can for them, unless their families would rather I stay away. I don't want to cause any more harm.

"But here's the thing, Mazer Rackham: I knew what I was doing. It's ridiculous for Hyrum Graff to be on trial for this. He had no idea of the way I thought, when it came to Stilson. He couldn't have known what I'd do. Only I knew. And I meant to hurt him—I meant to hurt him bad. Not Graff's fault. The fault was Stilson's. If he had left me alone—and I gave him every chance to walk away. I begged him to leave me alone. If he'd done that, he'd be alive. He chose. Just because he thought I was weaker than him, just because he thought I couldn't protect myself, doesn't mean it stopped being his fault. He chose to attack me precisely because he thought there would be no consequences. Only there *were* consequences."

Mazer cleared his throat a little. And then spoke. "This has gone far enough."

"With Bonzo, however, Graff was taking a terrible risk. What if Bonzo and his friends hurt me? What if I died? Or was brain-damaged? Or was simply made fearful and timid? He would lose the weapon he was forging. Bean would have won the war even if I was out of the picture, but Graff couldn't know that. It was a terrible gamble. Because Graff also knew that if I got out of that confrontation with Bonzo alive—victorious—then I would believe in myself. My ability to win under any circumstances. The game didn't give me that—it was just a game. Bonzo showed me that in real life I could win. As long as I understood my enemy. *You* understand what that means, Mazer."

"Even if anything you're saying were true . . ."

"Take this vid and introduce it into evidence. Or if, by some remote chance, nobody's recording our conversation, then testify on his behalf. Let them know—the court martial—let them know that Graff acted properly. I was angry at him for doing it that way, and I suppose I still am. But if I were in his place, I would have done the same. It was part of winning the war. People die in war. You send your soldiers into combat and you know some of them won't come back. But Graff didn't send Bonzo. Bonzo was a volunteer for the duty he assigned himself—attacking me and allowing us all to learn that no, I would not allow myself to lose, ever. Bonzo volunteered. Just like the buggers volunteered by coming here and trying to wipe out human life. If they'd left us alone, we wouldn't have hurt them. The court martial has to understand. I am what Battle School was designed to create, what the whole world *wanted* it to create. Graff cannot be blamed for shaping and sharpening the weapon. He did not wield it. No one did. Bonzo found a knife and cut himself on it. That's how they have to look at it."

"Are you done?" Mazer had asked.

"Why, are you running out of recording room?"

Mazer got up and left.

When he came back, he said nothing about their discussion. But Ender was now free to come and go anywhere. They no longer tried to hide things from him. He was able to read the transcript of Graff's arraignment.

He had been right on every point.

Ender also understood that Graff would not be convicted of anything serious—he would not go to prison. The court martial existed only to damage Ender and make it impossible for America to use him as a military leader. Ender was a hero, yes, but he was now officially a really scary kid. The court martial would cement that image in the public mind. People might have rallied around the savior of the human race. But a monstrous kid who killed other children? Even if it was self-defense, it was just too terrible. Ender's political future on Earth was nonexistent.

Ender tracked how the commentator Demosthenes responded as things began to come out in the trial. For months—ever since it became clear that Ender was *not* being sent home immediately—the famous American chauvinist had been agitating on the nets to "bring the hero home." Even now, as Ender's private killings were being used against Graff at the trial, Demosthenes still declared, more than once, that Ender was a "weapon that belongs to the American people."

This practically guaranteed that no one from any other nation would consent to that weapon getting into American hands.

Ender thought at first that Demosthenes must be a complete idiot, playing his hand completely wrong. Then he realized that Demosthenes might be doing it on purpose, energizing the opposition, because the last thing Demosthenes wanted was a rival for American political leadership.

Was the man that subtle? Ender pored over his essays—what else did he have to do?—and saw a pattern of self-defeat. Demosthenes was eloquent, but he always pushed a little too hard. Enough to energize the opposition, inside and outside America. Discrediting his own side of every argument.

Deliberately?

Probably not. Ender knew the history of leaders—especially of the original Demosthenes. Eloquence didn't imply intelligence or deep analysis. True believers in a cause often behaved in self-defeating ways because they expected other people to see the rightness of their cause if they just stated it clearly enough.

As a result, they tipped their hand in every game and couldn't understand why everyone ganged up against them.

Ender had watched the arguments unfold on the nets, watched the teams form, saw how the "moderates" led by Locke kept benefiting from Demosthenes' provocations.

And now, as Demosthenes continued to agitate in support of Ender, he was actually the one doing Ender the most damage. To everyone who feared Demosthenes' movement—which was the whole world outside America—Ender would not be a hero, he'd be a monster. Bring *him* home, to lead America on a nuevo-imperialista rampage? Let him become an American Alexander, Genghis Khan, Adolf Hitler, conquering the world or forcing the world to unite in brutal war against him?

Fortunately, Ender did not want to be a conqueror. So he wouldn't be hurt by missing out on the chance to try it.

Still, he'd love to have a chance to explain things to Demosthenes.

Not that the man would ever consent to be alone in a room with the killer hero.

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Mazer never discussed the actual court martial with Ender, but they could talk about Graff.

"Hyrum Graff is the consummate bureaucrat," Mazer told him. "He's always thinking ten steps ahead of everyone else. It doesn't really matter what office he holds. He can use anybody—below him or above him or complete strangers who've never met him—to accomplish whatever he thinks is needful for the human race."

"I'm glad he chooses to use this power of his for good."

"I don't know that he does," said Mazer. "He uses it for what he believes is good. But I don't know that he's particularly good at knowing what 'good' is."

"In philosophy class I think we finally decided that 'good' is an infinitely recursive term—it can't be defined except in terms of itself. Good is good because it's better than bad, though why it's better to be good than bad depends on how you define good, and on and on."

"The things the modern fleet teaches to its admirals."

"You're an admiral too, and look where it got *you*."

"Tutor to a bratty boy who saves the human race but doesn't do his chores."

"Sometimes I wish I were bratty," said Ender. "I dream about it—about defying authority. But even when I absolutely decide to, what I can't get rid of is responsibility. People counting on me—that's what controls me."

"So you have no ambition except duty?" asked Mazer.

"And I have no duties now," said Ender. "So I envy Colonel . . . Mister Graff. All those plans. All that purpose. I wonder what he plans for *me*."

"Are you sure he does?" asked Mazer. "Plan anything for you, I mean?"

"Maybe not," said Ender. "He worked awfully hard to shape this tool. But now that it will never be

needed again, maybe he can set me down and let me rust and never think of me."

"Maybe," said Mazer. "That's the thing we have to keep in mind. Graff is not . . . *nice*."

"Unless he needs to be."

"Unless he needs to *seem* to be," said Mazer. "He's not above lying his face off to frame things in such a way that you'll *want* to do what he wants you to do."

"Which is how he got you here, to be my trainer during the war?"

"Oh, yes," said Mazer, with a sigh.

"Going home now?" asked Ender. "I know you have family."

"Great-grandchildren," said Mazer. "And great-great-grandchildren. My wife is dead and my only surviving child is gaga with senility, my grandchildren tell me. They say it lightly, because they've accepted that their father or uncle has lived a full life and he's getting really old. But how can I accept it? I don't know any of these people."

"Hero's welcome won't be enough to make up for losing fifty years, is that it?" asked Ender.

"Hero's welcome," muttered Mazer. "You know what the hero's welcome is? They're still deciding whether to charge me along with Graff. I think they probably will."

"So if they charge you along with Graff," said Ender, "then you'll be acquitted along with him."

"Acquitted?" said Mazer ruefully. "We won't be jailed or anything. But we'll be reprimanded. A note of censure placed in our files. And Graff will probably be cashiered. The people who brought this court martial can't be made to look foolish for doing it. They have to turn out to have been correct."

Ender sighed. "So for their pride, you both get slapped. And Graff maybe loses his career."

Mazer laughed. "Not so bad, really. My record was full of notes of reprimand *before* I beat the buggers in the Second Formic War. My career has been forged out of reprimands and censures. And Graff? The military was never his *career*. It was just a way to get access to the influence and power he needed in order to accomplish his plans. Now he doesn't need the military anymore, so he's willing to be drummed out of it."

Ender nodded, chuckled. "I bet you're right. Graff is probably planning to exploit it somehow. The people who benefit from his being kicked out, he'll take advantage of how guilty they feel in order to get what he really wants. A consolation prize that turns out to be his real objective."

"Well, they can't very well give him medals for the exact same thing that he was court-martialed for," said Mazer.

"They'll give him his colonization project," said Ender.

"Oh, I don't know if guilt goes *that* far," said Mazer. "It would cost billions of dollars to equip and refit the fleet into colony ships, and there's no guarantee that anyone from Earth will volunteer to go away forever. Let alone crews for the ships."

"They have to do something with this huge fleet and all its personnel. The ships have to go somewhere. And there are those surviving I.F. soldiers on all the conquered worlds. I think Graff's going to get his colonies—we won't send ships to bring them home, we'll send new colonists to join them."

"I see you've mastered all of Graff's arguments."

"So have you," said Ender. "And I bet you'll go with them."

"Me? I'm too old to be a colonist."

"You'd pilot a ship," said Ender. "A colony ship. You'd go away again. Because you've already done it once. Why not go again? Lightspeed travel, taking the ship to one of the old formic planets."

"Maybe."

"After you've lost everybody, what's left to lose?" asked Ender. "And you believe in what Graff is doing. It's his real plan all along, isn't it? To spread the human race out of the solar system so we aren't held as hostages to the fate of a single planet. To spread ourselves out among star systems as far as we can go, so that we're unkillable as a species. It's Graff's great cause. And you also think that's worth doing."

"I've never spoken a word on the subject."

"Whenever it's discussed, you don't make that little lemon-sucking face when Graff's arguments are presented."

"Oh, now you think you can read my face. I'm Maori, I don't show anything."

"You're half-Maori, and I've studied you for months."

"You can't read my mind. Even if you've deluded yourself into thinking you can read my face."

"The colonization project is the only thing left out here in space that's worth doing."

"I haven't been asked to pilot anything," said Mazer. "I'm old for a pilot, you know."

"Not a pilot, a commander of a ship."

"I'm lucky they let me aim by myself when I pee," said Mazer. "They don't trust me. That's why I'm going on trial."

"When the trial's over," said Ender, "they'll have no more use for you than they have for me. They've got to send you somewhere far away so that the I.F. will be safe for the bureaucrats again."

Mazer looked away and waited, but there was an air about him that told Ender that Mazer was about to say something important.

"Ender, what about you?" Mazer finally asked. "Would you go?"

"To a colony?" Ender laughed. "I'm thirteen years old. On a colony, what would I be good for? Farming? You know what my skills are. Useless in a colony."

Mazer barked a laugh. "Oh, you'll send *me*, but you won't go yourself."

"I'm not sending anybody," said Ender. "Least of all myself."

"You've got to do *something* with your life," said Mazer.

And there it was: The tacit recognition that Ender wasn't going home. That he was never going to lead a normal life on Earth.

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One by one the other kids got their orders, each saying good-bye before they left. It was increasingly awkward with each one, because Ender was more and more a stranger to them. He didn't hang out with them. If he happened to join in a conversation, he didn't stay long and never really engaged.

It wasn't a deliberate choice, he just wasn't interested in doing the things they did or talking about what they discussed. They were full of their studies, their return to Earth. What they'd do. How they'd find a way to get together again after they'd been home for a while. How much money they'd get as severance pay from the military. What they might choose as a career. How their families might have changed.

None of that applied to Ender. He couldn't pretend that it did, or that he had a future. Least of all could he talk about what really preyed on his mind. They wouldn't understand.

He didn't understand it himself. He had been able to let go of everything else, all the things he'd concentrated on so hard for so long. Military tactics? Strategy? Not even interesting to him now. Ways that he might have avoided antagonizing Bonzo or Stilson in the first place? He had strong feelings about that, but no rational ideas, so he didn't waste time trying to think it through. He let go of it, just the way he let go of his deep knowledge of everyone in his jeesh, his little army of brilliant kids whom he led through the training that turned out to be the war.

Once, knowing and understanding those kids had been part of his work, had been essential to victory. During that time he had even come to think of them as his friends. But he was never one of them; their relationship was too unequal. He had loved them so he could know them, and he had known them so he could use them. Now he had no use for them—not his choice, there simply wasn't a purpose to be served by keeping the group together. They didn't, as a group, exist. They were just a bunch of kids who had been on a long, difficult camping trip together, that's how Ender saw them now. They had pulled together to make it back to civilization, but now they'd all go home to their families. They weren't connected now. Except in memory.

So Ender had let go of them all. Even the ones who were still here. He saw how it hurt them—the ones who had wanted to be closer than mere pals—when he didn't let things change, didn't let them into his thoughts. He couldn't explain to them that he wasn't keeping them out, that there was simply no way they'd understand what it was that occupied him whenever he wasn't forced to think about something else:

The hive queens.

It made no sense, what the formics had done. They weren't stupid. Yet they had made the strategic mistake of grouping all their queens—not "their" queens, they *were* the queens, the queens *were* the formics—they had all gathered on their home planet, where Ender's use of the M.D. Device could—and did—destroy them utterly, all at once.

Mazer had explained that the hive queens must have gathered on their home planet years before they could have known that the human fleet *had* the M.D. Device. They knew—from the way Mazer had defeated their main expedition to Earth's star system—that their greatest weakness was that if you found the hive queen and killed her, you had killed the whole army. So they withdrew from all their forward positions, put the hive queens together on their home world, and then protected that world with everything they had.

Yes, yes, Ender understood *that*.

But Ender had used the M.D. Device early on in the invasion of the formic worlds, to destroy a formation

of ships. The hive queens had instantly understood the capabilities of the weapon and never allowed their ships to get close enough together for the M.D. Device to be able to set up a self-sustaining reaction.

So: Once they knew that the weapon existed, and that humans were willing to use it, why did they *stay* on that single planet? They must have known that the human fleet was coming. As Ender won battle after battle, they must have known that the possibility of their defeat existed. It would have been easy for them to get onto starships and disperse from their home planet. Before that last battle began, they could all have been out of range of the M.D. Device.

Then we would have had to hunt them down, ship by ship, queen by queen. Their planets would still be inhabited by the formics, and so they could have fought us in bloody confrontations on every world, meanwhile building new ships, launching new fleets against us.

But they had stayed. And died.

Was it fear? Maybe. But Ender didn't think so. The hive queens had bred themselves for war. All the speculations of the scientists who had studied the anatomy and molecular structure of the formic corpses left over from the Second Formic War led to that conclusion: The formics were created, first and foremost, to fight and kill. That implied that they had evolved in a world where such fighting was necessary.

The best guess—at least the one that made the most sense to Ender—was that they weren't fighting some predatory species on their home world. Like humans, they would surely have wiped out any really threatening predator early on. No, they had evolved to fight each other. Queens fighting queens, spawning vast armies of formics and developing tools and weapons for them, each of them vying to be the dominant—or sole surviving—queen.

Yet somehow they had gotten over it. They had stopped fighting each other.

Was it before they had developed spaceflight and colonized other worlds? Or was it one particular queen who developed near-light-speed ships and created colonies and then used the power that she had developed to crush the others?

It wouldn't have mattered. Her own daughters would surely have rebelled against her—it would go on and on, each new generation trying to destroy the one before. That was how hives on Earth worked, anyway—the rival queen must be driven off or killed. Only the non-reproducing workers could be allowed to stay, because they weren't rivals, they were servants.

It was like the immune system of an organism. Each hive queen had to make sure that any food their workers grew was used *only* to nurture her workers, her children, her mates, and herself. So any formic—queen or worker—that tried to infiltrate her territory and use her resources had to be driven off or killed.

Yet they had stopped fighting with each other and now cooperated.

If they could do that with each other, the implacable enemies that had driven each other's evolution long enough to become the brilliant sentient beings they were, then why couldn't they have done it with us? With the humans? Why couldn't they have tried to communicate with us? Made some sort of settlement with us, just as they had done with each other? Divided the galaxy between us? Live and let live?

In any of these battles, Ender knew that if he had seen a sign of an effort to communicate, he would have known instantly that it wasn't a game—there would have been no reason for the teachers to simulate any attempt to parley. They didn't regard that as Ender's business—they wouldn't train him for it. If some

effort at communication had really happened, surely the adults would have stopped Ender at once, pretended that the "exercise" was over, and tried to deal with it on their own.

But the hive queens did not attempt to communicate. Nor did they use the obvious strategy of dispersal to save themselves. They had sat there, waiting for Ender to come. And then Ender had won, the only way he could: with devastating force.

It was how Ender always fought. To make sure that there was no further fighting. To use this victory to ensure that there was no more danger.

Even if I had known the war was real, I would have tried to do exactly what I did.

So in his mind he now asked the hive queens, over and over, though he knew they were dead and could not answer: Why?

Why did you decide to let me kill you?

His rational mind introduced all the other possibilities—including the chance that perhaps they were really quite stupid. Or perhaps they had so little experience at running a society of equals that they were unable to reach a rational decision together. Or, or, or, or, over and over he ran through possible explanations.

Ender's study now, when he wasn't pursuing the schoolwork that someone—Graff, still? Or Graff's rivals?—kept assigning him, was to read over the reports from the soldiers that he had once unknowingly commanded. On every formic colony world, humans now walked. And from every exploratory team the reports were the same: All the formics dead and rotting, with vast farms and factories now available for the taking. The soldiers-turned-explorers were always alert to the possibility of ambush, but as the months passed and there were no attacks, their reports became full of the things they were learning from the xenobiologists that had been sent with them: Not only can we breathe the air on every formic world, we can eat most of their food.

And so every formic planet became a human colony, the soldiers settling down to live among the relics of their enemies. There were not enough women among them, but they began to work out social patterns that would maximize reproduction and keep from having too many males without a hope of mating. Within a generation or two, if babies came in the usual proportions, half male and half female, the normal human pattern of monogamy could be restored.

But Ender took only peripheral interest in what the humans were doing on the new worlds. What he studied were the formic artifacts. The patterns of formic settlement. The warrens that had once been the hive queens' breeding grounds, full of larvae that were so hard-toothed they could gnaw through rock, creating more and more tunnels. They had to farm on the surface, but they went underground to breed, to raise their young, and the young themselves were every bit as lethal and powerful as the adults. Chewing through rock—the explorers found the larval bodies, rotting quickly but still there to be photographed, dissected, studied.

"So this is how you spend your days," said Petra. "Looking at pictures of formic tunnels. Is this a return-to-the-womb thing?"

Ender smiled and set aside the pictures he had been studying. "I thought you'd already gone home to Armenia."

"Not till I see how this stupid court martial turns out," she said. "Not until the Armenian government is ready to receive me in high style. Which means they have to decide whether they want me."

"Of course they want you."

"They don't know what they want. They're politicians. Is it good for them to have me back? Is keeping me up here *worse* for them than having me come home? It's so very, very hard when you have no convictions except your lust to remain in power. Aren't we glad we're not in politics?"

Ender sighed. "É. I will never hold office again. Commander of Dragon Army was too much for me, and that was just a kids' game."

"That's what I tried to assure them. I don't want anybody's job. I'm not going to endorse anybody for office. I want to live with my family and see if they remember who I am. And vice versa."

"They'll love you," said Ender.

"And you know this because . . . ?"

"Because *I* love you."

She looked at him in consternation. "How can I possibly answer a comment like *that*?"

"Oh. What was I supposed to say?"

"I don't know. Am I supposed to write scripts for you now?"

"OK," said Ender. "Should it have been banter? 'They'll love you because somebody has to, and it sure isn't anybody up here.' Or maybe the ethnic slur: 'They'll love you because hey, they're Armenian and you're a female.' "

"What does *that* mean?"

"I got that from an Azeri I talked to during that whole flap about Sinterklaas Day back in Battle School. Apparently the idea is that Armenians know that the only people who think Armenian women are . . . I don't have to explain ethnic insults, Petra. They're infinitely transferable."

"When are they letting *you* go home?" asked Petra.

Instead of sidestepping the question or giving it a lazy answer, Ender answered truthfully for once. "I'm thinking maybe it won't happen."

"What do you mean? You think this stupid court martial is going to end up convicting *you*?"

"I'm the one on trial, aren't I?"

"Definitely *not*."

"Only because I'm a child and therefore not responsible. But it's all about what an evil little monster I am."

"It is not."

"I've seen the highlights on the nets, Petra. What the world is seeing is that the savior of the world has a little problem—he kills children."

"You defended yourself from bullies. Everybody understands that."

"Except the people who post comments about how I'm a worse war criminal than Hitler or Pol Pot. A mass murderer. What makes you think I *want* to go home and deal with all that?"

Petra wasn't playing now. She sat down next to him and took his hands. "Ender, you have a family."

"Had."

"Oh, don't say that! You *have* a family. Families still love their children even if they've been away for eight years."

"I've only been away for seven. Almost. Yes, I know they love me. Some of them at least. They love who I was. A cute little six-year-old. I must have been so huggable. Between killing other children, that is."

"So is that what this obsession with formic porn is?"

"Porn?"

"The way *you* study it. Classic addiction. Got to have more and more of it. Explicit photos of rotting larva bodies. Autopsy shots. Slides of their molecular structure. Ender, they're gone, and *you* didn't kill them. Or if you did, then *we* did. But we didn't. We played a game! We were training for war, that's all it was."

"And if it had really been just a game?" asked Ender. "And then they assigned us to the fleet after we graduated, and we actually piloted those ships or commanded those squadrons? Wouldn't we have done it for real?"

"Yes," said Petra. "But we didn't. It didn't happen."

"It happened. They're gone."

"Well, studying the structure of their bodies and the biochemistry of their cells is not going to bring them back."

"I'm not trying to bring them back," said Ender. "What a nightmare *that* would be."

"No, you're trying to persuade yourself that you deserve the merdicious things they're saying about you in the court martial, because if that's true, then you don't deserve to go back to Earth."

Ender shook his head. "I want to go home, Petra, even if I can't stay. And I'm not conflicted about the war. I'm glad we fought and I'm glad we won and I'm glad it's over."

"But you keep your distance from everybody. We understood, or sympathized, or pretended we did. But you've kept us all at arm's length. You make this show of dropping everything whenever one of us comes around to chat, but it's an act of hostility."

What an outrageous thing to say. "It's common courtesy!"

"You never even say, 'Just a sec,' you just drop everything. It's so . . . *obvious*. The message is: 'I'm really busy but I still think you're my responsibility so I'll drop whatever I'm doing because you need my time.'"

"Wow," said Ender. "You sure understand a lot of things about me. You're so smart, Petra. A girl like you—they could really make something out of you in Battle School."

"Now *that's* a real answer."

"Not as real as what I said before."

"That you love me? You're not my therapist, Ender. Or my priest. Don't coddle me, don't tell me what you think I need to hear."

"You're right," said Ender. "I *shouldn't* drop everything when one of my friends drops by." He picked his papers back up again.

"Put those down."

"Oh, *now* it's OK because you asked me so rudely."

"Ender," Petra said, "we all came back from the war. You didn't. You're still in it. Still fighting . . . something. We talk about you all the time. Wondering why you won't turn to us. Hoping there's *somebody* you talk to."

"I talk to anybody and everybody. I'm quite the chatterbox."

"There's a stone wall around you and those words you just said are some of the bricks."

"Bricks in a stone wall?"

"So you *are* listening!" she said triumphantly. "Ender, I'm not trying to violate your privacy. Keep it all in. Whatever it is."

"I'm not keeping anything in," said Ender. "I don't have any secrets. My whole life is on the nets, it belongs to the human race now, and I'm really not that worried about it. It's like I don't even live in my body. Just in my mind. Just trying to solve this question that won't leave me alone."

"What question?"

"The question I keep asking the hive queens, and they never answer."

"*What question?*"

"I keep asking them, 'Why did you die?'"

Petra searched his face for . . . what, a sign that he was joking? "Ender, they died because we—"

"Why were they still on that planet? Why weren't they in ships, speeding away? They chose to stay, knowing we had that weapon, knowing what it did and how it worked, they *stayed* for the battle, they waited for us to come."

"They fought us as hard as they could. They didn't want to die, Ender. They didn't commit suicide by human soldier."

"They knew we had beaten them time after time. They had to think it was at least a possibility that it would happen again. And they stayed."

"So they stayed."

"It's not like they had to prove their loyalty or courage to the footsoldiers. The workers and soldiers were like their own body parts. That would be like saying, 'I have to do this because I want my hands to know how brave I am.'"

"I can see you've given this a lot of thought. Obsessive, borderline crazy thought. But whatever keeps you happy. You *are* happy, you know. People all over Eros talk about it—how cheerful that Wiggin boy

always is. You've got to cut back on the whistling, though. It's driving people crazy."

"Petra, I've done my life's work. I don't think they're going to let me go back to Earth, not even to visit. I hate that, I'm angry about it, but I also understand it. And in a way it's *fine* with me. I've had all the responsibility I want. I'm done. I'm retired. No more duty to anybody. So now I get to think about what actually bothers me. The problem I have to solve."

He slid the pictures forward on the library table. "Who *are* these people?" he asked.

Petra looked at the pictures of the dead larvae and formic workers and said, "They aren't people, Ender. They're *formics*. And they're gone."

"For years I've bent every thought to understanding them, Petra. To knowing them better than I know any human being in my life. To *loving* them. So I could use that knowledge to defeat them and destroy them. Now they're destroyed, but that doesn't mean that I can switch off my *attention* to them."

Petra's face lit up. "I get it. I finally get it!"

"Get what?"

"Why you're so weird, Ender Wiggin, sir. It's not weird at all."

"If you think I'm not weird, Petra, it proves you *don't* understand me."

"The rest of us, we fought a war and we won it and we're going home. But you, Ender, you were *married* to the formics. When the war ended you were *widowed*."

Ender sighed and rolled his chair back from the table.

"I'm not joking," said Petra. "It's like when my great-grandpa died. Great-grandma had always taken care of him, it was pathetic the way he bossed her around, and she just did whatever he wanted, and my mother would say to me, 'Don't you ever marry a man who treats you like that,' but when he died, you'd think Great-grandma would have been liberated. Free at last! But she wasn't. She was *lost*. She kept looking for him. She kept talking about things she was working on for him. Can't do this, can't do that, Babo wouldn't like it, until my grandpa—her son—said, 'He's gone.' "

"I know the formics are gone, Petra."

"And so did Great-grandma. That's what she said. 'I know. I just can't figure out why I'm not gone too.' "

Ender slapped his forehead. "Thank you, doctor, you finally revealed my innermost motivations and now I'm able to get on with my life."

Petra ignored his sarcasm. "They died without giving you answers. That's why you hardly notice what's going on around you. Why you can't act like a regular friend to anybody. Why you don't even seem to care that there are people down there on Earth who are trying to keep you from ever coming home. You win the victory and they want to exile you for life and you *don't care* because all you can think about is your lost formics. They're your dead wife and you can't let go."

"It wasn't much of a marriage," said Ender.

"You're still in love."

"Petra, cross-species romance just isn't for me."

"You said it yourself. You had to love them to defeat them. You don't have to agree with me now. It will come to you later. You'll wake up in a cold sweat and you'll shout, 'Eureka! Petra was right!' Then you can start fighting for the right to return to the planet you saved. You can start *caring* about something again."

"I care about *you*, Petra," said Ender. What he didn't say was: I already care about understanding the hive queens, but you don't count that because you don't get it.

She shook her head. "No getting through the wall," she said. "But I thought it was worth one last try. I'm right, though. You'll see. You can't let these hive queens deform the rest of your life. You have to let them be dead and move on."

Ender smiled. "I hope you find happiness at home, Petra. And love. And I hope you have the babies that you want and a good life full of meaning and accomplishment. You are so ambitious—and I think you'll have it all, true love and domesticity and great achievements."

Petra stood up. "What makes you think I want babies?" she said.

"I know you," said Ender.

"You *think* you know me."

"The way you think you know me?"

"I'm not a lovesick girl," said Petra, "and if I were, it wouldn't be over *you*."

"Ah, so it bothers you when somebody presumes to know your deepest inner motivation."

"It bothers me that you're such an oomo."

"Well, you've cheered me up marvelous well, Miss Arkanian. We oomos are grateful when the fine folk from the big house come to visit us."

Petra's voice was angry and defiant when she fired her parting shot. "Well, I actually *love* you and *care* about you, Ender Wiggin." Then she turned and walked away.

"And I love and care about *you*, only you wouldn't believe me when I said it!"

At the door she turned back to face him. "Ender Wiggin, *I* wasn't being sarcastic or patronizing when I said that."

"Neither was I!"

But she was gone.

"Maybe I've been trying to study the wrong alien species," he said softly.

He looked at the display above his desk. It was still in motion, though muted, showing bits from Mazer's testimony. He looked so cold, so aloof, as if he had contempt for the whole business. When they asked about Ender's violence and whether that made it hard to train him, Mazer turned to face the judges and said, "I'm sorry, I misunderstood, isn't this a court *martial*? Aren't we all soldiers here, trained to commit acts of violence?"

The judge gaveled him down and reprimanded him, but the point was made. Violence was what the military existed for—controlled violence, directed against appropriate targets. Without actually having to

say a word about Ender, Mazer had made it clear that violence wasn't a drawback, it was the point.

It made Ender feel better. He could switch off the newslink and get back to work.

He stood up to reach across the table and retrieve the photos that Petra had moved. The face of a dead formic farmer from one of the faroff planets stared up at him, the torso open and the organs arranged neatly around the corpse.

I can't believe you *gave up*, Ender said silently to the picture. I can't believe that a whole species lost its will to live. Why did you let me kill you?

"I will not rest until I know you," he whispered.

But they were gone. Which meant that he could never, never rest.

CHAPTER 3

To: mazerrackham%nonexistent@unguessable.com/imaginary.heroes

From: hgraff%educadmin@ifcom.gov

{self-shred protocol}

Subj: How about a little voyage?

Dear Mazer,

I know as well as anyone that you almost refused to come home from your last voyage, and I'm certainly not going to let them send you anywhere now. But you took too big a risk testifying for me (or for Ender; or for truth and justice; I don't presume to guess your motives) and the heat is on. The best way, I think, for you to become less visible and therefore less likely to be further interfered with is to let it be known that you will be the commander of a certain colony ship. The one that's going to carry Ender away to safety.

Once you're fully ignored because you're supposedly going on a forty-year voyage, it will be easy enough to reassign you at the last minute to another ship that isn't leaving till later. No publicity that time. You'll just happen not to go.

As for Ender, we'll let him in on the lie from the start. He doesn't need or deserve any more surprises. But he also doesn't need you or me to protect him. I think he's proven that many times over.

—Hyrum

PS: It's just too cute for you to use your real name as your secret identity on Unguessable.com. Who knew you had a sense of irony?

Mother and Father were both out of the house. That was a bad thing, because it meant Peter could get in full carpet-chewing mode if he felt like it, and things were definitely heading that way.

"I can't believe I got suckered into this," said Peter.

"Suckered into what?"

"Having Locke and Demosthenes push for Ender not to come home."

"You haven't been paying attention," said Valentine. "Demosthenes is pushing for Ender to come back and restore America to its former greatness. And Locke is the conciliatory moderate, trying to find a middle way, as he always does, the miserable appeaser."

"Oh shut up," said Peter. "It's too late for you to start playing dumb. But I had no way of knowing they were going to turn that stupid court martial into a smear campaign against the Wiggin name!"

"Oh, I see," said Valentine. "It's not Ender, it's the fact that you can't take advantage of being Locke without revealing who you are, and who you are is Ender's brother. Now that won't be such a nice boost for you."

"I can't accomplish anything unless I get into a position of influence, and now it's going to be a lot harder because Ender *killed* people."

"In self-defense."

"When he was a *baby*."

"I distinctly remember," said Valentine, "that you once promised to kill him."

"I didn't mean it."

Valentine had her doubts. She was the only one who didn't trust Peter's sudden bout of niceness several Christmases ago, when apparently he was anointed by Saint Nick—or Uriah Heap—with the unguent of altruism. "My point is that Ender didn't kill *everybody* who threatened him."

And there it was—a flash of the old rage. She watched, amused, as Peter fought it down, got it under control.

"It's too late to change our position on Ender's return." He said it like an accusation, as if this had all been her idea.

Well, in a way, it had. But not the actual implementation—that was all Peter's script.

"But before we let it be discovered who Locke really is, we have to rehabilitate Ender's reputation. That's not going to be easy. I just can't figure out which of us should do it. On the one hand, Demosthenes would be right in character—but nobody would trust his motives. On the other hand, if Locke does it openly, then everybody will think I had an ulterior motive when it comes out who I really am."

Valentine didn't even smirk, though she knew—had known for years—that Colonel Graff and probably half the I.F. command knew who Locke and Demosthenes really were. They had kept the secret so that it wouldn't compromise Ender. But at some point, somebody was going to let it slip—and it wasn't going to be on Peter's own timing.

"No, I think what we have to do," said Peter, "is bring Ender home after all. But not to the United States, or at least not under the control of the U.S. government. I think Locke needs to speak with compassion about the young hero who can't help how he was exploited." Peter put on his Locke voice—a conciliatory whine that if he ever used it in public, Locke would be out of business in a trice. "Let him come home, as a citizen of the world he saved. Let the Hegemon's Council protect him. If no one threatens him, the boy poses no danger." Peter looked at her triumphantly and went back to his own voice. "See? We bring him home, and then when my identity comes out, I'm a loyal brother, yes, but I also acted for the good of the whole world, and not for the advantage of the United States."

"You're forgetting a couple of things," said Valentine.

Peter glared at her. He hated it when she accused him of making a mistake, but he had to listen to her because she was often right. Even though he usually pretended that he had already thought of her objection.

"First, you're assuming that Ender wants to come home."

"Of course he wants to come home."

"You don't know that. We don't know him. Second, you're assuming that if he does come home, he'll be such a cuddly kid that everybody will decide he isn't *really* a child-killing monster."

"We've both watched the vids of the court martial," said Peter. "Those men love Ender Wiggin. You could see it in everything they said and did. All that mattered to them was protecting him. Which is exactly how everybody used to act when Ender lived here."

"He never actually lived *here*," said Valentine. "We moved after he left, remember?"

Another glare. "Ender makes people want to die for him."

"Or kill him," she said with a smile.

"Ender makes *adults* love him."

"So we're back to the first problem."

"He wants to come home," said Peter. "He's human. Humans want to go home."

"But where is Ender's home?" asked Valentine. "He's spent more than half his life in Battle School. What does he even remember about living with us? An older brother who was constantly bullying him, threatening to kill him—"

"I'll apologize," said Peter. "I really *am* sorry I acted like that."

"But you can't apologize if he doesn't come home. Besides, Peter, he's a smart kid. Smarter than us—there's a reason we weren't taken into Battle School and he was. So he'll figure out exactly how you're using him. Hegemon's Council—that is such *itshay*. He won't stay under your thumb."

"He's been trained for war. Not for politics," said Peter.

His hint of a smile was so smug Valentine wanted to smash a baseball bat into his face a little. "It doesn't matter," said Valentine. "You can't bring him home no matter what Locke writes."

"And why is that?"

"Because you didn't create the forces that dread him and fear his return, you just exploited them. They aren't going to change their minds, not even for Locke. And also, Demosthenes won't let you."

Peter looked at her with amused contempt. "Oh, going freelance, eh?"

"I think I can scare people into keeping Ender in space better than you can make them pity him enough to bring him home."

"I thought you loved him best. I thought you wanted him home."

"I wanted him home for the past seven years, Peter," said Valentine, "and you were glad he was gone. But now—to bring him home so that he can be under the protection of the Hegemon's Council—which means under *your* control, since you've got the thing packed with your toadies—"

"Locke's toadies," Peter corrected her.

"I'm not helping you bring Ender home so he can be a tool to advance your career."

"So you'd make your beloved little brother stay in permanent exile in space, just to spite your nasty older brother?" asked Peter. "Wow, I'm glad *I'm* not the one you love."

"You nailed it, Peter," said Valentine. "I've spent all these years under your thumb. I know exactly how it feels. Ender would hate it. I know, because I hate it."

"You've loved the whole thing. Being Demosthenes—you know what power feels like."

"I know what it feels like to have power flow through me and into your hands," said Valentine.

"Is that what this is about? You're suddenly power hungry?"

"Peter, you're such an idiot about the people you supposedly know best. I'm not telling you I want your power. I'm telling you that I'm getting out from under your thumb."

"Fine, I'll just write the Demosthenes essays myself."

"No you won't, because people would know something was wrong. You can't do Demosthenes."

"Anything you can do . . ."

"I've changed all the passwords. I've hidden all of Demosthenes' memberships and money and you can't get to any of it."

Peter gazed at her with pity. "I'll find it all if I want to."

"It wouldn't do you any good. Demosthenes is retiring from politics, Peter. He's going to plead ill health and offer a ringing endorsement . . . of Locke!"

Peter looked horrorstruck. "You can't! It would destroy Locke to have Demosthenes' endorsement!"

"You see? I do have some weapons you fear."

"Why would you do this? All these years, and suddenly *now* you've decided to pack up your dolls and dishes and leave the tea party?"

"I never played with dolls, Peter. Apparently you did."

"Stop this," said Peter sternly. "Really. It's not funny. Let's get Ender home. I won't try to control him the way you're saying."

"You mean the way you control me."

"Come on, Val," said Peter. "Just a couple more years and I can unmask myself as Locke—and as Ender's brother. Sure, salvaging his reputation will help me, but it'll help Ender, too."

"I think you should do it. Salvage away, Peter. But I don't think Ender should come home. Instead, I'll go to *him*. Mom and Dad will, too, I bet."

"They're not going to pay for you to have a jaunt into space—not all the way to Eros. That would take months anyway. Right now it's practically on the other side of the sun."

"Not a jaunt," said Valentine. "I'm leaving Earth. I'm joining Ender in exile."

For a moment Peter believed her. It was gratifying to see genuine alarm on his face. Then he relaxed. "Mom and Dad won't let you," he said.

"Fifteen-year-old females don't have to have their parents' consent to volunteer to be colonists. We're the ideal age for reproduction, and are assumed to be dumb enough to volunteer."

"What do the colonies have to do with anything? Ender's not going to be a colonist."

"What else will they do with him? It's the only task remaining for the I.F., and he's their responsibility. That's why I'm making arrangements to get assigned to the same colony as him."

"Where did you get these imasen ideas?" If she didn't understand Battle School slang, too bad. "Colonies, voluntary exile, it's just crazy. The future is here on Earth, not out at the far reaches of the galaxy."

"The formics' worlds were all in the same arm of the galaxy as us, and not all that far away, as galaxies go," said Valentine primly, to goad him. "And Peter, just because *your* future is all tied up with trying to become the ruler of the world doesn't mean that I want to spend my whole future as your sidekick. You've had my youth, you've used me up, but I will spend my declining years without you, my love."

"It's sickening when you talk as if we were married."

"I'm talking as if we were in an old movie," said Valentine.

"I don't watch movies," said Peter, "so I wouldn't know."

"There's so much you 'wouldn't know,'" said Valentine. For a moment she was tempted to tell him all about Ender's visit to Earth, when Graff tried to use Valentine to persuade a burnt-out Ender to get back to work. And to tell Peter that Graff knew all about their secret identities on the nets. That would take the smirk off his face.

But what would that accomplish? It was better for everyone to leave Peter in blissful ignorance.

While they were talking, Peter had been doing some desultory pointing and typing on his desk. Now he was seeing something in his holo that made him as angry as she had ever seen him. "What?" she asked, assuming it was some dreadful world news.

"You shut down my back doors!"

It took her a moment to understand what he meant. Then she realized—he had apparently thought she wouldn't notice that he had secret access points to all of Demosthenes' vital sites and identities. What an idiot. When he made a big deal about how he had created all these wonderful identities and accounts for her, of *course* she assumed that he had created back doors to all of them so he could always come in and change what she did. Why would he imagine she'd leave things that way? She found them all within a few weeks; anything he could do with Demosthenes on the nets, she could undo. So when she changed all the passwords and access codes, of course she closed the back doors, too. What did he think?

"Peter," she said, "they wouldn't be locked if I let you have a key, now, would they?"

Peter rose to his feet, his face turning red, his fists clenched. "You ungrateful little bitch."

"What are you going to do, Peter? Hit me? I'm ready. I think I can take you down."

Peter sat back down. "Go," he said. "Go into space. Shut down Demosthenes. I don't need you. I don't need anybody."

"That's why you're such a loser," said Valentine. "You'll never rule the world until you figure out that you can't do it without *everybody's* cooperation. You can't fool them, you can't force them. They have to *want* to follow you. Like Alexander's soldiers wanted to follow him and fight for him. And the moment they stopped wanting to, his power evaporated. You need *everybody* but you're too narcissistic to know it."

"I need the willing cooperation of key people here on Earth," said Peter, "but you won't be one of them, will you? So go, tell Mom and Dad what you're doing. Break their hearts. What do *you* care? You're going off to see your precious Ender."

"You still hate him," said Valentine.

"I never hated him," said Peter. "But at this moment, I certainly do hate you. Not a lot, but enough to make me want to piss on your bed."

It was a standing joke between them. She couldn't help it. It made her laugh. "Oh, Peter, you're such a *boy*."

* * * * *

Mother and Father took her decision surprisingly well. But they refused to come with her. "Val," Father said, "I think you're right—Ender won't be coming home. It broke our hearts to realize it. And it's wonderful of you to want to join him, even if neither of you ends up going with a colony. Even if it's just a few months in space. Even a few years. It's a good thing for him to be with you again."

"It would be better to have the two of you out there, too."

Father shook his head. Mother pressed a finger to each eye—her gesture that said, I'm not going to cry.

"We can't go," said Father. "Our work is here."

"They could spare you for a year or two."

"That's easy for you to say," said Father. "You're young. What's a couple of years to you? But we're older. Not old, but older than you. Time means something different to us. We love Ender, but we can't spend months or years just going out to visit him. We don't have that much time left."

"That's exactly the point," said Valentine. "You don't have much time—and still less time to get a chance to see Ender again."

"Val," said Mother, her voice quavering. "Nothing we do now will give us back the years we've lost."

She was right, and Valentine knew it. But she didn't see the relevance. "So you're going to treat him as if he's dead?"

"Val," said Father. "We know he's not dead. But we also know he doesn't want us. We've written to him—since the war ended. Graff—the one who's on trial—he wrote back. Ender doesn't want to write letters to us. He reads them, but he told Graff that he had nothing to say."

"Graff's a liar," said Valentine. "He probably hasn't shown Ender anything."

"That's possible," said Father. "But Ender doesn't need us. He's thirteen. He's becoming a man. He's done brilliantly since he left us, but he also went through terrible things, and we weren't there. I'm not sure he'll ever forgive us for letting him go."

"You had no choice," said Valentine. "They would have taken him to Battle School whether you liked it or not."

"I'm sure he knows that in his head," said Mother. "But in his heart?"

"So I'm going without you," she said. It had never crossed her mind that they wouldn't even want to go.

"You're going to leave us behind," said Father. "It's what children do. They live at home until they leave. Then they're gone. Even if they visit, even if they move back, it's never the same. You think it will be, but it won't. It happened with Ender, and it'll happen with you."

"The good thing," said Mother, who was crying a little now, "is that you won't be with Peter anymore."

Valentine couldn't believe her mother was saying such a thing.

"You've spent too much time with him," said Mother. "He's a bad influence on you. He makes you unhappy. He sucks you into his life so you can't have one of your own."

"That'll be our job now," said Father.

"Good luck," was all Valentine could say. Was it possible that her parents really did understand Peter? But if they did, why had they let him have his way for all these years?

"You see, Val," said Father, "if we went to Ender now, we'd want to be his parents, but we don't have any authority over him. Nor anything to offer him. He doesn't need parents anymore."

"A sister, now," said Mother. "A sister, he can use." She took Valentine's hand. She was asking for something.

So Valentine gave her the only thing she could think of that she might want. A promise. "I'll stick with him," said Valentine, "as long as he needs me."

"We would expect nothing less of you, dear," said Mother. She squeezed Valentine's hand and let go. Apparently that was what she had wanted.

"It's a kind and loving thing," said Father. "It's always been your nature. And Ender was always your darling baby brother."

Valentine winced at the old phrase from childhood. Darling baby brother. Ick. "I'll make sure to call him that."

"Do," said Mother. "Ender likes to be reminded of good things."

Did Mother really imagine that anything she knew about Ender at age six would still apply to him now, at age thirteen?

As if she had read Valentine's mind, Mother answered her. "People don't change, Val. Not their fundamental character. Whatever you're going to be as an adult is already visible to someone who really knows you from your birth onward."

Valentine laughed. "So . . . why did you let Peter live?"

They laughed, but uncomfortably. "Val," said Father, "we don't expect you to understand this, but some of the things that make Peter . . . difficult . . . are the very things that might also make him great someday."

"What about me?" asked Valentine. "As long as you're telling fortunes."

"Oh, Val," said Father. "All you have to do is live your life, and everyone around you will be happier."

"No greatness, then."

"Val," said Mother, "goodness trumps greatness any day."

"Not in the history books," said Valentine.

"Then the wrong people are writing history, aren't they?" said Father.

CHAPTER

4

To: qmorgan%rearadmiral@ifcom.gov/fleetcom

From: chamrajnagar%polemarch@ifcom.gov/centcom

{self-shred protocol}

Subj: In or out?

My dear Quince, I'm quite aware of the difference between combat command and flying a colony ship for a few dozen lightyears. If you feel your usefulness in space is over, then by all means, retire with full benefits. But if you stay in, and remain in near space, I can't promise you promotion within the I.F.

We suddenly find ourselves afflicted with peace, you see. Always a disaster for those whose careers have not reached their natural apex.

The colony ship I have offered you is not, contrary to your too-often-stated opinion (try discretion now and then, Quince, and see if it might not work better), a way to send you to oblivion. Retirement is oblivion, my friend. A forty-or fifty-year voyage means that you will outlive all of us who remain behind. All your friends will be dead. But you'll be alive to make new friends. And you'll be in command of a ship. A nice, big, fast one.

This is what the whole fleet faces. We have heroes out there who fought this war that The Boy is credited with winning. Have we forgotten them? ALL our most significant missions will involve decades of flight. Yet we must send our best officers to command them. So at any given moment, most of our best officers will be strangers to everyone at CentCom because they've been in flight for half a lifetime.

Eventually, ALL the central staff will be star voyagers. They will look down their noses at anyone who has NOT taken decades-long flights between stars. They will have cut themselves loose from Earth's timeline. They will know each other by their logs, transmitted by ansible.

What I'm offering you is the only possible source of career-making voyages: colony ships.

And not only a colony ship, but one whose governor is a thirteen-year-old boy. Are you seriously going

to tell me that you don't understand that you are not his "nanny," you are being entrusted with the highly responsible position of making sure that The Boy stays as far from Earth as possible, while also making sure that he is a complete success in his new assignment so that later generations cannot judge that he was not treated well.

Naturally, I did not send you this letter, and you did not read it. Nothing in this is to be construed as a secret order. It is merely my personal observation about the opportunity that you have been offered by a polemarch who believes in your potential to be one of the great admirals of the I.F.

Are you in? Or out? I need to draw up the papers one way or the other within the week.

Your friend, Cham

Ender knew that making him the nominal governor of the colony was a joke. When he got there, the colony would already be a going concern, with its own elected leaders. He would be a thirteen-year-old—well, by then a fifteen-year-old—whose only claim to authority was that forty years before he commanded the *grandparents* of the colonists, or at least their parents, in a war that was ancient history by then.

They would have bonded together into a closed community, and it would be outrageous for the I.F. to send them any governor at all, let alone a teenager.

But they'd soon find out that if nobody wanted him to govern, Ender would go along quite happily. All he cared about was getting to a formic planet to see what they had left behind.

The bodies that had so recently been dissected would have long since rotted away; but there's no way the colonists could have settled or even explored more than a tiny fraction of the formic civilization's buildings and artifacts. Governing the colony would be an annoyance—all Ender wanted was to see if there was some way to understand the enemy he had loved and vanquished.

Still, he had to go through the motions of preparing to be governor. For instance, training sessions with legal experts who had drafted the constitution that was being imposed on all the colonies. And even though Ender didn't actually care, he could see that an honest effort had been made to reflect what had been reported by all the soldiers-turned-colonists so far. He should have expected that. Anything Graff did, or caused to be done, was done well.

And then there were the even-less-relevant lessons on the workings of starships. What did Ender care? He was never going to be regular fleet. He had no interest in captaining any vessel of any size.

On the third day of his walk-through of the ship that would carry him and his colonists, Ender was so tired of phony nautical terminology transferred to starships that he found himself making sarcastic remarks. Fortunately, he didn't actually say them, he only thought them. Do we swab the decks, matey? Will the bosun pipe us aboard? How many degrees will she tack into the wind, sir?

"You know," said the captain who had Ender duty today, "the real barrier to interstellar flight wasn't just getting up to lightspeed. It was overcoming the collision problem."

"You mean with all of space to work in . . ." Then, from the captain's smirk, Ender realized he had fallen into a little trap. "Ah. You mean collisions with space debris."

"All those old vids showing spaceships dodging through asteroid clusters—they weren't actually far off. Because when you hit a molecule of hydrogen when you're near lightspeed, it releases a huge amount of energy. Like hitting a huge rock at a much slower speed. Tears you up. Any shielding scheme our

ancestors came up with involved so much additional mass, or cost so much energy and therefore fuel, that it simply wasn't practical. You had so much mass that you couldn't carry enough fuel to get anywhere."

"So how did we finally solve it?" asked Ender.

"Well of course we didn't," said the captain.

Again, Ender could see that this was an old prank to play on novices, and so he gave the man the pleasure of showing off his superior knowledge. "Then how are we getting from star to star?" asked Ender. Instead of saying, Ah, so it's formic technology.

"The formics did it for us," said the captain with delight. "When they got here, yes, they devastated parts of China and damn near whupped us in the first two wars. But they also taught us. The very fact that they got here told us that it could be done. And then they thoughtfully left behind dozens of working starships for us to study."

The captain had by now led Ender to the very front of the ship, through several doors that required the highest security clearance to enter. "Not everybody gets to see this, but I was told that you were to see *everything*."

It was crystalline in substance and ovoid in shape, except that it came to a sharp point at the back. "Please don't tell me it's an egg," said Ender.

The captain chuckled. "Don't tell anybody, but the engines of this ship, and all that fuel—they're just for maneuvering near planets and moons and such. And getting the ship going. Once we get up to one percent of lightspeed, we switch on this baby, and from then on, it's just a matter of controlling the intensity and direction."

"Of what?"

"Of the drive field," said the captain. "It was such an elegant solution, but we hadn't even discovered the *area* of science that would have gotten us to this."

"And what area is that?"

"Strong force field dynamics," said the captain. "When people speak of it, they almost always say that the strong force field breaks apart molecules, but that's not the real story. What it really does is change the direction of the strong force. Molecules simply can't hold together when the nuclei of all the constituent atoms start to prefer a particular direction of movement at lightspeed."

Ender knew he was pouring on technical terms, but he was tired of the game. "What you're saying is that the field generated by this device takes all the molecules and objects it runs into in the direction of movement and uses the nuclear strong force to make them move in a uniform direction at lightspeed."

The captain grinned. "Touché. But you're an admiral, sir, and so I was giving you the show I give all the admirals." He winked. "Most of them don't have a clue what I'm saying, and they're too stuffed to admit it and ask me to translate."

"What happens to the energy from the breaking of the molecules into their constituent atoms?" asked Ender.

"That, sir, is what powers the ship. No, I'll be more specific. That's what actually *moves* the ship. It's so beautiful. We move forward under rockets, and then we switch off the engines—can't be generating

molecules of our own!—and turn on the egg—yeah, we call it the egg. The field goes up—it's shaped exactly like the crystal ball here—and the leading edges start colliding with molecules and tearing them up. The atoms are channeled along the field and they all emerge at the trailing point. Giving us an incredible amount of thrust. I've talked to physicists who still don't get it. They say there isn't enough energy stored in the molecular bonds to produce the thrust—they've come up with all kinds of theories about where the extra energy is coming from."

"And we got this from the formics."

"There was one terrible accident the first time we turned on one of these. Of course they weren't using them in-system. But we had one of our cruisers simply disappear because it was docked right up against a formic ship when the egg got turned on. Poof. Every molecule in the cruiser—including the unluckiest crew in history—got incorporated into the field, then got spit out the back, and made the formic ship itself jump like a bullet halfway across the solar system."

"Didn't that kill the people on the formic ship, too? To jump that fast?"

"No. Because the formic anti-grav—technically, anti-inertial—was on. Powered by the egg reaction, too, of course. It's like all the molecules in space were put there to be cheap fuel for our ships and everything on them. Anyway, the anti-gravs compensated for the jump and the only problem was communicating with IFCOM to tell them what happened. Without the cruiser, no communications except short-range radio."

The captain went on to tell about the clever way the men on the formic ship attracted the attention of rescuers, but Ender's concentration was on something else—something so disturbing that it made him lightheaded and a little nauseated from the shock of it.

The egg, the strong force field generator, obviously was the source of the molecular disruption device. What the captain had just described was the reaction that was in the M.D. Device, the "Little Doctor," which Ender had used to destroy the formic home planet and kill all the hive queens.

Ender thought it was a technology that humans had come up with on their own. But it was clearly based on formic technology. You just take away the controls that shape the field, and you've got a field that chews up everything in its path and spits it out as raw atoms. A field that sustains itself on the energy it generates by playing with the strong nuclear force. A planet-eater.

The formics had to recognize it when Ender used it the first time. It wasn't mysterious to them—they'd recognize it immediately as a raw, uncontrolled weaponization of the principle that powered every formic starship.

Between the time of that battle and the final one, the formics surely had the time to do the same thing—to weaponize the strong force field generator and use it against the humans before they came in range.

They absolutely knew what the weapon was. They could have made their own whenever they wanted. But they didn't do it. They just sat there waiting for Ender.

They gave us the stardrive we used to get to them, and the weapon we used to kill them. They gave us everything.

We humans are supposed to be so clever. So inventive. Yet this was completely beyond our reach. *We* make desks with clever holodisplays that we can play really fun games on. Plus send each other letters over vast distances. But compared to them, we didn't even know how to *kill* properly. While they knew how—but chose not to use the technology that way.

"Well, this part of the tour usually bores people," said the captain.

"No, I wasn't bored. Truly. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Stuff that's too classified to talk about using any method but telepathy," said Ender. Which was true—the existence of the M.D. Device was only on a need-to-know basis, and the secret had been well kept. Even the men who deployed and used the weapons didn't understand what they were and what they could do. The soldiers who had seen the Little Doctor consume a planet were dead, lost in the same vast chain reaction. The soldiers who had seen it used in one of the early battles just thought of it as an incredibly big bomb. Only the top brass understood it—and Ender, because Mazer Rackham had insisted that he had to be told what the weapons he carried actually were and how they worked. As Mazer told him later, "I told Graff, You don't give a man a bag of tools and not tell him what they are and what they do and how they might go wrong."

Graff again. Graff who decided Mazer was right and allowed them to tell Ender what it was and how it worked.

My slaughter of the formics—it's all here in the egg.

"You've gone off again," said the captain.

"Thinking about what a miracle starflight is. Whatever else we might think of the buggers, they did give us our road to the stars."

"I know," said the captain. "I've thought of that before. If they had just bypassed our system instead of coming in and trying to wipe Earth clean, we'd never have known they existed. And at our level of technology, we probably wouldn't have gotten out into the stars until so much later that we'd have found every nearby planet completely occupied by formics."

"Captain, this was a most excellent and productive tour."

"I know. How else would you have learned how to find the head on every deck?"

Ender laughed at the joke. Partly because it was true. He'd need to find a bathroom several times a day through the whole voyage.

"I assume you're staying awake for the flight," said the captain.

"Wouldn't want to miss any of the scenery."

"Oh, there's no scenery, because at lightspeed you—oh, a joke. Sorry, sir."

"Got to work on my sense of humor, when my jokes make other people apologize to me."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but you don't talk like a kid."

"Do I talk like an admiral?" asked Ender.

"Since you *are* an admiral, however you talk is like an admiral, sir," said the captain.

"Very cleverly sidestepped, sir. Tell me, are you coming on the voyage with me?"

"I have a family on Earth, sir, and my wife doesn't want to join a colony on another world. No pioneer

spirit, I'm afraid."

"You have a life. A good reason for staying home."

"But you're going," said the captain.

"Have to see the formic homeland," said Ender. "Or the next best thing, considering that their home planet doesn't exist anymore."

"Which I'm damned happy about, sir," said the captain. "If you hadn't whopped them for good and all, sir, we'd be looking over our shoulder through the next ten thousand years of human history."

There was a stab of insight there. Ender caught it and then it immediately slipped away. Something about the way the hive queens thought. Their purpose in letting Ender kill them.

Well, if it's true, then I'll think of it again.

Ender hoped that optimistic thought was right.