

ENDER'S GAME
by Orson Scott Card

Chapter 1 -- Third

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

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

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

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

"Not if the other person is his enemy."

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

"If we have to."

"I thought you said you liked this kid."

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Peter won't hate me anymore. I'll come home and show him that the monitor's gone, and he'll see that I didn't make it, either. That I'll just be a normal kid now, like him. That won't be so bad then. He'll forgive me that I had my monitor a whole year longer than he had his. We'll be-- not friends, probably. No, Peter was too dangerous. Peter got so angry. Brothers, though. Not enemies, not friends, but brothers-- able to live in the same house. He won't hate me, he'll just leave me alone. And when he wants to play buggers and astronauts, maybe I won't have to play, maybe I can just go read a book.

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

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

Ender nodded.

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

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

"Deedee!" shouted the doctor. "I need you!" The nurse ran in, gasped. "Got to relax these muscles. Get it to me, now! What are you waiting for!"

Something changed hands; Ender could not see. He lurched to one side and fell off the examining table. "Catch him!" cried the nurse.

"Just hold him steady."

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

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

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

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

Andrew could not remember how to speak. They lifted him onto the table. They checked his pulse, did other things; he did not understand it all.

The doctor was trembling; his voice shook as he spoke. "They leave these things in the kids for three years, what do they expect? We could have switched him off, do you realize that? We could have unplugged his brain for all time."

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

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

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

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

He nodded.

"Were you ill?"

He shook his head.

"You don't look well."

"I'm OK."

"You'd better sit down, Andrew."

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

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

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

"Your monitor," whispered the girl behind him.

Andrew shrugged.

"His monitor," she whispered to the others.

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

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

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

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

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

THIRD

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

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

"Are you all right. Andrew?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll miss the bus."

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

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

"Hey, Third."

Don't answer. Nothing to say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tennis!"

"Ping-pong!"

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

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

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

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

"We're people, not Thirds, turd face. You're about as strong as a fart!"

But they let go of him. And as soon as they did, Ender kicked out high and hard, catching Stilson square in the breastbone. He dropped. It took Ender by surprise he hadn't thought to put Stilson on the ground with one kick. It didn't occur to him that Stilson didn't take a fight like this seriously, that he wasn't prepared for a truly desperate blow.

For a moment, the others backed away and Stilson lay motionless. They were all wondering if he was dead. Ender, however, was trying to figure out a way to forestall vengeance. To keep them from taking him in a pack tomorrow. I have to win this now, and for all time, or I'll fight it every day and it will get worse and worse. Ender knew the unspoken rules of manly warfare, even though he was only six. It was forbidden to strike the opponent who lay helpless on the ground; only an animal would do that.

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

Then Ender looked at the others coldly. "You might be having some idea of ganging up on me. You could probably beat me up pretty bad. But just remember what I do to people who try to hurt me. From then on you'd be wondering when I'd get you, and how bad it would be." He kicked Stilson in the face. Blood from his nose spattered the ground nearby. "It wouldn't be this bad," Ender said. "It would be worse."

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

Chapter 2 -- Peter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ender shrugged.

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

"Where's Mom?" asked Valentine.

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

"I think I'll call Daddy."

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

"I'll play," Ender said.

"You be the bugger," said Peter.

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

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

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

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

If I survive the games, thought Ender. He put on the mask. It closed him in like a hand pressed tight against his face. But this isn't how it feels to be a bugger, thought Ender. They don't wear this face like a mask, it is their face. On their home worlds, do the buggers put on human masks, and play? And what do they call its? Slimies, because we're so soft and oily compared to them?

"Watch out, Slimy," Ender said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Peter, stop it," Ender said.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll tell," Valentine said.

"No one would believe you."

"They'd believe me."

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

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

The pressure let up a little.

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

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

"I don't?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The biggest asshole," Valentine said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ender lifted his right leg and took off the shoe. He held it up. "See there, on the toe? That's blood, Peter."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3 -- Graff

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

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

"So, what are you going to do?"

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

"How will you do that?"

"I'll lie to him."

"And if that doesn't work?"

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

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

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

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

"Just for you," Ender murmured.

"Andrew, you have to eat."

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

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

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

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

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

The table beeped. Someone was at the door.

"Who is it?" Mother asked.

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

"I thought it was over," said Father.

Peter said nothing, just poured milk over his cereal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Another oral exam, huh?" Peter said.

"Shut up, Peter," said Valentine.

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

"I don't know how."

"It could be an anal exam."

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

"Talking to a guy from IF."

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

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

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

"Sorry, Peter," Valentine taunted.

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

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

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

"The Stilson boy is in the hospital," Father said. "You really did a number on him. With your shoe, Ender, that wasn't exactly fair."

Ender shook his head. He had expected someone from the school to come about Stilson, not an officer of the fleet. This was more serious than he had thought. And yet he couldn't think what else he could have done.

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

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

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

"I didn't," Ender whispered.

"Then why did you do it?"

"He had his gang there," Ender said.

"So? This excuses anything?"

"No."

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

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

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

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

After all. "But the monitor--"

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

"And I passed?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wiggin. But that's the name he calls himself."

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

"That depends," said Graff.

"On what?"

"On whether Ender wants to come."

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

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

"Officers?" Ender asked. At the sound of his voice, the others fell silent.

"Yes," said Graff. "Battle School is for training future starship captains and commodores of flotillas and admirals of the fleet."

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

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

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

"All who want to," said Graff.

Ender almost said, I want to. But he held his tongue. This would keep him out of school, but that was stupid, that was just a problem for a few days. It would keep him away from

Peter-- that was more important, that might be a matter of life itself. But to leave Mother and Father, and above all, to leave Valentine. And become a soldier. Ender didn't like fighting. He didn't like Peter's kind, the strong against the weak, and he didn't like his own kind either, the smart against the stupid.

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

"No," Father said.

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

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

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

"Mom and Daddy?"

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

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

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

Nine children. That was unthinkable. Criminal.

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

"He didn't want me."

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

"They feel both ways."

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

"I know that."

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

"How can you know all this?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Valentine loves me."

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

"What is it like, there?"

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

"What's that?"

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

"All boys?"

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

"Like Peter?"

"Peter wasn't accepted, Ender, for the very reasons that you hate him."

"I don't hate him. I'm just--"

"Afraid of him. Well, Peter isn't all bad, you know. He was the best we'd seen in a long time. We asked your parents to choose a daughter next they would have anyway hoping that Valentine would be Peter, but milder. She was too mild. And so we requisitioned you."

"To be half Peter and half Valentine."

"If things worked out right."

"Am I?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell me again," said Graff.

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

"Not good enough," said Graff.

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

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

Ender nodded.

"All right. Let's tell them."

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

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

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

"Kill some buggers for me!" Peter shouted.

"I love you, Andrew!" Mother called.

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

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

Chapter 4 -- Launch

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

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

"It isn't that simple. Mazer Rackham could handle his little fleet and win. By the time this war happens, there'll be too much, even for a genius. Too many little coats. He has to work smoothly with his subordinates."

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

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

"So you're going to isolate him."

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

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

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

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

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

"You're a monster."

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

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

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

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

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

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

He imagined himself being on TV, in an interview. The announcer asking him, How do you feel, Mr. Wiggin? Actually quite well, except hungry. Hungry? Oh, yes, they don't let you eat for twenty hours before the launch. How interesting, I never knew that. All of us are quite hungry, actually. And all the while, during the interview, Ender and the TV guy would slink along smoothly in front of the cameraman, taking long, lithe strides. For

the first time, Ender felt like laughing. He smiled. The other boys near him were laughing at the moment, too, for another reason. They think I'm smiling at their joke, thought Ender. But I'm smiling at something much funnier.

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

It was a joke. The other boys laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, already figured it out," said Graff. He was standing on the ladder.

"Coming with us?" Ender asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But because he had already reoriented himself, he was not surprised when Graff came up the ladder backward, as if he were climbing down to the front of the shuttle. Nor did it bother him when Graff hooked his feet under a rung and pushed off with his hands, so that suddenly he swung upright, as if this were an ordinary airplane.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes sir," Ender said.

"Well answer it, then!"

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

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

Murmurs of no.

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

The boy nodded.

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

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

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

Suddenly Graff did a backflip and caught the ladder with his hands, then swung his feet away from the ladder. Doing a handstand, if the floor was down. Dangling by his hands, if the floor was up. Hand over hand he swung himself back along the aisle to his seat.

"Looks like you've got it made here," whispered the boy next to him.

Ender shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ender felt sick. He had only meant to catch the boy's arm. No. No, he had meant to hurt him, and had pulled with all his strength. He hadn't meant it to be so public, but the boy was feeling exactly the pain Ender had meant him to feel. Null gravity had betrayed him, that was all. I am Peter. I'm just like him. And Ender hated himself.

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

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

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

A voice over the speaker told them they were approaching the school; it took twenty minutes to decelerate and dock. Ender lagged behind the others.

They were not unwilling to let him be the last to leave the shuttle, climbing upward in the direction that had been down when they embarked. Graff was waiting at the end of the narrow tube that led from the shuttle into the heart of the Battle School.

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

"I thought you were my friend." Despite himself, Ender's voice trembled.

Graff looked puzzled. "Whatever gave you that idea, Ender?"

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

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

"You made them hate me."

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

"What if I can't?"

"Then too bad. Look, Ender. I'm sorry if you're lonely and afraid. But the buggers are out there. Ten billion, a hundred billion, a million billion of them, for all we know. With as many ships, for all we know. With weapons we can't understand. And a willingness to use those weapons to wipe us out. It isn't the world at stake, Ender. Just us. Just humankind. As far as the rest of the earth is concerned, we could be wiped out and it would adjust, it would get on with the next step in evolution. But humanity doesn't want to die. As a species, we have evolved to survive. And the way we do it is by straining and straining and, at last, every few generations, giving birth to genius. The one who invents the wheel. And light. And flight. The one who builds a city, a nation, an empire. Do you understand any of this?"

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

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

"Is that all? Just tools?"

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

"That's a lie."

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

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

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

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

Graff watched him go.

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

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

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

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

"I will."

They stood in silence a while longer.

"Anderson."

"Mmm."

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

"I know."

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

"I've read the reports."

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5 -- Games

"You have my admiration. Breaking an arm-- that was a master stroke."

"That was an accident."

"Really? And I've already commended you in your official report."

"It's too strong. It makes that other little bastard into a hero. It could screw up training for a lot of kids. I thought he might call for help."

"Call for help? I thought that was what you valued most in him that he settles his own problems. When he's out there surrounded by an enemy fleet, there ain't gonna be nobody to help him if he calls."

"Who would have guessed the little sucker'd be out of his seat? And that he'd land just wrong against the bulkhead?"

"Just one more example of the stupidity of the military. If you had any brains, you'd be in a real career, like selling life insurance."

"You, too, mastermind."

"We've just got to face the fact that we're second rate. With the fate of humanity in our hands. Gives you a delicious feeling of power, doesn't it? Especially because this time if we lose there won't be any criticism of us at all."

"I never thought of it that way. But let's not lose."

"See how Ender handles it. If we've already lost him, if he can't handle this, who next? Who else?"

"I'll make up a list."

"In the meantime, figure out how to unlose Ender."

"I told you. His isolation can't be broken. He can never come to believe that anybody will ever help him out. ever. If he once thinks there's an easy way out, he's wrecked."

"You're right. That would be terrible, if he believed he had a friend."

"He can have friends. It's parents he can't have."

The other boys had already chosen their bunks when Ender arrived. Ender stopped in the doorway of the dormitory, looking for the sole remaining bed. The ceiling was low Ender could reach up and touch it. A child-size room, with the bottom bunk resting on the floor. The other boys were watching him, cornerwise. Sure enough, the bottom bunk right by the door was the only empty bed. For a moment it occurred to Ender that by letting the others put him in the worst place, he was inviting later bullying. Yet he couldn't very well oust someone else.

So he smiled broadly. "Hey, thanks," he said. Not sarcastically at all. He said it as sincerely as if they had reserved for him the best position. "I thought I was going to have to ask for low bunk by the door."

He sat down and looked in the locker that stood open at the foot of the bunk. There was a paper taped to the inside of the door.

Place your hand on the scanner at the head of your bunk
and speak your name twice.

Ender found the scanner, a sheet of opaque plastic. He put his left hand on it and said, "Ender Wiggin. Ender Wiggin."

The scanner glowed green for a moment. Ender closed his locker and tried to reopen it. He couldn't. Then he put his hand on the scanner and said, "Ender Wiggin." The locker popped open. So did three other compartments.

One of them contained four jumpsuits like the one he was wearing, and one white one. Another compartment contained a small desk, just like the ones at school. So they weren't through with studies yet.

It was the largest compartment that contained the prize. It looked like a spacesuit at first glance, complete with helmet and gloves. But it wasn't. There was no airtight seal. Still, it would effectively cover the whole body. It was thickly padded. It was also a little stiff.

And there was a pistol with it. A lasergun, it looked like, since the end was solid, clear glass. But surely they wouldn't let children have lethal weapons--

"Not laser," said a man. Ender looked up. It was one he hadn't seen before. A young and kind-looking man. "But it has a tight enough beam. Well-focused. You can aim it and make a three-inch circle of light on a wall a hundred meters off."

"What's it for?" Ender asked.

"One of the games we play during recreation. Does anyone else have his locker open?" The man looked around. "I mean, have you followed directions and coded in your voices and hands? You can't get into the lockers until you do. This room is your home for the first year or so here at the Battle School, so get the bunk you want and stay with it. Ordinarily we let you elect your chief officer and install him in the lower bunk by the door, but apparently that position has been taken. Can't recode the lockers now. So think about whom you want to choose. Dinner in seven minutes. Follow the lighted dots on the floor. Your color code is red yellow yellow-- whenever you're assigned a path to follow, it will be red yellow yellow, three dots side by side-- go where those lights indicate. What's your color code, boys?"

"Red, yellow, yellow."

"Very good. My name is Dap. I'm your mom for the next few months."

The boys laughed.

"Laugh all you like, but keep it in mind. If you get lost in the school, which is quite possible, don't go opening doors. Some of them lead outside." More laughter. "Instead just tell someone that your mom is Dap, and they'll call me. Or tell them your color, and they'll light up a path for you to get home. If you have a problem, come talk to me. Remember, I'm the only person here who's paid to be nice to you, but not too nice. Give me any lip and I'll break your face, OK?"

They laughed again. Dap had a room full of friends, Frightened children are so easy to win.

"Which way is down, anybody tell me?"

They told him.

"OK, that's true. But that direction is toward the outside. The ship is spinning, and that's what makes it feel like that is down. The floor actually curves around in that direction. Keep going long enough that way, and you come back to where you started. Except don't try it. Because up that way is teachers' quarters, and up that way is the bigger kids. And the bigger kids don't like Launchies butting in. You might get pushed around. In fact, you will get pushed around. And when you do, don't come crying to me. Got it? This is Battle School, not nursery school."

"What are we supposed to do, then?" asked a boy, a really small black kid who had a top hunk near Ender's.

"If you don't like getting pushed around, figure out for yourself what to do about it, but I warn you-- murder is strictly against the rules. So is any deliberate injury. I understand there was one attempted murder on the way up here. A broken arm. That kind of thing happens again, somebody ices out. You got it?"

"What's icing out?" asked the boy with his arm puffed up in a splint.

"Ice. Put out in the cold. Sent Earthside. Finished at Battle School."

Nobody looked at Ender.

"So, boys, if any of you are thinking of being troublemakers, at least be clever about it. OK?"

Dap left. They still didn't look at Ender.

Ender felt the fear growing in his belly. The kid whose arm he broke-- Ender didn't feel sorry for him. He was a Stilson. And like Stilson, he was already gathering a gang. A little knot of kids, several of the bigger ones, they were laughing at the far end of the room, and every now and then one of them would turn to look at Ender.

With all his heart, Ender wanted to go home. What did any of this have to do with saving the world? There was no monitor now. It was Ender against the gang again, only they were right in his room. Peter again, but without Valentine.

The fear stayed, all through dinner as no one sat by him in the mess hall. The other boys were talking about things-- the big scoreboard on one wall, the food, the bigger kids. Ender could only watch in isolation.

The scoreboards were team standings. Won-loss records, with the most recent scores. Some of the bigger boy's apparently had bets on the most recent games. Two teams, Manticore and Asp, had no recent score-- that box was flashing. Ender decided they must be playing right now.

He noticed that the older boys were divided into groups, according to the uniforms they wore. Some with different uniforms were talking together, but generally the groups each had their own area. Launchies-- their own group, and the two or three next older groups all had plain blue uniforms. But the big kids, the ones that were on teams, they were wearing much more flamboyant clothing. Ender tried to guess which ones went with which name. Scorpion and Spider were easy. So were Flame and Tide.

A bigger boy came to sit by him. Not just a little bigger- he looked to be twelve or thirteen. Getting his man's growth started.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Ender said.

"I'm Mick."

"Ender."

"That's a name?"

"Since I was little. It's what my sister called me."

"Not a bad name here. Ender. Finisher. Hey."

"Hope so."

"Ender, you the bugger in your launch?"

Ender shrugged.

"I noticed you eating all alone. Every launch has one like that. Kid that nobody takes to right away. Sometimes I think the teachers do it on purpose. The teachers aren't very nice. You'll notice that."

"Yeah."

"So you the bugger?"

"I guess so."

"Hey. Nothing to cry about, you know?" He gave Ender his roll, and took Ender's pudding. "Eat nutritious stuff. It'll keep you strong." Mick dug into the pudding.

"What about you?" asked Ender.

"Me? I'm nothing. I'm a fart in the air conditioning. I'm always there, but most of the time nobody knows it."

Ender smiled tentatively.

"Yeah, funny, but no joke. I got nowhere here. I'm getting big now. They're going to send me to my next school pretty soon. No way it'll be Tactical School for me. I've never been a leader, you see. Only the guys who get to be leaders have a shot at it."

"How do you get to be a leader?"

"Hey, if I knew, you think I'd be like this? How many guys my size you see in here?"

Not many. Ender didn't say it.

"A few. I'm not the only half-iced bugger-fodder. A few of us. The other guys-- they're all commanders. All the guys from my launch have their own teams now. Not me."

Ender nodded.

"Listen, little guy. I'm doing you a favor. Make friends. Be a leader. Kiss butts if you've got to, but if the other guys despise you-- you know what I mean?"

Ender nodded again.

"Naw, you don't know anything. You Launchies are all alike. You don't know nothing. Minds like space. Nothing there. And if anything hits you, you fall apart. Look, when you end up like me, don't forget that somebody warned you. It's the last nice thing anybody's going to do for you."

"So why did you tell me?" asked Ender.

"What are you, a smart mouth? Shut up and eat."

Ender shut up and ate. He didn't like Mick. And he knew there was no chance he would end up like that. Maybe that was what the teachers were planning, but Ender didn't intend to fit in with their plans.

I will not be the bugger of my group, Ender thought. I didn't leave Valentine and Mother and Father to come here just to be iced.

As he lifted the fork to his mouth, he could feel his family around him, as they always had been. He knew just which way to turn his head to look up and see Mother, trying to get Valentine not to slurp. He knew just where Father would be, scanning the news on the table while pretending to be part of the dinner conversation. Peter, pretending to take a crushed pea out of his nose-- even Peter could be funny.

It was a mistake to think of them. He felt a sob rise in his throat and swallowed it down; he could not see his plate.

He could not cry. There was no chance that he would be treated with compassion. Dap was not Mother. Any sign of weakness would tell the Stilsons and Peters that this boy could be broken. Ender did what he always did when Peter tormented him. He began to count doubles. One, two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four. And on, as high as he could hold the numbers in his head: 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096, 8192, 16384, 32768, 65536, 131072, 262144. At 67108864 he began to be unsure-- had he slipped out a digit? Should he be in the ten millions or the hundred millions or just the millions? He tried doubling again and lost it. 1342 something. 16? Or 17738? It was gone. Start over again. All the doubling he could hold. The pain was gone. The tears were gone. He would not cry.

Until that night, when the lights went dim, and in the distance he could hear several boys whimpering for their mothers or fathers or dogs. He could not help himself. His lips formed Valentine's name. He could hear her voice laughing in the distance, just down the hall. He could see Mother passing his door, looking in to be sure he was all right. He could hear Father laughing at the video. It was all so clear, and it would never be that way again. I'll be old when I ever see them again, twelve at the earliest. Why did I say yes? What was I such a fool for? Going to school would have been nothing. Facing Stilson every day. And Peter. He was a pissant. Ender wasn't afraid of him.

I want to go home, he whispered.

But his whisper was the whisper he used when he cried out in pain when Peter tormented him. The sound didn't travel farther than his own ears, and sometimes not that far.

And his tears could fall unwanted on his sheet, but his sobs were so gentle that they did not shake the bed; so quiet they could not be heard. But the ache was there, thick in his throat and the front of his face, hot in his chest and in his eyes. I want to go home.

Dap came to the door that night and moved quietly among the beds, touching a hand here. Where he went there was more crying, not less. The touch of kindness in this frightening place was enough to push some over the edge into tears. Not Ender, though. When Dap came, his crying was over, and his face was dry. It was the lying face he presented to Mother and Father, when Peter had been cruel to him and he dared not let it show. Thank you for this, Peter. For dry eyes and silent weeping. You taught me how to hide anything I felt. More than ever, I need that now.

There was school. Every day, hours of classes. Reading. Numbers. History. Videos of the bloody battles in space, the Marines spraying their guts all over the walls of the

bigger ships. Holo of clean wars of the fleet, ships turning into puffs of light as the spacecraft killed each other deftly in the deep night. Many things to learn. Ender worked as hard as anyone; all of them struggled for the first time in their lives, as for the first time in their lives they competed with classmates who were at least as bright as they,

But the games-- that was what they lived for. That was what filled the hours between waking and sleeping.

Dap introduced them to the game room on their second day. It was up, way above the decks where the boys lived and worked. They climbed ladders to where the gravity weakened, and there in the cavern they saw the dazzling lights of the games.

Some of the games they knew; some they had even played at home. Simple ones and hard ones. Ender walked past the two-dimensional games on video and began to study the games the bigger boys played, the holographic games with objects hovering in the air. He was the only Launchy in that part of the room, and every now and then one of the bigger boys would shove him out of the way. What're you doing here? Get lost. Fly off. And of course he would fly, in the lower gravity here, leave his feet and soar until he ran into something or someone.

Every time, though, he extricated himself and went back, perhaps to a different spot, to get a different angle on the game. He was too small to see the controls, how the game was actually done. That didn't matter. He got the movement of it in the air. The way the player dug tunnels in the darkness, tunnels of light, which the enemy ships would search for and then follow mercilessly until they caught the player's ship. The player could make traps: mines, drifting bombs, loops in the air that forced the enemy ships to repeat endlessly. Some of the players were clever. Others lost quickly.

Ender liked it better, though, when two boys played against each other. Then they had to use each other's tunnels, and it quickly became clear which of them were worth anything at the strategy of it.

Within an hour or so, it began to pall. Ender understood the regularities by then. Understood the rules the computer was following, so that he knew he could always, once he mastered the controls, outmaneuver the enemy. Spirals when the enemy was like this; loops when the enemy was like that. Lie in wait at one trap. Lay seven traps and then lure them like this. There was no challenge to it, then, just a matter of playing until the computer got so fast that no human reflexes could overcome it. That wasn't fun. It was the other boys he wanted to play. The boys who had been so trained by the computer that even when they played against each other they each tried to emulate the computer. Think like a machine instead of a boy.

I could beat them this way. I could beat them that way.

"I'd like a turn against you," he said to the boy who had just won.

"Lawsy me, what is this?" asked the boy. "Is it a bug or a bugger?"

"A new flock of dwarfs just came aboard," said another boy.

"But it talks. Did you know they could talk?"

"I see," said Ender. "You're afraid to play me two out of three."

"Beating you," said the boy, "would be as easy as pissing in the shower."

"And not half as fun," said another.

"I'm Ender Wiggin."

"Listen up, scrunchface. You nobody. Got that? You nobody, got that? You not anybody till you gots you first kill. Got that?"

The slang of the older boys had its own rhythm. Ender picked it up quick enough. "If I'm nobody, then how come you scared to play me two out of three?"

Now the other guys were impatient. "Kill the squirt quick and let's get on with it."

So Ender took his place at the unfamiliar controls. His hands were small, but the controls were simple enough. It took only a little experimentation to find out which buttons used certain weapons. Movement control was a standard wireball. His reflexes were slow at first. The other boy, whose name he still didn't know, got ahead quickly. But Ender learned a lot and was doing much better by the time the game ended.

"Satisfied, launchy?"

"Two out of three."

"We don't allow two out of three games."

"So you beat me the first time I ever touched the game," Ender said. "If you can't do it twice, you can't do it at all."

They played again, and this time Ender was deft enough to pull off a few maneuvers that the boy had obviously never seen before. His patterns couldn't cope with them. Ender didn't win easily, but he won.

The bigger boys stopped laughing and joking then. The third game went in total silence, Ender won it quickly and efficiently.

When the game ended, one of the older boys said, "Bout time they replaced this machine. Getting so any pinbrain can beat it now."

Not a word of congratulation. Just total silence as Ender walked away.

He didn't go far. Just stood off in the near distance and watched as the next players tried to use the things he had shown them. Any pinbrain? Ender smiled inwardly. They won't forget me.

He felt good. He had won something, and against older boys. Probably not the best of the older boys, but he no longer had the panicked feeling that he might be out of his depth, that Battle School might be too much for him. All he had to do was watch the game and understand how things worked, and then he could use the system, and even excel.

It was the waiting and watching that cost the most. For during that time he had to endure. The boy whose arm he had broken was out for vengeance. His name, Ender quickly learned, was Bernard. He spoke his own name with a French accent, since the French, with their arrogant Separatism, insisted that the teaching of Standard not begin until the age of four, when the French language patterns were already set. His accent made him exotic and interesting; his broken arm made him a martyr; his sadism made him a natural focus for all those who loved pain in others.

Ender became their enemy.

Little things. Kicking his bed every time they went in and out of the door. Jostling him with his meal tray. Tripping him on the ladders. Ender learned quickly not to leave anything of his outside his lockers; he also learned to be quick on his feet, to catch himself. "Maladroit," Bernard called him once, and the name stuck.

There were times when Ender was very angry. With Bernard, of course, anger was inadequate. It was the kind of person he was-- a tormentor. What enraged Ender was how willingly the others went along with him. Surely they knew there was no justice in Bernard's revenge. Surely they knew that he had struck first at Ender in the shuttle, that Ender had only been responding to violence. If they knew, they acted as if they didn't; even if they did not know, they should be able to tell from Bernard himself that he was a snake.

After all, Ender wasn't his only target. Bernard was setting up a kingdom, wasn't he?

Ender watched from the fringes of the group as Bernard established the hierarchy. Some of the boys were useful to him, and he flattered them outrageously. Some of the boys were willing servants, doing whatever he wanted even though he treated them with contempt.

But a few chafed under Bernard's rule.

Ender, watching, knew who resented Bernard. Shen was small, ambitious, and easily needed. Bernard had discovered that quickly, and started calling him Worm. "Because he's so small," Bernard said, "and because he wriggles. Look how he shimmies his butt when he walks."

Shen stormed off, but they only laughed louder. "Look at his butt. Seeya, Worm!"

Ender said nothing to Shen-- it would be too obvious, then, that he was starting his own competing gang. He just sat with his desk on his lap, looking as studious as possible.

He was not studying. He was telling his desk to keep sending a message into the interrupt queue every thirty seconds. The message was to everyone, and it was short and to the point. What made it hard was figuring out how to disguise who it was from, the way the teachers could. Messages from one of the boys always had their name automatically inserted. Ender hadn't cracked the teachers security system yet, so he couldn't pretend to be a teacher. But he was able to set up a file for a nonexistent student, whom he whimsically named God.

Only when the message was ready to go did he try to catch Shen's eye. Like all the other boys, he was watching Bernard and his cronies laugh and joke, making fun of the math teacher, who often stopped in midsentence and looked around as if he had been let off the bus at the wrong stop and didn't know where he was.

Eventually, though, Shen glanced around. Ender nodded to him, pointed to his desk, and smiled. Shen looked puzzled. Ender held up his desk a little and then pointed at it. Shen reached for his own desk. Ender sent the message then, Shen saw it almost at once. Shen read it, then laughed aloud. He looked at Ender as if to say, Did you do this? Ender shrugged, to say, I don't know who did it but it sure wasn't me.

Shen laughed again, and several of the other boys who were not close to Bernard's group got out their desks and looked. Every thirty seconds the message appeared on every desk, marched around the screen quickly, then disappeared. The boys laughed together.

"What's so funny?" Bernard asked, Ender made sure he was not smiling when Bernard looked around the room, imitating the fear that so many others felt. Shen, of course, smiled all the more defiantly. It took a moment; then Bernard told one of his boy's to bring out a desk. Together they read the message.

COVER YOUR BUTT. BERNARD IS WATCHING.

--GOD

Bernard went red with anger. "Who did this!" he shouted.

"God," said Shen.

"It sure as hell wasn't you," Bernard said. "This takes too much brains for a worm."

Ender's message expired after five minutes. After a while, a message from Bernard appeared on his desk.

I KNOW IT WAS YOU.

--BERNARD

Ender didn't look up. He acted, in fact, as if he hadn't seen the message. Bernard just wants to catch me looking guilty. He doesn't know.

Of course, it didn't matter if he knew. Bernard would punish him all the more, because he had to rebuild his position. The one thing he couldn't stand was having the other boys laughing at him. He had to make clear who was boss. So Ender got knocked down in the shower that morning. One of Bernard's boys pretended to trip over him, and managed to plant a knee in his belly. Ender took it in silence. He was still watching, as far as the open war was concerned. He would do nothing.

But in the other war, the war of desks, he already had his next attack in place. When he got back from the shower, Bernard was raging, kicking beds and yelling at boys. "I didn't write it! Shut up!"

Marching constantly around every boy's desk was this message:

I LOVE YOUR BUTT. LET ME KISS IT.

--BERNARD

"I didn't write that message!" Bernard shouted. After the shouting had been going on for some time, Dap appeared at the door.

"What's the fuss?" he asked.

"Somebody's been writing messages using my name." Bernard was sullen.

"What message."

"It doesn't matter what message!"

"It does to me." Dap picked up the nearest desk, which happened to belong to the boy who bunked above Ender. Dap read it, smiled very slightly, gave back the desk.

"Interesting," he said.

"Aren't you going to find out who did it?" demanded Bernard.

"Oh, I know who did it," Dap said.

Yes, Ender thought. The system was too easily broken. They mean us to break it, or sections of it. They know it was me.

"Well, who, then?" Bernard shouted.

"Are you shouting at me, soldier?" asked Dap, very softly.

At once the mood in the room changed. From rage on the part of Bernard's closest friends and barely contained mirth among the rest, all became somber. Authority was about to speak.

"No, sir," said Bernard.

"Everybody knows that the system automatically puts on the name of the sender."

"I didn't write that!" Bernard said.

"Shouting?" asked Dap.

"Yesterday someone sent a message that was signed GOD," Bernard said.

"Really?" said Dap. "I didn't know he was signed onto the system." Dap turned and left, and the room filled with laughter.

Bernard's attempt to be ruler of the room was broken-- only a few stayed with him now. But they were the most vicious. And Ender knew that until he was through watching, it would go hard on him. Still, the tampering with the system had done its work, Bernard was contained, and all the boys who had some quality were free of him. Best of all, Ender had done it without sending him to the hospital. Much better this way.

Then he settled down to the serious business of designing a security system for his own desk, since the safeguards built into the system were obviously inadequate. If a six-year-old could break them down, they were obviously put there as a plaything, not serious security. Just another game that the teachers set up for us. And this is one I'm good at.

"How did you do that?" Shen asked him at breakfast.

Ender noted quietly that this was the first time another Launchy from his own class had sat with him at a meal. "Do what?" he asked.

"Send a message with a fake name. And Bernard's name! That was great. They're calling him Buttwatcher now. Just Watcher in front of the teachers, but everybody knows what he's watching."

"Poor Bernard," Ender murmured. "And he's so sensitive."

"Come on, Ender. You broke into the system. How'd you do it?"

Ender shook his head and smiled. "Thanks for thinking I'm bright enough to do that. I just happened to see it first, that's all."

"OK, you don't have to tell me," said Shen. "Still, it was great." They ate in silence for a moment. "Do I wiggle my butt when I walk?"

"Naw." Ender said. "Just a little. Just don't take such big long steps, that's all."

Shen nodded.

"The only person who'd ever notice was Bernard."

"He's a pig," said Shen.

Ender shrugged. "On the whole, pigs aren't so bad."

Shen laughed. "You're right. I wasn't being fair to the pigs."

They laughed together, and two other Launchies joined them. Ender's isolation was over. The war was just beginning.

Chapter 6 -- The Giant's Drink

"We've had our disappointments in the past, hanging on for years, hoping they'll pull through, and then they don't. Nice thing about Ender, he's determined to ice within the first six months."

"Oh?"

"Don't you see what's going on here? He's stuck at the Giant's Drink in the mind game. Is the boy suicidal? You never mentioned it."

"Everybody gets the Giant sometime."

"But Ender won't leave it alone. Like Pinual."

"Everybody looks like Pinual at one time or another. But he's the only one who killed himself. I don't think it had anything to do with the Giant's Drink."

"You're betting my life on that. And look what he's done with his launch group."

"Wasn't his fault, you know."

"I don't care. His fault or not, he's poisoning that group. They're supposed to bond, and right where he stands there's a chasm a mile wide."

"I don't plan to leave him there very long, anyway."

"Then you'd better plan again. That launch is sick, and he's the source of the disease. He stays till it's cured."

"I was the source of the disease. I was isolating him, and it worked."

"Give him time. To see what he does with it."

"We don't have time."

"We don't have time to rush a kid ahead who has as much chance of being a monster as a military genius."

"Is this an order?"

"The recorders on, it's always on, your ass is covered, go to hell."

"If it's an order, then I'll--"

"It's an order. Hold him where he is until we see how he handles things in his launch group. Graff, you give me ulcers."

"You wouldn't have ulcers if you'd leave the school to me and take care of the fleet yourself."

"The fleet is looking for a battle commander. There's nothing to take care of until you get me that."

They filed clumsily into the battleroom, like children in a swimming pool for the first time, clinging to the handholds along the side. Null gravity was frightening, disorienting; they soon found that things went better if they didn't use their feet at all.

Worse, the suits were confining. It was harder to make precise movements, since the suits bent just a bit slower, resisted a bit more than any clothing they had ever worn before.

Ender gripped the handhold and flexed his knees. He noticed that along with the sluggishness, the suit had an amplifying effect on movement. It was hard to get them started, but the suit's legs kept moving, and strongly, after his muscles had stopped. Give them a push this strong, and the suit pushes with twice the force. I'll be clumsy for a while. Better get started.

So, still grasping the handhold, he pushed off strongly with his feet.

Instantly he flipped around, his feet flying over his head, and landed flat on his back against the wall. The rebound was stronger, it seemed, and his hands tore loose from the handhold. He flew across the battleroom, tumbling over and over.

For a sickening moment he tried to retain his old up-and-down orientation, his body attempting to right itself, searching for the gravity that wasn't there. Then he forced himself to change his view. He was hurtling toward a wall. That was down. And at once he had control of himself. He wasn't flying, he was falling. This was a dive. He could choose how he would hit the surface.

I'm going too fast to catch ahold and stay, but I can soften the impact, can fly off at an angle if I roll when I hit and use my feet--

It didn't work at all the way he had planned. He went off at an angle, but it was not the one he had predicted. Nor did he have time to consider. He hit another wall, this time too soon to have prepared for it. But quite accidentally he discovered a way to use his feet to control the rebound angle. Now he was soaring across the room again, toward the other boys who still clung to the wall. This time he had slowed enough to be able to grip a rung. He was at a crazy angle in relation to the other boys, but once again his orientation had changed, and as far as he could tell, they were all lying on the floor, not hanging on a wall, and he was no more upside down than they were.

"What are you trying to do, kill yourself?" asked Shen.

"Try it," Ender said. "The suit keeps you from hurting yourself, and you can control your bouncing with your legs, like this." He approximated the movement he had made.

Shen shook his head-- he wasn't trying any fool stunt like that. But one boy did take off, not as fast as Ender had, because he didn't begin with a flip, but fast enough. Ender didn't even have to see his face to know that it was Bernard. And right after him, Bernard's best friend, Alai.

Ender watched them cross the huge room, Bernard struggling to orient himself to the direction he thought of as the floor, Alai surrendering to the movement and preparing to

rebound from the wall. No wonder Bernard broke his arm in the shuttle, Ender thought. He tightens up when he's flying. He panics. Ender stored the information away for future reference.

And another bit of information, too. Alai did not push off in the same direction as Bernard. He aimed for a corner of the room. Their paths diverged more and more as they flew, and where Bernard made a clumsy, crunching landing and bounce on his wall, Alai did a glancing triple bounce on three surfaces near the corner that left him most of his speed and sent him flying off at a surprising angle. Alai shouted and whooped, and so did the boys watching him. Some of them forgot they were weightless and let go of the wall to clap their hands. Now they drifted lazily in many directions, waving their arms, trying to swim.

Now, that's a problem, thought Ender. What if you catch yourself drifting? There's no way to push off.

He was tempted to set himself adrift and try to solve the problem by trial and error. But he could see the others, their useless efforts at control, and he couldn't think of what he would do that they weren't already doing.

Holding onto the floor with one hand, he fiddled idly with the toy gun that was attached to his suit in front, just below the shoulder. Then he remembered the hand rockets sometimes used by marines when they did a boarding assault on an enemy station. He pulled the gun from his suit and examined it. He had pushed all the buttons back in the room, but the gun did nothing there. Maybe here in the battleroom it would work. There were no instructions on it. No labels on the controls. The trigger was obvious-- he had had toy guns, as all children had, almost since infancy. There were two buttons that his thumb could easily reach, and several others along the bottom of the shaft that were almost inaccessible without using two hands. Obviously, the two buttons near his thumb were meant to be instantly usable.

He aimed the gun at the floor and pulled back on the trigger. He felt the gun grow instantly warm; when he let go of the trigger, it cooled at once. Also, a tiny circle of light appeared on the floor where he was aiming.

He thumbed the red button at the top of the gun, and pulled the trigger again. Same thing.

Then he pushed the white button. It gave a bright flash of light that illuminated a wide area, but not as intensely. The gun was quite cold when the button was pressed.

The red button makes it like a laser-- but it is not a laser, Dap had said-- while the white button makes it a lamp. Neither will be much help when it comes to maneuvering.

So everything depends on how you push off, the course you set when you start. It means we're going to have to get very good at controlling our launches and rebounds or we're all

going to end up floating around in the middle of nowhere. Ender looked around the room. A few of the boys were drifting close to walls now, flailing their arms to catch a handhold. Most were bumping into each other and laughing; some were holding hands and going around in circles. Only a few, like Ender, were calmly holding onto the walls and watching.

One of them, he saw, was Alai. He had ended up on another wall not too far from Ender. On impulse, Ender pushed off and moved quickly toward Alai. Once in the air, he wondered what he would say. Alai was Bernard's friend. What did Ender have to say to him?

Still, there was no changing course now. So he watched straight ahead, and practiced making tiny leg and hand movements to control which way he was facing as he drifted. Too late, he realized that he had aimed too well. He was not going to land near Alai-- he was going to hit him.

"Here, snag my hand!" Alai called.

Ender held out his hand. Alai took the shock of impact and helped Ender make a fairly gentle landing against the wall.

"That's good," Ender said. "We ought to practice that kind of thing."

"That's what I thought, only everybody's turning to butter out there," Alai said. "What happens if we get out there together? We should be able to shove each other in opposite directions."

"Yeah."

"OK?"

It was an admission that all might not be right between them. Is it OK for us to do something together? Ender's answer was to take Alai by the wrist and get ready to push off.

"Ready?" said Alai. "Go."

Since they pushed off with different amounts of force, they began to circle each other. Ender made some small hand movements, then shifted a leg. They slowed. He did it again. They stopped orbiting. Now they were drifting evenly.

"Packed head, Ender." Alai said. It was high praise. "Let's push off before we run into that bunch."

"And then let's meet over in that corner." Ender did not want this bridge into the enemy camp to fail.

"Last one there saves farts in a milk bottle," Alai said.

Then, slowly, steadily, they maneuvered until they faced each other, spread-eagled, hand to hand, knee to knee.

"And then we just scrunch?" asked Alai.

"I've never done this before either," said Ender.

They pushed off. It propelled them faster than they expected. Ender ran into a couple of boys and ended up on a wall that he hadn't expected. It took him a moment to reorient and find the corner where he and Alai were to meet. Alai was already headed toward it. Ender plotted a course that would include two rebounds, to avoid the largest clusters of boys.

When Ender reached the corner, Alai had hooked his arms through two adjacent handholds and was pretending to doze.

"You win."

"I want to see your fart collection," Alai said.

"I stored it in your locker. Didn't you notice?"

"I thought it was my socks."

"We don't wear socks anymore."

"Oh yeah." A reminder that they were both far from home. It took some of the fun out of having mastered a bit of navigation.

Ender took his pistol and demonstrated what he had learned about the two thumb buttons.

"What does it do when you aim at a person?" asked Alai.

"I don't know."

"Why don't we find out?"

Ender shook his head. "We might hurt somebody."

"I meant why don't we shoot each other in the foot or something. I'm not Bernard, I never tortured cats for fun."

"Oh."

"It can't be too dangerous, or they wouldn't give these guns to kids."

"We're soldiers now."

"Shoot me in the foot."

"No, you shoot me."

"Let's shoot each other."

They did. Immediately Ender felt the leg of the suit grow stiff, immobile at the knee and ankle joints.

"You frozen?" asked Alai.

"Stiff as a board."

"Let's freeze a few," Alai said. "Let's have our first war. Us against them."

They grinned. Then Ender said, "Better invite Bernard."

Alai cocked an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"And Shen."

"That little slanty-eyed butt-wiggler?"

Ender decided that Alai was joking. "Hey, we can't all be niggers."

Alai grinned. "My grandpa would've killed you for that."

"My great great grandpa would have sold him first,"

"Let's go get Bernard and Shen and freeze these bugger-lovers."

In twenty minutes, everyone in the room was frozen except Ender, Bernard, Shen, and Alai. The four of them sat there whooping and laughing until Dap came in.

"I see you've learned how to use your equipment," he said. Then he did something to a control he held in his hand. Everybody drifted slowly toward the wall he was standing on. He went among the frozen boys, touching them and thawing their suits. There was a tumult of complaint that it wasn't fair how Bernard and Alai had shot them all when they weren't ready.

"Why weren't you ready?" asked Dap. "You had your suits just as long as they did. You had just as many minutes flapping around like drunken ducks. Stop moaning and we'll begin."

Ender noticed that it was assumed that Bernard and Alai were the leaders of the battle. Well, that was fine. Bernard knew that Ender and Alai had learned to use the guns together. And Ender and Alai were friends. Bernard might believe that Ender had joined his group, but it wasn't so. Ender had joined a new group. Alai's group. Bernard had joined it too.

It wasn't obvious to everyone; Bernard still blustered and sent his cronies on errands. But Alai now moved freely through the whole room, and when Bernard was crazy, Alai could joke a little and calm him down. When it came time to choose their launch leader, Alai was the almost unanimous choice. Bernard sulked for a few days and then he was fine, and everyone settled into the new pattern. The launch was no longer divided into Bernard's in-group and Ender's outcasts. Alai was the bridge.

Ender sat on his bed with his desk on his knees. It was private study time, and Ender was doing Free Play. It was a shifting, crazy kind of game in which the school computer kept bringing up new things, building a maze that you could explore. You could go back to events that you liked, for a while; if you left them alone too long, they disappeared and something else took its place.

Sometimes funny things. Sometimes exciting, and he had to be quick to stay alive. He had lots of deaths, but that was OK, games were like that, you died a lot until you got the hang of it.

His figure on the screen had started out as a little boy. For a while it had changed into a bear. Now it was a large mouse, with long and delicate hands. He ran his figure under a lot of large items of furniture. He had played with the cat a lot, but now it was boring-- too easy to dodge, he knew all the furniture.

Not through the mousehole this time, he told himself. I'm sick of the Giant. It's a dumb game and I can't ever win. Whatever I choose is wrong.

But he went through the mousehole anyway, and over the small bridge in the garden. He avoided the ducks and the divebombing mosquitoes-- he had tried playing with them but they were too easy, and if he played with the ducks too long he turned into a fish, which he didn't like. Being a fish reminded him too much of being frozen in the battleroom, his whole body rigid, waiting for the practice to end so Dap would thaw him. So, as usual, he found himself going up the rolling hills.

The landslides began. At first he had got caught again and again, crushed in an exaggerated blot of gore oozing out from under a rock pile. Now, though, he had

mastered the skill of running up the slopes at an angle to avoid the crush, always seeking higher ground.

And, as always, the landslides finally stopped being jumbles of rock. The face of the hill broke open and instead of shale it was white bread, puffy, rising like dough as the crust broke away and fell. It was soft and spongy; his figure moved more slowly. And when he jumped down off the bread, he was standing on a table. Giant loaf of bread behind him; giant stick of butter beside him. And the Giant himself leaning his chin in his hands, looking at him. Ender's figure was about as tall as the Giant's head from chin to brow.

"I think I'll bite your head off," said the Giant, as he always did.

This time, instead of running away or standing there, Ender walked his figure up to the Giant's face and kicked him in the chin.

The Giant stuck out his tongue and Ender fell to the ground.

"How about a guessing game?" asked the Giant. So it didn't make any difference-- the Giant only played the guessing game. Stupid computer. Millions of possible scenarios in its memory, and the Giant could only play one stupid game.

The Giant, as always, set two huge shot glasses, as tall as Ender's knees, on the table in front of him. As always, the two were filled with different liquids. The computer was good enough that the liquids had never repeated, not that he could remember. This time the one had a thick, creamy looking liquid. The other hissed and foamed.

"One is poison and one is not," said the Giant. "Guess right and I'll take you into Fairyland."

Guessing meant sticking his head into one of the glasses to drink. He never guessed right. Sometimes his head was dissolved. Sometimes he caught on fire. Sometimes he fell in and drowned. Sometimes he fell out, turned green, and rotted away. It was always ghastly, and the Giant always laughed.

Ender knew that whatever he chose he would die. The game was rigged. On the first death, his figure would reappear on the Giant's table, to play again. On the second death, he'd come back to the landslides. Then to the garden bridge. Then to the mousehole. And then, if he still went back to the Giant and played again, and died again, his desk would go dark, "Free Play Over" would march around the desk and Ender would lie back on his bed and tremble until he could finally go to sleep. The game was rigged but still the Giant talked about Fairyland, some stupid childish three-year-old's Fairyland that probably had some stupid Mother Goose or Pac-Man or Peter Pan, it wasn't even worth getting to, but he had to find some way of beating the Giant to get there.

He drank the creamy liquid. Immediately he began to inflate and rise like a balloon. The Giant laughed. He was dead again.

He played again, and this time the liquid set, like concrete, and held his head down while the Giant cut him open along the spine, deboned him like a fish, and began to eat while his arms and legs quivered.

He reappeared at the landslides and decided not to go on. He even let the landslides cover him once. But even though he was sweating and he felt cold, with his next life he went back up the hills till then turned into bread, and stood on the Giant's table as the shot glasses were set before him.

He stared at the two liquids. The one foaming, the other with waves in it like the sea. He tried to guess what kind of death each one held. Probably a fish will come out of the ocean one and eat me. The foamy one will probably asphyxiate me. I hate this game. It isn't fair. It's stupid. It's rotten.

And instead of pushing his face into one of the liquids, he kicked one over, then the other, and dodged the Giant's huge hands as the Giant shouted, "Cheater, cheater!" He jumped at the Giant's face, clambered up his lip and nose, and began to dig in the Giant's eye. The stuff came away like cottage cheese, and as the Giant screamed, Ender's figure burrowed into the eye, climbed right in, burrowed in and in.

The Giant fell over backward, the view shifted as he fell, and when the Giant came to rest on the ground, there were intricate, lacy trees all around. A bat flew up and landed on the dead Giant's nose. Ender brought his figure up out of the Giant's eye.

"How did you get here?" the bat asked. "Nobody ever comes here."

Ender could not answer, of course. So he reached down, took a handful of the Giant's eyestuff, and offered it to the bat.

The bat took it and flew off, shouting as it went, "Welcome to Fairyland."

He had made it. He ought to explore. He ought to climb down from the Giant's face and see what he had finally achieved.

Instead he signed off, put his desk in his locker, stripped off his clothes and pulled his blanket over him. He hadn't meant to kill the Giant. This was supposed to be a game. Not a choice between his own grisly death and an even worse murder. I'm a murderer, even when I play. Peter would be proud of me.

Chapter 7 -- Salamander

"Isn't it nice to know that Ender can do the impossible?"

"The player's deaths have always been sickening. I've always thought the Giant's Drink was the most perverted part at the whole mind game, but going for the eye like that-- this is the one we want to put in command of our fleets?"

"What matters is that he won the game that couldn't be won."

"I suppose you'll move him now."

"We were waiting to see how he handled the thing with Bernard. He handled it perfectly."

"So as soon as he can cope with a situation, you move him to one he can't cope with. Doesn't he get any rest?"

"He'll have a month or two, maybe three, with his launch group. That's really quite a long time in a child's life."

"Does it ever seem to you that these boys aren't children? I look at what they do, the way they talk, and they don't seem like little kids."

"They're the most brilliant children in the world, each in his own way."

"But shouldn't they still act like children? They aren't normal. They act like-- history. Napoleon and Wellington. Caesar and Brutus."

"We're trying to save the world, not heal the wounded heart. You're too compassionate."

"General Levy has no pity for anyone. All the videos say so. But don't hurt this boy."

"Are you joking?"

"I mean, don't hurt him more than you have to."

Alai sat across from Ender at dinner. "I finally figured out how you sent that message. Using Bernard's name."

"Me?" asked Ender.

"Come on. who else? It sure wasn't Bernard. And Shen isn't too hot on the computer. And I know it wasn't me. Who else? Doesn't matter. I figured out how to fake a new student entry. You just created a student named Bernard-blank, B-E-R-N-A-R-D-space, so the computer didn't kick it out as a repeat of another student."

"Sounds like that might work," said Ender.

"OK, OK. It does work. But you did that practically on the first day."

"Or somebody. Maybe Dap did it, to keep Bernard from getting too much control."

"I found something else. I can't do it with your name."

"Oh?"

"Anything with Ender in it gets kicked out. I can't get inside your files at all, either. You made your own security system."

"Maybe."

Alai grinned. "I just got in and trashed somebody's files. He's right behind me on cracking the system. I need protection, Ender. I need your system."

"If I give you my system, you'll know how I do it and you'll get in and trash me."

"You say me?" Alai asked. "I the sweetest friend you got!"

Ender laughed. "I'll setup a system for you."

"Now?"

"Can I finish eating?"

"You never finish eating."

It was true. Ender's tray always had food on it after a meal. Ender looked at the plate and decided he was through. "Let's go then."

When they got to the barracks, Ender squatted down by his bed and said, "Get your desk and bring it over here. I'll show you how." But when Alai brought his desk to Ender's bed, Ender was just sitting there, his lockers still closed.

"What up?" asked Alai.

In answer Ender palmed his locker. "Unauthorized Access Attempt," it said. It didn't open.

"Somebody done a dance on your head, mama," Alai said. "Somebody eated your face."

"You sure you want my security system now?" Ender got up and walked away from his bed.

"Ender," said Alai.

Ender turned around. Alai was holding a little piece of paper.

"What is it?"

Alai looked up at him. "Don't you know? This was on your bed. You must have sat on it."

Ender took it from him.

ENDER WIGGIN -- ASSIGNED SALAMANDER ARMY -- COMMANDER BONZO MADRID -- EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY -- CODE GREEN GREEN BROWN -- NO POSSESSIONS TRANSFERRED

"You're smart, Ender, but you don't do the battle-room any better than me."

Ender shook his head. It was the stupidest thing he could think of, to promote him now. Nobody got promoted before they were eight years old. Ender wasn't even seven yet. And launches usually moved into the armies together, with most armies getting a new kid at the same time. There were no transfer slips on any of the other beds.

Just when things were finally coming together. Just when Bernard was getting along with everybody, even Ender. Just when Ender was beginning to make a real friend out of Alai. Just when his life was finally getting livable.

Ender reached down to pull Alai up from the bed.

"Salamander Army's in contention, anyway," Alai said.

Ender was so angry at the unfairness of the transfer that tears were coming to his eyes. Mustn't cry, he told himself.

Alai saw the tears but had the grace not to say so. "They're farheads, Ender, they won't even let you take anything you own."

Ender grinned and didn't cry after all. "Think I should strip and go naked?"

Alai laughed, too.

On impulse Ender hugged him, tight, almost as if he were Valentine. He even thought of Valentine then and wanted to go home. "I don't want to go," he said.

Alai hugged him back. "I understand them, Ender. You are the best of us. Maybe they're in a hurry to teach you everything."

"They don't want to teach me everything," Ender said. "I wanted to learn what it was like to have a friend."

Alai nodded soberly. "Always my friend, always the best of my friends," he said. Then he grinned. "Go slice up the buggers."

"Yeah." Ender smiled back.

Alai suddenly kissed Ender on the cheek and whispered in his ear. "Salaam." Then, red faced, he turned away and walked to his own bed at the back of the barracks. Ender guessed that the kiss and the word were somehow forbidden. A suppressed religion, perhaps. Or maybe the word had some private and powerful meaning for Alai alone. Whatever it meant to Alai, Ender knew that it was sacred; that he had uncovered himself for Ender, as once Ender's mother had done when he was very young, before they put the monitor in his neck, and she had put her hands on his head when she thought he was asleep, and prayed over him. Ender had never spoken of that to anyone, not even to Mother, but had kept it as a memory of holiness, of how his mother loved him when she thought that no one, not even he, could see or hear. That was what Alai had given him: a gift so sacred that even Ender could not be allowed to understand what it meant.

After such a thing nothing could be said. Alai reached his bed and turned around to see Ender. Their eyes held for only a moment, locked in understanding. Then Ender left.

There would be no green green brown in this part of the school; he would have to pick up the colors in one of the public areas. The others would be finished with dinner very soon; he didn't want to go near the mess hall. The game room would be nearly empty.

None of the games appealed to him, the way he felt now. So he went to the bank of public desks at the back of the room and signed on to his own private game. He went quickly to Fairyland. The Giant was dead when he arrived now; he had to climb carefully down the table, jump to the leg of the Giant's overturned chair, and then make the drop to the ground. For a while there had been rats gnawing at the Giant's body, but Ender had killed one with a pin from the Giant's ragged shirt, and they had left him alone after that.

The Giant's corpse had essentially finished its decay. What could be torn by the small scavengers was torn; the maggots had done their work on the organs, now it was a dessicated mummy, hollowed-out, teeth in a rigid grin, eyes empty, fingers curled. Ender remembered burrowing through the eye when it had been alive and malicious and intelligent. Angry and frustrated as he was, Ender wished to do such murder again. But the Giant had become part of the landscape now, and so there could be no rage against him.

Ender had always gone over the bridge to the castle of the Queen of Hearts, where there were games enough for him; but none of those appealed to him now. He went around the giant's corpse and followed the brook upstream, to where it emerged from the forest. There was a playground there, slides and monkeybars, teeter-totters and merry-go-rounds, with a dozen children laughing as they played. Ender came and found that in the game he had become a child, though usually his figure in the games was adult. In fact, he was smaller than the other children.

He got in line for the slide. The other children ignored him. He climbed up to the top, watched the boy before him whirl down the long spiral to the ground. Then he sat and began to slide.

He had not slid for a moment when he fell right through the slide and landed on the ground under the ladder. The slide would not hold him.

Neither would the monkey bars. He could climb a ways, but then at random a bar seemed to be insubstantial and he fell. He could sit on the see-saw until he rose to the apex; then he fell. When the merry-go-round went fast, he could not hold onto any of the bars, and centrifugal force hurled him off.

And the other children: their laughter was raucous, offensive. They circled around him and pointed and laughed for many seconds before they went back to their play.

Ender wanted to hit them, to throw them in the brook. Instead he walked into the forest. He found a path, which soon became an ancient brick road, much overgrown with weeds but still usable. There were hints of possible games off to either side, but Ender followed none of them. He wanted to see where the path led.

It led to a clearing, with a well in the middle, and a sign that said, "Drink, traveler." Ender went forward and looked at the well. Almost at once, he heard a snarl. Out of the woods emerged a dozen slavering wolves with human faces. Ender recognized them-- they were the children from the playground. Only now their teeth could tear; Ender, weaponless, was quickly devoured.

His next figure appeared, as usual, in the same spot, and was eaten again, though Ender tried to climb down into the well.

The next appearance, though, was at the playground. Again the children laughed at him. Laugh all you like, Ender thought. I know what you are. He pushed one of them. She followed him, angry. Ender led her up the slide. Of course he fell through; but this time, following so closely behind him, she also fell through. When she hit the ground, she turned into a wolf and lay there, dead or stunned.

One by one Ender led each of the others into a trap. But before he had finished off the last of them, the wolves began reviving, and were no longer children. Ender was torn apart again.

This time, shaking and sweating, Ender found his figure revived on the Giant's table. I should quit, he told himself. I should go to my new army.

But instead he made his figure drop down from the table and walk around the Giant's body to the playground.

This time, as soon as the child hit the ground and turned into a wolf, Ender dragged the body to the brook and pulled it in. Each time, the body sizzled as though the water were acid; the wolf was consumed, and a dark cloud of smoke arose and drifted away. The children were easily dispatched, though they began following him in twos and threes at the end. Ender found no wolves waiting for him in the clearing, and he lowered himself into the well on the bucket rope.

The light in the cavern was dim, but he could see piles of jewels. He passed them by, noting that, behind him, eyes glinted among the gems. A table covered with food did not interest him. He passed through a group of cages hanging from the ceiling of the cave, each containing some exotic, friendly-looking creature. I'll play with you later, Ender thought. At last he came to a door, with these words in glowing emeralds:

THE END OF THE WORLD

He did not hesitate. He opened the door and stepped through.

He stood on a small ledge, high on a cliff overlooking a terrain of bright and deep green forest with dashes of autumn color and patches here and there of cleared land, with oxdrawn plows and small villages, a castle on a rise in the distance, and clouds riding currents of air below him. Above him, the sky was the ceiling of a vast cavern, with crystals dangling in bright stalactites.

The door closed behind him. Ender studied the scene intently. With the beauty of it, he cared less for survival than usual. He cared little, at the moment, what the game of this place might be. He had found it, and seeing it was its own reward. And so, with no thought of consequences, he jumped from the ledge.

Now he plummeted downward toward a roiling river and savage rocks; but a cloud came between him and the ground as he fell, and caught him, and carried him away.

It took him to the tower of the castle, and through the open window, bearing him in. There it left him, in a room with no apparent door in floor or ceiling, and windows looking out over a certainly fatal fall.

A moment ago he had thrown himself from a ledge carelessly; this time he hesitated.

The small rug before the fire unraveled itself into a long, slender serpent with wicked teeth.

"I am your only escape," it said. "Death is your only escape.

Ender looked around the room for a weapon, when suddenly the screen went dark. Words flashed around the rim of the desk.

REPORT TO COMMANDER IMMEDIATELY. YOU ARE LATE. -- GREEN
GREEN BROWN.

Furious, Ender snapped off the desk and went to the color wall, where he found the ribbon of green green brown, touched it, and followed it as it lit up before him. The dark green, light green, and brown of the ribbon reminded him of the early autumn kingdom he had found in the game. I must go back there, he told himself. The serpent is a long thread; I can let myself down from the tower and find my way through that place. Perhaps it's called the end of the world because it's the end of the games, because I can go to one of the villages and become one of the little boys working and playing there, with nothing to kill and nothing to kill me, just living there.

As he thought of it, though, he could not imagine what "just living" might actually be. He had never done it in his life. But he wanted to do it anyway.

Armies were larger than launch groups, and the army barracks room was larger, too. It was long and narrow, with bunks on both sides; so long, in fact, that you could see the curvature of the floor as the far end bent upward, part of the wheel of the Battle School.

Ender stood at the door. A few boys near the door glanced at him, but they were older, and it seemed as though they hadn't even seen him. They went on with their conversations, lying and leaning on bunks. They were discussing battles, of course; the older boys always did. They were all much larger than Ender. The ten- and eleven-year-olds towered over him; even the youngest were eight, and Ender was not large for his age.

He tried to see which of the boys was the commander, but most were somewhere between battle dress and what the soldiers always called their sleep uniform-- skin from head to toe. Many of them had desks out, but few were studying.

Ender stepped into the room. The moment he did, he was noticed.

"What do you want?" demanded the boy who had the upper bunk by the door. He was the largest of them. Ender had noticed him before, a young giant who had whiskers growing raggedly on his chin. "You're not a Salamander."

"I'm supposed to be, I think," Ender said. "Green green brown, right? I was transferred." He showed the boy, obviously the doorguard, his paper.

The doorguard reached for it. Ender withdrew it just out of reach. "I'm supposed to give it to Bonzo Madrid."

Now another boy joined the conversation, a smaller boy, but still larger than Ender, "Not bahn-zoe, pisshead. Bone-So. The name's Spanish. Bonzo Madrid. Aqui nosotros hablamos español, Señor Gran Fedor."

"You must be Bonzo, then?" Ender asked, pronouncing the name correctly.

"No, just a brilliant and talented polyglot. Petra Arkanian. The only girl in Salamander Army. With more balls than anybody else in the room."

"Mother Petra she talking?" said one of the boys. "She talking, she talking."

Another one chimed in. "Shit talking ... shit talking, shit talking!"

Quite a few laughed.

"Just between you and me," Petra said, "if they gave the Battle School an enema, they'd stick it in at green green brown."

Ender despaired. He already had nothing going for him: grossly undertrained, small, inexperienced, doomed to be resented for early advancement. And now, by chance, he had made exactly the wrong friend. An outcast in Salamander Army, and she had just linked him with her in the minds of the rest of the army. A good day's work. For a moment, as Ender looked around at the laughing, jeering faces, he imagined their bodies covered with hair, their teeth pointed for tearing. Am I the only human being in this place? Are all the others animals, waiting only to devour?

Then he remembered Alai. In every army, surely, there was at least one worth knowing.

Suddenly, though no one said to be quiet, the laughter stopped and the group fell silent. Ender turned to the door. A boy stood there, tall and dark and slender, with beautiful black eyes and slender lips that hinted at refinement. I would follow such beauty, said something inside Ender. I would see as those eyes see.

"Who are you?" asked the boy quietly.

"Ender Wiggin, sir," Ender said. "Reassigned from launch to Salamander Army." He held out the orders.

The boy took the paper in a swift, sure movement, without touching Ender's hand. "How old are you, Wiggin?" he asked.

"Almost seven."

Still quietly, he said, "I asked how old you are, not how old you almost are."

"I am six years, nine months, and twelve days old."

"How long have you been working in the battle room?"

"A few months, now. My aim is better."

"Any training in battle maneuvers? Have you ever been part of a team? Have you ever carried out a joint exercise?"

Ender had never heard of such things. He shook his head.

Madrid looked at him steadily. "I see. As you will quickly learn, the officers in command of this school, most notably Major Anderson, who runs the game, are fond of playing tricks. Salamander Army is just beginning to emerge from indecent obscurity. We have won twelve of our last twenty games. We have surprised Rat and Scorpion and Hound, and we are ready to play for leadership in the game. So of course, of course I am given such a useless, untrained, hopeless specimen of underdevelopment as yourself."

Petra said, quietly, "He isn't glad to meet you."

"Shut up, Arkanian," Madrid said. "To one trial we now add another. But whatever obstacles our officers choose to fling in our path, we are still--"

"Salamander!" cried the soldiers, in one voice. Instinctively, Ender's perception of these events changed. It was a pattern, a ritual. Madrid was not trying to hurt him, merely taking control of a surprising event and using it to strengthen his control of his army.

"We are the fire that will consume them, belly and bowel, head and heart, many flames of us, but one fire."

"Salamander!" they cried again.

"Even this one will not weaken us."

For a moment, Ender allowed himself to hope. "I'll work hard and learn quickly," he said.

"I didn't give you permission to speak," Madrid answered. "I intend to trade you away as quickly as I can. I'll probably have to give up someone valuable along with you, but as

small as you are you are worse than useless. One more frozen, inevitably, in every battle, that's all you are, and we're now at a point where every frozen soldier makes a difference in the standings. Nothing personal, Wiggin, but I'm sure you can get your training at someone else's expense."

"He's all heart," Petra said.

Madrid stepped closer to the girl and slapped her across the face with the back of his hand. It made little sound, for only his fingernails had hit her. But there were bright red marks, four of them, on her cheek, and little pricks of blood marked where the tips of his fingernails had struck.

"Here are your instructions, Wiggin. I expect that it is the last time I'll need to speak to you. You will stay out of the way when we're training in the battleroom. You have to be there, of course, but you will not belong to any toon and you will not take part in any maneuvers. When we're called to battle, you will dress quickly and present yourself at the gate with everyone else. But you will not pass through the gate until four full minutes after the beginning of the game, and then you will remain at the gate, with your weapon undrawn and unfired, until such time as the game ends."

Ender nodded. So he was to be a nothing. He hoped the trade happened soon.

He also noticed that Petra did not so much as cry out in pain, or touch her cheek, though one spot of blood had beaded and run, making a streak down to her jaw. Outcast she may be, but since Bonzo Madrid was not going to be Ender's friend, no matter what, he might as well make friends with Petra.

He was assigned a bunk at the far end of the room. The upper bunk, so that when he lay on his bed he couldn't even see the door; the curve of the ceiling blocked it. There were other boys near him, tired-looking boys, sullen, the ones least valued. They had nothing of welcome to say to Ender.

Ender tried to palm his locker open, but nothing happened. Then he realized the lockers were not secured. All four of them had rings on them, to pull them open. Nothing would be private, then, now that he was in an army.

There was a uniform in the locker. Not the pale green of the Launchies, but the orange-trimmed dark green uniform of Salamander Army. It did not fit well. But then, they had probably never had to provide such a uniform for a boy so young.

He was starting to take it off when he noticed Petra walking down the aisle toward his bed. He slid off the bunk and stood on the floor to greet her.

"Relax," she said. "I'm not an officer."

"You're a toon leader, aren't you?"

Someone nearby snickered.

"Whatever gave you that idea, Wiggin?"

"You have a bunk in the front."

"I bunk in the front because I'm the best sharpshooter in Salamander Army, and because Bonzo is afraid I'll start a revolution if the toon leaders don't keep an eye on me. As if I could start anything with boys like these." She indicated the sullen-faced boys on the nearby bunks.

What was she trying to do, make it worse than it already was?

"Everybody's better than I am," Ender said, trying to dissociate himself from her contempt for the boys who would, after all, be his near bunkmates.

"I'm a girl," she said, "and you're a pissant of a six-year-old. We have so much in common, why don't we be friends?"

"I won't do your deskwork for you," he said.

In a moment she realized it was a joke. "Ha," she said. "It's all so military, when you're in the game. School isn't like it is for Launchies. Histories and strategy and tactics and buggers and math and stars, things you'll need as a pilot or a commander. You'll see."

"So you're my friend. Do I get a prize?" Ender asked. He was imitating her swaggering way of speaking, as if she cared about nothing.

"Bonzo isn't going to let you practice. He's going to make you take your desk to the battleroom and study. He's right, in a way-- he doesn't want a totally untrained little kid start screwing up his precision maneuvers." She lapsed into giria, the slangy talk that imitated the pidgin English of uneducated people. "Bonzo, he pre-cise. He so careful, he piss on a plate and never splash."

Ender grinned.

"The battleroom is open all the time. If you want, I'll take you in the off hours and show you some of the things I know, I'm not a great soldier, but I'm pretty good, and I sure know more than you."

"If you want," Ender said.

"Starting tomorrow morning after breakfast."

"What if somebody's using the room? We always went right after breakfast, in my launch."

"No problem. There are really nine battlerooms."

"I never heard of any others."

"They all have the same entrance. The whole center of the battle school, the hub of the wheel, is battlerooms. They don't rotate with the rest of the station. That's how they do the nullg, the no-gravity-- it just holds still. No spin, no down. But they can set it up so that any one of the rooms is at the battleroom entrance corridor that we all use. Once you're inside, they move it along and another battleroom's in position."

"Oh."

"Like I said. Right after breakfast."

"Right," Ender said.

She started to walk away.

"Petra," he said.

She turned back.

"Thanks."

She said nothing, just turned around again and walked down the aisle.

Ender climbed back up on his bunk and finished taking off his uniform. He lay naked on the bed, doodling with his new desk, trying to decide if they had done anything to his access codes. Sure enough, they had wiped out his security system. He couldn't own anything here, not even his desk.

The lights dimmed a little. Getting toward bedtime. Ender didn't know which bathroom to use.

"Go left out of the door," said the boy on the next bunk. "We share it with Rat, Condor, and Squirrel."

Ender thanked him and started to walk on past.

"Hey," said the boy. "You can't go like that. Uniforms at all times out of this room."

"Even going to the toilet?"

"Especially. And you're forbidden to speak to anyone from any other army. At meals or in the toilet. You can get away with it sometimes in the game room, and of course whenever a teacher tells you to, but if Bonzo catch you, you dead, eh?"

"Thanks."

"And, uh, Bonzo get mad if you skin by Petra."

"She was naked when I came in, wasn't she?"

"She do what she like, but you keep you clothes on. Bonzo's orders."

That was stupid. Petra still looked like a boy, it was a stupid rule. It set her apart, made her different, split the army. Stupid stupid. How did Bonzo get to be a commander, if he didn't know better than that? Alai would be a better commander than Bonzo. He knew how to bring a group together.

I know how to bring a group together, too, thought Ender. Maybe I'll be commander someday.

In the bathroom, he was washing his hands when somebody spoke to him. "Hey, they putting babies in Salamander uniforms now?"

Ender didn't answer just dried off his hands.

"Hey, look! Salamander's getting babies now! Look at this! He could walk between my legs without touching my balls!"

"Cause you got none, Dink, that's why," somebody answered.

As Ender left the room, he heard somebody else say, "It's Wiggin. You know, the smartass from the game room."

He walked down the corridor smiling. He may be short, but they knew his name. From the game room, of course, so it meant nothing. But they'd see. He'd be a good soldier, too. They'd all know his name soon enough. Not in Salamander Army, maybe, but soon enough.

Petra was waiting in the corridor that led to the battleroom. "Wait a minute," she said to Ender. "Rabbit Army just went in, and it takes a few minutes to change to the next battleroom."

Ender sat down beside her. "There's more to the battleroom than just switching from one to the next," he said. "For instance, why is there gravity in the corridor outside the room, just before we go in?"

Petra closed her eyes. "And if the battlerooms are really free-floating, what happens when one is connected? Why doesn't it start to move with the rotation of the school?"

Ender nodded.

"These are the mysteries," Petra said in a deep whisper. "Do not pry into them. Terrible things happened to the last soldier who tried. He was discovered hanging by his feet from the ceiling of the bathroom, with his head stuffed in the toilet."

"So I'm not the first person to ask the question."

"You remember this, little boy." When she said little boy it sounded friendly, not contemptuous. "They never tell you any more truth than they have to. But any kid with brains knows that there've been some changes in science since the days of old Mazer Rackham and the Victorious Fleet. Obviously we can now control gravity. Turn it on and off, change the direction, maybe reflect it-- I've thought of lots of neat things you could do with gravity weapons and gravity drives on starships. And think how starships could move near planets. Maybe tear big chunks out of them by reflecting the planet's own gravity back on itself, only from another direction, and focused down to a smaller point. But they say nothing."

Ender understood more than she said. Manipulation of gravity was one thing; deception by the officers was another; but the most important message was this: the adults are the enemy, not the other armies. They do not tell us the truth.

"Come, little boy," she said. "The battleroom is ready. Petra's hands are steady. The enemy is deady." She giggled. "Petra the poet, they call me."

"They also say you're crazy as a loon."

"Better believe it, baby butt." She had ten target balls in a bag. Ender held onto her suit with one hand and the wall with the other, to steady her as she threw them, hard, in different directions. In the null gravity, they bounced every which way. "Let go of me," she said. She shoved off, spinning deliberately; with a few deft hand moves she steadied herself, and began aiming carefully at ball after ball. When she shot one, its glow changed from white to red. Ender knew that the color change lasted less than two minutes. Only one ball had changed back to white when she got the last one.

She rebounded accurately from a wall and came at high speed back to Ender. He caught her and held her against her own rebound, one of the first techniques they had taught him as a Launchy.

"You're good," he said.

"None better. And you're going to learn how to do it."

Petra taught him to hold his arm straight, to aim with the whole arm. "Something most soldiers don't realize is that the farther away your target is, the longer you have to hold the beam within about a two-centimeter circle. It's the difference between a tenth of a second and a half a second, but in battle that's a long time. A lot of soldiers think they missed when they were right on target, but they moved away too fast. So you can't use your gun like a sword, swish swish slice-em-in-half. You got to aim."

She used the ballcaller to bring the targets back, then launched them slowly, one by one. Ender fired at them. He missed every one.

"Good," she said. "You don't have any bad habits."

"I don't have any good ones, either," he pointed out.

"I give you those."

They didn't accomplish much that first morning. Mostly talk. How to think while you were aiming. You've got to hold your own motion and your enemy's motion in your mind at the same time. You've got to hold your arm straight out and aim with your body, so in case your arm is frozen you can still shoot. Learn where your trigger actually fires and ride the edge, so you don't have to pull so far each time you fire. Relax your body, don't tense up; it makes you tremble.

It was the only practice Ender got that day. During the army's drills in the afternoon, Ender was ordered to bring his desk and do his schoolwork, sitting in a corner of the room. Bonzo had to have all his soldiers in the battleroom, but he didn't have to use them.

Ender did not do his schoolwork, however. If he couldn't have drill as a soldier, he could study Bonzo as a tactician. Salamander Army was divided into the standard four toons of ten soldiers each. Some commanders set up their toons so that A toon consisted of the best soldiers, and D toon had the worst. Bonzo had mixed them, so that each consisted of good soldiers and weaker ones.

Except that B toon had only nine boys. Ender wondered who had been transferred to make room for him. It soon became plain that the leader of toon B was new. No wonder Bonzo was so disgusted-- he had lost a toon leader to get Ender.

And Bonzo was right about another thing. Ender was not ready.

All the practice time was spent working on maneuvers. Toons that couldn't see each other practiced performing precision operations together with exact timing; toons practiced using each other to make sudden changes of direction without losing formation.

All these soldiers took for granted skills that Ender didn't have. The ability to make a soft landing and absorb most of the shock. Accurate flight. Course adjustment using the frozen soldiers floating randomly through the room. Rolls, spins, dodges. Sliding along the walls-- a very difficult maneuver and yet one of the most valuable, since the enemy couldn't get behind you.

Even as Ender learned how much he did not know, he also saw things that he could improve on. The well-rehearsed formations were a mistake. It allowed the soldiers to obey shouted orders instantly, but it also meant they were predictable. Also, the individual soldiers were given little initiative. Once a pattern was set, they were to follow it through. There was no room for adjustment to what the enemy did against the formation. Ender studied Bonzo's formations like an enemy commander would, noting ways to disrupt the formation.

During free play that night, Ender asked Petra to practice with him.

"No," she said. "I want to be a commander someday, so I've got to play the game room." It was a common belief that the teachers monitored the games and spotted potential commanders there. Ender doubted it, though. Toon leaders had a better chance to show what they might do as commanders than any video player.

But he didn't argue with Petra. The after-breakfast practice was generous enough. Still, he had to practice. And he couldn't practice alone, except a few of the basic skills. Most of the hard things required partners or teams. If only he still had Alai or Shen to practice with.

Well, why shouldn't he practice with them? He had never heard of a soldier practicing with Launchies, but there was no rule against it. It just wasn't done; Launchies were held in too much contempt. Well, Ender was still being treated like a Launchy anyway. He needed someone to practice with, and in return he could help them learn some of the things he saw the older boys doing.

"Hey, the great soldier returns!" said Bernard. Ender stood in the doorway of his old barracks. He'd only been away for a day, but already it seemed like an alien place, and the others of his launch group were strangers. Almost he turned around and left. But there was Alai, who had made their friendship sacred. Alai was not a stranger.

Ender made no effort to conceal how he was treated in Salamander Army. "And they're right. I'm about as useful as a sneeze in a spacesuit." Alai laughed, and other Launchies started to gather around. Ender proposed his bargain. Free play, every day, working hard in the battleroom, under Ender's direction. They would learn things from the armies, from the battles Ender would see; he would get the practice he needed in developing soldier skills. "We'll get ready together."

A lot of boys wanted to come, too. "Sure," Ender said. "If you're coming to work. If you're just farting around, you're out. I don't have any time to waste."

They didn't waste any time. Ender was clumsy, trying to describe what he had seen, working out ways to do it. But by the time free play ended, they had learned some things. They were tired, but they were getting the knack of a few techniques.

"Where were you?" asked Bonzo.

Ender stood stiffly by his commander's bunk. "Practicing in a battleroom."

"I hear you had some of your old Launchy group with you."

"I couldn't practice alone."

"I won't have any soldiers in Salamander Army hanging around with Launchies. You're a soldier now."

Ender regarded him in silence.

"Did you hear me, Wiggin?"

"Yes, sir."

"No more practicing with those little farts."

"May I speak to you privately?" asked Ender.

It was a request that commanders were required to allow. Bonzo's face went angry, and he led Ender out into the corridor. "Listen, Wiggin, I don't want you, I'm trying to get rid of you, but don't give me any problems or I'll paste you to the wall."

A good commander, thought Ender, doesn't have to make stupid threats.

Bonzo grew annoyed at Ender's silence. "Look, you asked me to come out here, now talk."

"Sir, you were correct not to place me in a toon. I don't know how to do anything."

"I don't need you to tell me when I'm correct."

"But I'm going to become a good soldier. I won't screw up your regular drill, but I'm going to practice, and I'm going to practice with the only people who will practice with me, and that's my Launchies."

"You'll do what I tell you, you little bastard."

"That's right, sir. I'll follow all the orders that you're authorized to give. But free play is free. No assignments can be given. None. By anyone.

He could see Bonzo's anger growing hot. Hot anger was bad. Ender's anger was cold, and he could use it. Bonzo's was hot, and so it used him.

"Sir, I've got my own career to think of. I won't interfere in your training and your battles, but I've got to learn sometime. I didn't ask to be put into your army, you're trying to trade me as soon as you can. But nobody will take me if I don't know anything, will they? Let me learn something, and then you can get rid of me all the sooner and get a soldier you can really use."

Bonzo was not such a fool that anger kept him from recognizing good sense when he heard it. Still, he couldn't let go of his anger immediately.

"While you're in Salamander Army, you'll obey me."

"If you try to control my free play, I can get you iced."

It probably wasn't true. But it was possible. Certainly if Ender made a fuss about it, interfering with free play could conceivably get Bonzo removed from command. Also, there was the fact that the officers obviously saw something in Ender, since they had promoted him. Maybe Ender did have influence enough with the teachers to ice somebody. "Bastard," said Bonzo.

"It isn't my fault you gave me that order in front of everybody," Ender said. "But if you want, I'll pretend you won this argument. Then tomorrow you can tell me you changed your mind."

"I don't need you to tell me what to do."

"I don't want the other guys to think you backed down. You wouldn't be able to command as well."

Bonzo hated him for it, for the kindness. It was as if Ender were granting him his command as a favor. Galling, and yet he had no choice. No choice about anything. It didn't occur to Bonzo that it was his own fault, for giving Ender an unreasonable order. He only knew that Ender had beaten him, and then rubbed his nose in it by being magnanimous.

"I'll have your ass someday," Bonzo said.

"Probably," said Ender. The lights out buzzer sounded. Ender walked back into the room, looking dejected. Beaten. Angry. The other boys drew the obvious conclusion.

And in the morning, as Ender was leaving for breakfast, Bonzo stopped him and spoke loudly. "I changed my mind, pinprick. Maybe by practicing with your Launchies you'll learn something, and I can trade you easier. Anything to get rid of you faster."

"Thank you, sir," Ender said.

"Anything," whispered Boozo. "I hope you're iced." Ender smiled gratefully and left the room. After breakfast he practiced again with Petra. All afternoon he watched Bonzo drill and figured out ways to destroy his army. During free play he and Alai and the others worked themselves to exhaustion. I can do this, thought Ender as he lay in his bed, his muscles throbbing, unknitting themselves. I can handle it.

Salamander Army had a battle four days later. Ender followed behind the real soldiers as they jogged along the corridors to the battleroom. There were two ribbons along the walls, the green green brown of Salamander and the black white black of Condor. When they came to the place where the battleroom had always been, the corridor split instead, with green green brown heading to the left and black white black to the right. Around another turn to the right, and the army stopped in front of a blank wall.

The toons formed up in silence. Ender stayed behind them all. Bonzo was giving his instructions. "A take the handles and go up. B left, C right, D down." He saw that the toons were oriented to follow instructions, then added, "And you, pinprick, wait four minutes, then come just inside the door. Don't even take your gun off your suit."

Ender nodded. Suddenly the wall behind Bonzo became transparent. Not a wall at all, then, but a forcefield. The battleroom was different, too. Huge brown boxes were suspended in midair, partially obstructing the view. So these were the obstacles that the soldiers called stars. They were distributed seemingly at random. Bonzo seemed not to care where they were.

Apparently the soldiers already knew how to handle the stars.

But it soon became clear to Ender, as he sat and watched the battle from the corridor, that they did not know how to handle the stars. They did know how to softland on one and use it for cover, the tactics of assaulting the enemy's position on a star. They showed no sense at all of which stars mattered. They persisted in assaulting stars that could have been bypassed by wall-sliding to a more advanced position.

The other commander was taking advantage of Bonzo's neglect of strategy. Condor Army forced the Salamanders into costly assaults. Fewer and fewer Salamanders were unfrozen for the attack on the next star. It was clear, after only five or six minutes, that Salamander Army could not defeat the enemy by attacking.

Ender stepped through the gate. He drifted slightly downward. The battlerooms he had practiced in always had their doors at floor level. For real battles, however, the door was set in the middle of the wall, as far from the floor as from the ceiling.

Abruptly he felt himself reorient, as he had in the shuttle. What had been down was now up, and now sideways. In null-g, there was no reason to stay oriented the way he had been in the corridor. It was impossible to tell, looking at the perfectly square doors, which way had been up. And it didn't matter. For now Ender had found the orientation that made sense. The enemy's gate was down. The object of the game was to fall toward the enemy's home.

Ender made the motions that oriented himself in his new direction. Instead of being spread out, his whole body presented to the enemy, now Ender's legs pointed toward them. He was a much smaller target.

Someone saw him. He was, after all, drifting aimlessly in the open. Instinctively he pulled his legs up under him. At that moment he was flashed and the legs of his suit froze in position. His arms remained unfrozen, for without a direct body hit, only the limbs that were shot froze up. It occurred to Ender that if he had not been presenting his legs to the enemy, it would have been his body they hit. He would have been immobilized.

Since Bonzo had ordered him not to draw his weapon, Ender continued to drift, not moving his head or arms, as if they had been frozen, too. The enemy ignored him and concentrated their fire on the soldiers who were firing at them. It was a bitter battle. Outnumbered now, Salamander Army gave ground stubbornly. The battle disintegrated into a dozen individual shootouts. Bonzo's discipline paid off now, for each Salamander that froze took at least one enemy with him. No one ran or panicked, everyone remained calm and aimed carefully.

Petra was especially deadly. Condor Army noticed it and took great effort to freeze her. They froze her shooting arm first, and her stream of curses was only interrupted when they froze her completely and the helmet clamped down on her jaw. In a few minutes it was over. Salamander Army offered no more resistance.

Ender noted with pleasure that Condor could only muster the minimal five soldiers necessary to open the gate to victory. Four of them touched their helmets to the lighted spots at the four corners of Salamander's door, while the fifth passed through the forcefield. That ended the game. The lights came back on to their full brightness, and Anderson came out of the teacher door.

I could have drawn my gun, thought Ender, as the enemy approached the door. I could have drawn my gun and shot just one of them, and they would have been too few. The game would have been a draw. Without four men to touch the four corners and a fifth man to pass through the gate, Condor would have had no victory. Bonzo, you ass, I could have saved you from this defeat. Maybe even turned it to victory, since they were sitting

there, easy targets, and they wouldn't have known at first where the shots were coming from. I'm a good enough shot for that.

But orders were orders, and Ender had promised to obey. He did get some satisfaction out of the fact that on the official tally Salamander Army recorded, not the expected forty-one disabled or eliminated, but rather forty eliminated and one damaged. Bonzo couldn't understand it, until he consulted Anderson's book and realized who it was. Damaged, Bonzo, thought Ender. I could still shoot,

He expected Bonzo to come to him and say, "Next time, when it's like that, you can shoot." But Bonzo didn't say anything to him at all until the next morning after breakfast. Of course, Bonzo ate in the commanders mess, but Ender was pretty sure the odd score would cause as much stir there as it did in the soldiers dining hall. In every other game that wasn't a draw, every member of the losing team was either eliminated-- totally frozen-- or disabled, which meant they had some body parts still unfrozen, but were unable to shoot or inflict damage on the enemy. Salamander was the only losing army with one man in the Damaged but Active category.

Ender volunteered no explanation, but the other members of Salamander Army let it be known why it had happened. And when other boys asked him why he hadn't disobeyed orders and fired, he calmly answered, "I obey orders."

After breakfast, Bonzo looked for him. "The order still stands," he said, "and don't you forget it."

It will cost you, you fool. I may not be a good soldier, but I can still help and there's no reason you shouldn't let me.

Ender said nothing.

An interesting side effect of the battle was that Ender emerged at the top of the soldier efficiency list. Since he hadn't fired a shot, he had a perfect record on shooting-- no misses at all. And since he had never been eliminated or disabled, his percentage there was excellent. No one else came close. It made a lot of boys laugh, and others were angry, but on the prized efficiency list, Ender was now the leader.

He kept sitting out the army practice sessions, and kept working hard on his own, with Petra in the mornings and his friends at night. More Launchies were joining them now, not on a lark but because they could see results-- they were getting better and better. Ender and Alai stayed ahead of them, though. In part, it was because Alai kept trying new things, which forced Ender to think of new tactics to cope with them. In part it was because they kept making stupid mistakes, which suggested things to do that no self-respecting, well-trained soldier would even have tried. Many of the things they attempted turned out to be useless. But it was always fun, always exciting, and enough things worked that they knew it was helping them. Evening was the best time of the day.

The next two battles were easy Salamander victories; Ender came in after five minutes and remained untouched by the defeated enemy. Ender began to realize that Condor Army, which had beaten them, was unusually good; Salamander, weak as Bonzo's grasp of strategy might be, was one of the better teams, climbing steadily in the ratings, clawing for fourth place with Rat Army.

Ender turned seven. They weren't much for dates and calendars at the Battle School, but Ender had found out how to bring up the date on his desk, and he noticed his birthday. The school noticed it, too: they took his measurements and issued him a new Salamander uniform and a new flash suit for the battleroom. He went back to the barracks with the new clothing on. It felt strange and loose, like his skin no longer fit properly.

He wanted to stop at Petra's bunk and tell her about his home, about what his birthdays were usually like, just tell her it was his birthday so she'd say something about it being a happy one. But nobody told birthdays. It was childish. It was what landsiders did. Cakes and silly customs. Valentine baked him his cake on his sixth birthday. It fell and it was terrible. Nobody knew how to cook anymore; it was the kind of crazy thing Valentine would do. Everybody teased Valentine about it, but Ender saved a little bit of it in his cupboard. Then they took out his monitor and he left and for all he knew, it was still there, a little piece of greasy yellow dust. Nobody talked about home, not among the soldiers; there had been no life before Battle School. Nobody got letters, and nobody wrote any. Everybody pretended that they didn't care.

But I do care, thought Ender. The only reason I'm here is so that a bugger won't shoot out Valentine's eye, won't blast her head open like the soldiers in the videos of the first battles with the buggers. Won't split her head with a beam so hot that her brains burst the skull and spill out like rising bread dough, the way it happens in my worst nightmares, in my worst nights, when I wake up trembling but silent, must keep silent or they'll hear that I miss my family. I want to go home.

It was better in the morning. Home was merely a dull ache in the back of his memory. A tiredness in his eyes. That morning Bonzo came in as they were dressing. "Flash suits!" he called. It was a battle. Ender's fourth game.

The enemy was Leopard Army. It would be easy. Leopard was new, and it was always in the bottom quarter in the standings. It had been organized only six months ago, with Pol Slattery as its commander. Ender put on his new battle suit and got into line; Bonzo pulled him roughly out of line and made him march at the end. You didn't need to do that, Ender said silently. You could have let me stay in line.

Ender watched from the corridor. Pol Slattery was young, but he was sharp, he had some new ideas. He kept his soldiers moving, darting from star to star, wallsliding to get behind and above the stolid Salamanders. Ender smiled. Bonzo was hopelessly confused, and so were his men. Leopard seemed to have men in every direction. However, the battle was not as lopsided as it seemed. Ender noticed that Leopard was losing a lot of men, too-- their reckless tactics exposed them too much. What mattered, however, was

that Salamander was defeated. They had surrendered the initiative completely. Though they were still fairly evenly matched with the enemy, they huddled together like the last survivors of a massacre, as if they hoped the enemy would overlook them in the carnage.

Ender slipped slowly through the gate, oriented himself so the enemy's gate was down, and drifted slowly eastward to a corner where he wouldn't be noticed. He even fired at his own legs, to hold them in the kneeling position that offered him the best protection. He looked to any casual glance like another frozen soldier who had drifted helplessly out of the battle.

With Salamander Army waiting abjectly for destruction, Leopard obligingly destroyed them. They had nine boys left when Salamander finally stopped firing. They formed up and started to open the Salamander gate.

Ender aimed carefully with a straight arm, as Petra had taught him. Before anyone knew what was happening, he froze three of the soldiers who were about to press their helmets against the lighted corners of the door. Then some of the others spotted him and fired-- but at first they hit only his already frozen legs. It gave him time to get the last two men at the gate. Leopard had only four men left unfrozen when Ender was finally hit in the arm and disabled. The game was a draw, and they never had hit him in the body.

Pol Slattery was furious, but there had been nothing unfair about it. Everyone in Leopard Army assumed that it had been a strategy of Bonzo's, to leave a man till the last minute. It didn't occur to them that little Ender had fired against orders. But Salamander Army knew. Bonzo knew, and Ender could see from the way the commander looked at him that Bonzo hated him for rescuing him from total defeat. I don't care, Ender told himself. It will just make me easier to trade away, and in the meantime you won't drop so far in the standings. You trade me. I've learned all I'm ever going to learn from you. How to fail with style, that's all you know, Bonzo.

What have I learned so far? Ender listed things in his mind as he undressed by his bunk. The enemy's gate is down. Use my legs as a shield in battle. A small reserve, held back until the end of the game, can be decisive. And soldiers can sometimes make decisions that are smarter than the orders they've been given.

Naked, he was about to climb into bed when Bonzo came toward him, his face hard and set. I have seen Peter like this, thought Ender, silent with murder in his eye. But Bonzo is not Peter. Bonzo has more fear.

"Wiggin, I finally traded you. I was able to persuade Rat Army that your incredible place on the efficiency list is more than an accident. You go over there tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir," Ender said.

Perhaps he sounded too grateful. Suddenly Bonzo swung at him, caught his jaw with a vicious open-handed slap. It knocked Ender sideways, into his bunk, and he almost fell. Then Bonzo slugged him, hard, in the stomach. Ender dropped to his knees.

"You disobeyed me," Bonzo said. Loudly, for all to hear. "No good soldier ever disobeys."

Even as he cried from the pain, Ender could not help but take vengeful pleasure in the murmurs he heard rising through the barracks. You fool, Bonzo. You aren't enforcing discipline, you're destroying it. They know I turned defeat into a draw. And now they see how you repay me. You made yourself look stupid in front of everyone. What is your discipline worth now?

The next day, Ender told Petra that for her sake the shooting practice in the morning would have to end. Bonzo didn't need anything that looked like a challenge now, and so she'd better stay clear of Ender for a while. She understood perfectly. "Besides," she said, "you're as close to being a good shot as you'll ever be."

He left his desk and flash suit in the locker. He would wear his Salamander uniform until he could get to the commissary and change it for the brown and black of Rat. He had brought no possessions with him; he would take none away. There were none to have-- everything of value was in the school computer or his own head and hands.

He used one of the public desks in the game room to register for an earth-gravity personal combat course during the hour immediately after breakfast. He didn't plan to get vengeance on Bonzo for hitting him. But he did intend that no one would be able to do that to him again.

Chapter 8 -- Rat

"Colonel Graff, the games have always been run fairly before. Either random distribution of stars, or symmetrical."

"Fairness is a wonderful attribute, Major Anderson. It has nothing to do with war."

"The game will be compromised. The comparative standings will become meaningless."

"Alas."

"It will take months. Years, to develop the new battlerooms and run the simulations."

"That's why I'm asking you now. To begin. Be creative. Think of every stacked, impossible, unfair star arrangement you can. Think of other ways to bend the rules. Late

notification. Unequal forces. Then run the simulations and see which ones are hardest, which easiest. We want an intelligent progression here. We want to bring him along."

"When do you plan to make him a commander? When he's eight?"

"Of course not. I haven't even assembled his army yet."

"Oh, so you're stacking it that way, too?"

"You're getting too close to the game, Anderson. You're forgetting that it is merely a training exercise."

"It's also status, identity, purpose, name; all that makes these children who they are comes out of this game. When it becomes known that the game can be manipulated, weighted, cheated, it will undo this whole school. I'm not exaggerating."

"I know."

"So I hope Ender Wiggin truly is the one, because you'll have defeated the effectiveness of our training method for a long time to come."

"If Ender isn't the one, if his peak of military brilliance does not coincide with the arrival of our fleets at the bugger homeworlds, then it doesn't really matter what our training method is or isn't."

"I hope you will forgive me, Colonel Graff, but I feel that I must report your orders and my opinion of their consequences to the Strategos and the Hegemon."

"Why not our dear Polemarch?"

"Everybody knows you have him in your pocket."

"Such hostility Major Anderson. And I thought we were friends."

"We are. And I think you may be right about Ender. I just don't believe you, and you alone, should decide the fate of the world."

"I don't even think it's right for me to decide the fate of Ender Wiggin."

"So you won't mind if I notify them?"

"Of course I mind, you meddling ass. This is something to be decided by people who know what they're doing, not these frightened politicians who got their office because they happen to be politically potent in the country they came from."

"But you understand why I'm doing it."

"Because you're such a short-sighted little bureaucratic bastard that you think you need to cover yourself in case things go wrong. Well, if things go wrong we'll all be bugger meat. So trust me now, Anderson, and don't bring the whole damn Hegemony down on review. What I'm doing is hard enough without them."

"Oh, is it unfair? Are things stacked against you? You can do it to Ender, but you can't take it, is that it?"

"Ender Wiggin is ten times smarter and stronger than am. What I'm doing to him will bring out his genius. If I had to go through it myself, it would crush me. Major Anderson, I know I'm wrecking the game, and I know you love it better than any of the boys who play. Hate me if you like, but don't stop me."

"I reserve the right to communicate with the Hegemony and the Strategoi at any time. But for now do what you want."

"Thank you ever so kindly."

"Ender Wiggin, the little farthead who leads the standings, what a pleasure to have you with us." The commander of Rat Army lay sprawled on a lower bunk wearing only his desk. "With you around, how can any army lose?" Several of the boys nearby laughed.

There could not here been two more opposite armies than Samamander and Rat. The room was rumbled, cluttered, noisy. Alter Bonzo Ender had thought that indiscipline would be a welcome relief. Instead, he found that he had come to expet quiet and order, and the disorder here made him uncomfortable.

"We doing OK, Ender Bender. I Rose de Nose, Jewboy extraordinaire, and you ain't nothin but a pinheaded pinprick of a goy. Don't you forget it."

Since the IF was formed the Strategos of the military forces had always been a Jew. There was a myth that Jewish generals didn't lose wars. And so far it was still true. It made any Jew at the Battle School dream of being Strategos, and conferred prestige on him from the start. It also caused resentment. Rat Army was often called the Kike Force, half in parody of Mazer Rackham's Strike Force. There were many who liked to remember that during the Second Invasion, even though an American Jew, as President, was Hegemon of the alliance, an Israeli Jew was Strategos in overall command of IF, and a Russian Jew was Polemarch of the fleet, it was Mazer Rackham, a little-known, twice-court-martialled, half-Maori New Zealander whose Strike Force broke up and finally destroyed the bugger fleet in the action around Saturn.

If Mazer Rackham could save the world, then it didn't matter a bit whether you were a Jew or not, people said.

But it did matter, and Rose the Nose knew it. He mocked himself to forestall the mocking comments of anti-semites-- almost everyone he defeated in battle became, at least for a time, a Jew-hater-- but he also made sure everyone knew what he was. His army was in second place, bucking for first.

"I took you on, goy, because I didn't want people to think I only win because I got great soldiers. I want them to know that even with a little puke of a soldier like you I can still win. We only got three rules here. Do what I tell you and don't piss in the bed."

Ender nodded. He knew that Rose wanted him to ask what the third rule was. So he did.

"That was three rules. We don't do too good in math here."

The message was clear. Winning is more important than anything.

"Your practice sessions with half-assed little Launchies are over, Wiggin. Done. You're in a big boys' army now. I'm putting you in Dink Meeker's toon. From now on, as far as you're concerned, Dink Meeker is God."

"Then who are you?"

"The personnel officer who hired God." Rose grinned. "And you are forbidden to use your desk again until you've frozen two enemy soldiers in the same battle. This order is out of self-defense. I hear you're a genius programmer. I don't want you screwing around with my desk."

Everybody erupted in laughter. It took Ender a moment to understand why. Rose had programmed his desk to display-- and animate-- a bigger-than-life sized picture of male genitals, which waggled back and forth as Rose held the desk on his naked lap. This is just the sort of commander Bonzo would trade me to, thought Ender. How does a boy who spends his time like this win battles?

Ender found Dink Meeker in the game room, not playing, just sitting and watching. "A guy pointed you out," Ender said. "I'm Ender Wiggin."

"I know," said Meeker.

"I'm in your toon."

"I know," he said again.

"I'm pretty inexperienced."

Dink looked up at him. "Look, Wiggin, I know all this. Why do you think I asked Rose to get you for me?"

He had not been dumped, he had been picked up, he had been asked for. Meeker wanted him. "Why?" asked Ender.

"I've watched your practice sessions with the Launchies. I think you show some promise. Bonzo is stupid and I wanted you to get better training than Petra could give you. All she can do is shoot."

"I needed to learn that."

"You still move like you were afraid to wet your pants."

"So teach me."

"So learn."

"I'm not going to quit my freetime practice sessions."

"I don't want you to quit them."

"Rose the Nose does."

"Rose the Nose can't stop you. Likewise, he can't stop you from using your desk."

"I thought commanders could order anything."

"They can order the moon to turn blue, too, but it doesn't happen. Listen, Ender, commanders have just as much authority as you let them have. The more you obey them, the more power they have over you."

"What's to stop them from hurting me?" Ender remembered Bonzo's blow.

"I thought that was why you were taking personal attack classes."

"You've really been watching me, haven't you?"

Dink didn't answer.

"I don't want to get Rose mad at me. I want to be part of the battles now, I'm tired of sitting out till the end."

"Your standings will go down."

This time Ender didn't answer.

"Listen, Ender, as long as you're part of my toon, you're part of the battle."

Ender soon learned why. Dink trained his toon independently from the rest of Rat Army, with discipline and vigor; he never consulted with Rose, and only rarely did the whole army maneuver together. It was as if Rose commanded one army, and Dink commanded a much smaller one that happened to practice in the battleroom at the same time.

Dink started out the first practice by asking Ender to demonstrate his feet-first attack position. The other boys didn't like it. "How can we attack lying on our backs?" they asked.

To Ender's surprise, Dink didn't correct them, didn't say, "You aren't attacking on your back, you're dropping downward toward them." He had seen what Ender was doing, but he had not understood the orientation that it implied. It soon became clear to Ender that even though Dink was very, very good, his persistence in holding onto the corridor gravity orientation instead of thinking of the enemy gate as downward was limiting his thinking.

They practiced attacking an enemy-held star. Before trying Ender's feet-first method, they had always gone in standing up, their whole bodies available as a target. Even now, though, they reached the star and then assaulted the enemy from one direction only; "Over the top," cried Dink, and over they went. To his credit, he then repeated the exercise, calling, "Again, upside down," but because of their insistence on a gravity that didn't exist, the boys became awkward when the maneuver was under, as if vertigo seized them.

They hated the feet-first attack. Dink insisted that they use it. As a result, they hated Ender. "Do we have to learn how to fight from a Launchy?" one of them muttered, making sure Ender could hear. "Yes," answered Dink. They kept working.

And they learned it. In practice skirmishes, they began to realize how much harder it was to shoot an enemy attacking feet first. As soon as they were convinced of that, they practiced the maneuver more willingly.

That night was the first time Ender had come to a practice session after a whole afternoon of work. He was tired.

"Now you're in a real army," said Alai. "You don't have to keep practicing with us."

"From you I can learn things that nobody knows," said Ender.

"Dink Meeker is the best. I hear he's your toon leader."

"Then let's get busy. I'll teach you what I learned from him today."

He put Alai and two dozen others through the same exercises that had worn him out all afternoon. But he put new touches on the patterns, made the boys try the maneuvers with one leg frozen, with both legs frozen, or using frozen boys for leverage to change directions.

Halfway through the practice, Ender noticed Petra and Dink together, standing in the doorway, watching. Later, when he looked again, they were gone.

So they're watching me, and what we're doing is known. He did not know whether Dink was his friend; he believed that Petra was, but nothing could be sure. They might be angry that he was doing what only commanders and toon leaders were supposed to do--drilling and training soldiers. They might be offended that a soldier would associate so closely with Launchies. It made him uneasy, to have older children watching.

"I thought I told you not to use your desk." Rose the Nose stood by Ender's bunk.

Ender did not look up. "I'm completing the trigonometry assignment for tomorrow."

Rose bumped his knee into Ender's desk. "I said not to use it."

Ender set the desk on his bunk and stood up. "I need trigonometry more than I need you."

Rose was taller than Ender by at least forty centimeters. But Ender was not particularly worried. It would not come to physical violence, and if it did, Ender thought he could hold his own. Rose was lazy and didn't know personal combat.

"You're going down in the standings, boy," said Rose.

"I expect to. I was only leading the list because of the stupid way Salamander Army was using me."

"Stupid? Bonzo's strategy won a couple of key games."

"Bonzo's strategy wouldn't win a salad fight. I was violating orders every time I fired my gun."

Rose hadn't known that. It made him angry. "So everything Bonzo said about you was a lie. You're not only short and incompetent, you're insubordinate, too."

"But I turned defeat into stalemate, all by myself."

"We'll see how you do all by yourself next time." Rose went away.

One of Ender's toonmates shook his head. "You dumb as a thumb."

Ender looked at Dink, who was doodling on his desk. Dink looked up, noticed Ender watching him, and gazed steadily back at him. No expression. Nothing. OK, thought Ender, I can take care of myself.

Battle came two days later. It was Ender's first time fighting as part of a team; he was nervous. Dink's team lined up against the right-hand wall of the corridor and Ender was very careful not to lean, not to let his weight slip to either side. Stay balanced.

"Wiggin!" called Rose the Nose.

Ender felt dread come over him from throat to groin. a tingle of fear that made him shudder. Rose saw it.

"Shivering? Trembling? Don't wet your pants, little Launchy." Rose hooked a finger over the butt of Ender's gun and pulled him to the forcefield that hid the battleroom from view. "We'll see how well you do now, Ender. As soon as that door opens, you jump through, go straight ahead toward the enemy's door."

Suicide. Pointless, meaningless self-destruction. But he had to follow orders now, this was battle, not school. For a moment Ender raged silently; then he calmed himself. "Excellent, sir," he said. "The direction I fire my gun is the direction of their main contingent."

Rose laughed. "You won't have time to fire anything, pinprick."

The wall vanished. Ender jumped up, took hold of the ceiling handholds, and threw himself out and down, speeding toward the enemy door.

It was Centipede Army, and they only beginning to emerge from their door when Ender was halfway across the battleroom. Many of them were able to get under cover of stars quickly but Ender had doubled up his legs under him and, holding his pistol at his crotch, he was firing between his legs and freezing many of them as they emerged.

They flashed his legs, but he had three precious seconds before they could hit his body and put him out of action. He froze several more, then flung out his arms in equal and opposite directions. The hand that held his gun ended up pointing toward the main body of Centipede Army. He fired into the mass of the enemy, and then they froze him.

A second later he smashed into the forcefield of the enemy's door and rebounded with a crazy spin. He landed in a group of enemy soldiers behind a star; they shoved him off and spun him even more rapidly. He rebounded out of control through the rest of the battle, though gradually friction with the air slowed him down. He had no way of knowing how many men he had frozen before getting iced himself, but he did get the general idea that Rat Army won again, as usual.

After the battle Rose didn't speak to him. Ender was still first in the standings, since he had frozen three, disabled two, and damaged seven. There was no more talk about insubordination and whether Ender could use his desk. Rose stayed in his part of the barracks, and left Ender alone.

Dink Meeker began to practice instant emergence from the corridor-- Ender's attack on the enemy while they were still coming out of the door had been devastating. "If one man can do that much damage, think what a toon can do." Dink got Major Anderson to open a door in the middle of a wall, even during practice sessions, instead of just the floor level door, so they could practice launching under battle conditions. Word got around. From now on no one could take five or ten or fifteen seconds in the corridor to size things up. The game had changed.

More battles. This time Ender played a proper role within a toon. He made mistakes. Skirmishes were lost. He dropped from first to second in the standings, then to fourth. Then he made fewer mistakes, and began to feel comfortable within the framework of the toon, and he went back up to third, then second, then first.

After practice one afternoon, Ender stayed in the battleroom. He had noticed that Dink Meeker usually came late to dinner, and he assumed it was for extra practice. Ender wasn't very hungry, and he wanted to see what it was Dink practiced when no one else could see.

But Dink didn't practice. He stood near the door, watching Ender.

Ender stood across the room, watching Dink.

Neither spoke. It was plain Dink expected Ender to leave. It was just as plain that Ender was saying no.

Dink turned his back on Ender, methodically took off his flash suit, and gently pushed off from the floor. He drifted slowly toward the center of the room, very slowly, his body relaxing almost completely, so that his hands and arms seemed to be caught by almost nonexistent air currents in the room.

After the speed and tension of practice, the exhaustion, the alertness, it was restful just to watch him drift. He did it for ten minutes or so before he reached another wall. Then he pushed off rather sharply, returned to his flash suit, and pulled it on.

"Come on," he said to Ender.

They went to the barracks. The room was empty, since all the boys were at dinner. Each went to his own bunk and changed into regular uniforms. Ender walked to Dink's bunk and waited for a moment till Dink was ready to go.

"Why did you wait?" asked Dink.

"Wasn't hungry."

"Well, now you know why I'm not a commander."

Ender had wondered.

"Actually, they promoted me twice, and I refused."

"Refused?"

"They took away my old locker and bunk and desk, assigned me to a commander cabin and gave me an army. But I just stayed in the cabin until they gave in and put me back into somebody else's army."

"Why?"

"Because I won't let them do it to me. I can't believe you haven't seen through all this crap yet, Ender. But I guess you're young. These other armies, they aren't the enemy. It's the teachers, they're the enemy. They get us to fight each other, to hate each other. The game is everything. Win win win, it amounts to nothing. We kill ourselves, go crazy trying to beat each other, and all the time the old bastards are watching us, studying us, discovering our weak points, deciding whether we're good enough or not. Well, good enough for what? I was six years old when they brought me here. What the hell did I know? They decided I was right for the program, but nobody ever asked me if the program was right for me."

"So why don't you go home?"

Dink smiled crookedly. "Because I can't give up the game." He tugged at the fabric of his flash suit, which lay on the bunk beside him. "Because I love this."

"So why not be a commander?"

Dink shook his head. "Never. Look what it does to Rosen. The boy's crazy. Rose de Nose. Sleeps in here with us instead of in his cabin. Why? Because he's scared to be alone, Ender. Scared of the dark."

"Rose?"

"But they made him a commander and so he has to act like one. He doesn't know what he's doing. He's winning, but that scares him worst of all, because he doesn't know what he's winning, except that I have something to do with it. Any minute somebody could find out that Rosen isn't some magic Israeli general who can win no matter what. He doesn't know why anybody wins or loses. Nobody does."

"It doesn't mean he's crazy, Dink."

"I know, you've been here a year, you think these people are normal. Well, they're not. We're not. I look in the library, I call up books on my desk. Old ones, because they won't let us have anything new, but I've got a pretty good idea what children are, and we're not children. Children can lose sometimes, and nobody cares. Children aren't in armies, they aren't commanders, they don't rule over forty other kids, it's more than anybody can take and not get a little crazy."

Ender tried to remember what other children were like, in his class at school, back in the city. But all he could think of was Stilson.

"I had a brother. Just a normal guy. All he cared about was girls. And flying. He wanted to fly. He used to play ball with the guys. A pickup game, shooting balls at a hoop, dribbling down the corridors until the peace officers confiscated your ball. We had a great time. He was teaching me how to dribble when I was taken."

Ender remembered his own brother, and the memory was not fond.

Dink misunderstood the expression on Ender's face. "Hey, I know, nobody's supposed to talk about home. But we came from somewhere. The Battle School didn't create us, you know. The Battle School doesn't create anything. It just destroys. And we all remember things from home. Maybe not good things, but we remember and then we lie and pretend that-- look, Ender, why is that nobody talks about home, ever? Doesn't that tell you how important it is? That nobody even admits that-- oh hell."

"No, it's all right," Ender said. "I was just thinking about Valentine. My sister."

"I wasn't trying to make you upset."

"It's OK. I don't think of hut very much, because I always get like this."

"That's right, we never cry. Christ, I never thought of that. Nobody ever cries. We really are trying to be adult. Just like our fathers. I bet your father was like you. I bet he was quiet and took it, and then busted out and--"

"I'm not like my father."

"So maybe I'm wrong. But look at Bonzo, your old commander. He's got an advanced case of Spanish honor. He can't allow himself to have weaknesses. To be better than him, that's an insult. To be stronger, that's like cutting off his balls. That's why he hates you, because you didn't suffer when he tried to punish you. He hates you for that, he honestly wants to kill you. He's crazy. They're all crazy."

"And you aren't?"

"I be crazy too, little buddy, but at least when I be craziest, I be floating all alone in space and the crazy, she float out of me, she soak into the walls, and she don't come out till there be battles and little boy's bump into the walls and squish out de crazy."

Ender smiled.

"And you be crazy too," said Dink. "Come on, let's go eat."

"Maybe you can be a commander and not be crazy. Maybe knowing about the craziness means you don't have to fall for it."

"I'm not going to let the bastards run me, Ender. They've got you pegged, too, and they don't plan to treat you kindly, look what they've done to you so far."

"They haven't done anything except promote me."

"And she make you life so easy, neh?"

Ender laughed and shook his head. "So maybe you're right."

"They think they got you on ice. Don't let them."

"But that's what I came for," Ender said. "For them to make me into a tool. To save the world."

"I can't believe you still believe it."

"Believe what?"

"The bugger menace. Save the world. Listen. Ender, if the buggers were coming back to get us, they'd be here. They aren't invading again. We beat them and they're gone."

"But the videos--"

"All from the First and Second Invasions. Your grandparents weren't born yet when Mazer Rackham wiped them out. You watch. It's all a fake. There is no war, and they're just screwing around with us."

"But why?"

"Because as long as people are afraid of the buggers, the IF can stay in power, and as long as the IF is in power, certain countries can keep their hegemony. But keep watching the vids, Ender. People will catch onto this game pretty soon, and there'll be a civil war to end all wars. That is the menace, Ender, not the buggers. And in that war, when it comes, you and I won't be friends. Because you're American, just like our dear teachers. And I am not."

They went to the mess hall and ate, talking about other things. But Ender could not stop thinking about what Dink had said. The Battle School was so enclosed, the game so important in the minds of the children, that Ender had forgotten there was a world outside. Spanish honor. Civil war. Politics. The Battle School was really a very small place, wasn't it?

But Ender did not reach Dink's conclusions. The buggers were real. The threat was real. The IF controlled a lot of things, but it didn't control the videos and the nets. Not where Ender had grown up. In Dink's home in the Netherlands, with three generations under Russian hegemony, perhaps it was all controlled, but Ender knew that lies could not last long in America. So he believed.

Believed, but the seed of doubt was there, and it stayed, and every now and then sent out a little root. It changed everything, to have that seed growing. It made Ender listen more carefully to what people meant, instead of what they said. It made him wise.

There weren't as many boys at the evening practice, not by half.

"Where's Bernard?" asked Ender.

Alai grinned. Shen closed his eyes and assumed a look of blissful meditation.

"Haven't you heard?" said another boy, a Launchy from a younger group. "Word's out that any Launchy who comes to your practice sessions won't ever amount to anything in anybody's army. Word's out that the commanders don't want any soldiers who've been damaged by your training."

Ender nodded.

"But the way I brain it," said the Launchy, "I be the best soldier I can, and any commander worth a damn, he take me. Neh?"

"Eh," said Ender, with finality.

They went on with practice. About a half hour into it, when they were practicing throwing off collisions with frozen soldiers, several commanders in different uniforms came in. They ostentatiously took down names.

"Hey," shouted Alai. "Make sure you spell my name right!"

The next night there were even fewer boys. Now Ender was hearing the stories little Launchies getting slapped around in the bathrooms, or having accidents in the mess hall

and the game room, or getting their files trashed by older boys who had broken the primitive security system that guarded the Launchies' desks.

"No practice tonight," Ender said.

"The hell there's not," said Alai.

"Give it a few days. I don't want any of the little kids getting hurt."

"If you stop, even one night, they'll figure it works to do this kind of thing. Just like if you'd ever backed down to Bernard back when he was being a swine."

"Besides," said Shen. "We aren't scared and we don't care, so you owe it to us to go on. We need the practice and so do you."

Ender remembered what Dink had said. The game was trivial compared to the whole world. Why should anybody give every night of his life to this stupid, stupid game?

"We don't accomplish that much anyway," Ender said. He started to leave.

Aiai stopped him. "They scare you, too? They slap you up in the bathroom? Stick you head in the pissah? Somebody gots a gun up you bung?"

"No," Ender said.

"You still my friend?" asked Alai, more quietly.

"Yes."

"Then I still you friend, Ender, and I stay here and practice with you."

The older boys came again, but fewer of them were commanders. Most were members of a couple of armies. Ender recognized Salamander uniforms. Even a couple of Rats. They didn't take names this time. Instead, they mocked and shouted and ridiculed as the Launchies tried to master difficult skills with untrained muscles. It began to get to a few of the boys.

"Listen to them," Ender said to the other boys. "Remember the words. If you ever want to make your enemy crazy, shout that kind of stuff at them. It makes them do dumb things, to be mad. But we don't get mad."

Shen took the idea to heart, and after each jibe from the older boys, he had a group of four Launchies recite the words, loudly, five or six times. When they started singing the taunts like nursery rhymes, some of the older boys launched themselves from the wall and came out for a fight.

The flash suits were designed for wars fought with harmless light; they offered little protection and seriously hampered movement if it came to hand-to-hand fighting in null. Half the boys were flashed, anyway, and couldn't fight; but the stiffness of their suits made them potentially useful. Ender quickly ordered his Launchies to gather in one corner of the room. The older boys laughed at them even more, and some who had waited by the wall came forward to join in the attack, seeing Ender's group in retreat.

Ender and Alai decided to throw a frozen soldier in the face of an enemy. The frozen Launchy struck helmet first, and the two careened off each other. The older boy clutched his chest where the helmet had hit him, and screamed in pain.

The mockery was over. The rest of the older boys launched themselves to enter the battle. Ender didn't really have much hope of any of the boy's getting away without some injury. But the enemy was coming haphazardly, uncoordinatedly; they had never worked together before, while Ender's little practice army, though there were only a dozen of them now, knew each other well and knew how to work together.

"Go nova!" shouted Ender. The other boys laughed. They gathered into three groups, feet together, squatting, holding hands so they formed small stars against the back wall. "We'll go around them and make for the door. Now!"

At his signal, the three stars burst apart, each boy launching in a different direction, but angled so he could rebound off a wall and head for the door. Since all of the enemy were in the middle of the room, where course changes were far more difficult, it was an easy maneuver to carry out.

Ender had positioned himself so that when he launched, he would rendezvous with the frozen soldier he had just used as a missile. The boy wasn't frozen now, and he let Ender catch him, whirl him around and send him toward the door. Unfortunately, the necessary result of the action was for Ender to head in the opposite direction, and at a reduced speed. Alone of all his soldiers, he was drifting fairly slowly, and at the end of the battleroom where the older boys were gathered. He shifted himself so he could see that all his soldiers were safely gathered at the far wall.

In the meantime, the furious and disorganized enemy had just spotted him. Ender calculated how soon he would reach the wall so he could launch again. Not soon enough. Several enemies had already rebounded toward him. Ender was startled to see Stilson's face among them. Then he shuddered and realized he had been wrong. Still, it was the same situation, and this time they wouldn't sit still for a single combat settlement. There was no leader, as far as Ender knew, and these boys were a lot bigger than him.

Still, he had learned some things about weightshifting in personal combat class, and about the physics of moving objects. Game battles almost never got to hand-to-hand combat-- you never bumped into an enemy that wasn't frozen. So in the few seconds he had, Ender tried to position himself to receive his guests.

Fortunately, they knew as little about nullo fighting as he did, and the few that tried to punch him found that throwing a punch was pretty ineffective when their bodies moved backward just as quickly as their fists moved forward. But there were some in the group who had bone-breaking on their minds, as Ender quickly saw. He didn't plan to be there for it, though.

He caught one of the punchers by the arm and threw him as hard as he could. It hurled Ender out of the way of the rest of the first onslaught, though he still wasn't getting any closer to the door. "Stay there!" he shouted at his friends, who obviously were forming up to come and rescue him. "Just stay there!"

Someone caught Ender by the foot. The tight grip gave Ender some leverage; he was able to stamp firmly on the other boy's ear and shoulder, making him cry out and let go. If the boy had let go just as Ender kicked downward, it would have hurt much less and allowed Ender to use the maneuver as a launch. Instead, the boy had hung on too well; his ear was torn and scattering blood in the air, and Ender was drifting even more slowly.

I'm doing it again, thought Ender. I'm hurting people again, just to save myself. Why don't they leave me alone, so I don't have to hurt them?

Three more boys were converging on him now, and this time they were acting together. Still, they had to grab him before they could hurt him. Ender positioned himself quickly so that two of them would take his feet, leaving his hands free to deal with the third.

Sure enough, they took the bait. Ender grasped the shoulders of the third boy's shirt and pulled him up sharply, butting him in the face with his helmet. Again a scream and a shower of blood. The two boys who had his legs were wrenching at them, twisting him. Ender threw the boy with the bleeding nose at one of them; they entangled, and Ender's leg came free. It was a simple matter then to use the other boy's hold for leverage to kick him firmly in the groin, then shove off him in the direction of the door. He didn't get that good a launch, so that his speed was nothing special, but it didn't matter. No one was following him.

He got to his friends at the door. They caught him and handed him along to the door. They were laughing and slapping him playfully. "You bad!" they said. "You scary! You flame!"

"Practice is over for the day," Ender said.

"They'll be back tomorrow," said Shen.

"Won't do them any good," said Ender. "If they come without suits, we'll do this again. If they come with suits, we can flash them."

"Besides," said Alai, "the teachers won't let it happen."

Ender remembered what Dink had told him, and wondered if AIai was right.

"Hey Ender!" shouted one of the older boys as Ender left the battleroom. "You nothing, man! You be nothing!"

"My old corornander Bonzo," said Ender. "I think he doesn't like me."

Ender checked the rosters on his desk that night. Four boys turned up on medical report. One with bruised ribs, one with a bruised testicle, one with a torn ear, and one with a broken nose and a loose tooth. The cause of injury was the same in all cases:

ACCIDENTAL COLLISION IN NULL G

If the teachers were allowing that to turn up on the official report, it was obvious they didn't intend to punish anyone for the nasty little skirmish in the battleroom. Aren't they going to do anything? Don't they care what goes on in this school?

Since he was back to the barracks earlier than usual, Ender called up the fantasy game on his desk. It had been a while since he last used it. Long enough that it didn't start him where he had left off. Instead, he began by the Giant's corpse. Only now, it was hardly identifiable as a corpse at all, unless you stood off a ways and studied it. The body had eroded into a hill, entwined with grass and vines. Only the crest of the Giant's face was still visible, and it was white bone, like limestone protruding from a discouraged, withering mountain.

Ender did not look forward to fighting with the wolf-children again, but to his surprise they weren't there. Perhaps, killed once, they were gone forever. It made him a little sad.

He made his way down underground, through the tunnels, to the cliff ledge overlooking the beautiful forest. Again he threw himself down, and again a cloud caught him and carried him into the castle turret room.

The snake began to unweave itself from the rug again, only this time Ender did not hesitate. He stepped on the head of the snake and crushed it under his foot. It writhed and twisted under him, and in response he twisted and ground it deeper into the stone floor. Finally it was still. Ender picked it up and shook it, until it unwove itself and the pattern in the rug was gone. Then, still dragging the snake behind him, he began to look for a way out.

Instead, he found a mirror. And in the mirror he saw a face that he easily recognized. It was Peter, with blood dripping down his chin and a snake's tail protruding from a corner of his mouth.

Ender shouted and thrust his desk from him. The few boys in the barracks were alarmed at the noise, but he apologized and told them it was nothing. They went away. He looked

again into his desk. His figure was still there, staring into the mirror. He tried to pick up some of the furniture, to break the nurror, but it could not be moved. The mirror would not come off the wall, either. Finally Ender threw the snake at it. The mirror shattered, leaving a hole in the wail behind it. Out of the hole came dozens of tiny snakes which quickly bit Ender's figure again and again. Tearing the snakes frantically from itself, the figure collapsed and died in a writhing heap of small serpents.

The screen went blank, and words appeared.

PLAY AGAIN?

Ender signed off and put the desk away.

The next day, several commanders came to Ender or sent soldiers to tell him not to worry, most of them thought the extra practice sessions were a good idea, he should keep it up. And to make sure nobody bothered him, they were sending a few of their older soldiers who needed extra practice to come join him. "They're as big as most of the buggers who attacked you last night. They'll think twice."

Instead of a dozen boys, there were forty-five that night, more than an army, and whether it was because of the presence of older boys on Ender's side or because they had had enough the night before, none of their enemies came.

Ender didn't go back to the fantasy game. But it lived in his dreams. He kept remembering how it felt to kill the snake, grinding it in, the way he tore the ear off that boy, the way he destroyed Stilson, the way he broke Bernard's arm. And then to stand up, holding the corpse of his enemy, and find Peter's face looking out at him from the mirror, This game knows too much about me. This game tells filthy lies. I am not Peter. I don't have murder in my heart.

And then the worse fear, that he was a killer, only better at it than Peter ever was; that it was this very trait that pleased the teachers. It's killers they need for the bugger wars. It's people who can grind the enemy's face into the dust and spatter their blood all over space.

Well, I'm your man. I'm the bloody bastard you wanted when you had me spawned. I'm your tool, and what difference does it make if I hate the part of me that you most need? What difference does it make that when the little serpents killed me in the game, I agreed with them, and was glad.

Chapter 9 -- Locke and Demosthenes

"I didn't call you in here to waste time. How in hell did the computer do that?"

"I don't know."

"How could it pick up a picture of Ender's brother and put it into the graphics in this Fairyland routine?"

"Colonel Graff, I wasn't there when it was programmed. All I know is that the computer's never taken anyone to this place before. Fairyland was strange enough, but this isn't Fairyland anymore. It's beyond the End of the World, and--"

"I know the names of the places, I just don't know what they mean."

"Fairyland was programmed in. It's mentioned in a few other places. But nothing talks about the End of the World. We don't have any experience with it."

"I don't like having the computer screw around with Ender's mind that way. Peter Wiggin is the most potent person in his life, except maybe his sister Valentine."

"And the mind game is designed to help shape them, help them find worlds they can be comfortable in."

"You don't get it, do you, Major Imbu? I don't want Ender being comfortable with the end of the world. Our business here is not to be comfortable with the end of the world!"

"The End of the World in the game isn't necessarily the end of humanity in the bugger wars. It has a private meaning to Ender."

"Good. What meaning?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm not the kid. Ask him."

"Major Imbu, I'm asking you."

"There could be a thousand meanings."

"Try one."

"You've been isolating the boy. Maybe he's wishing for the end of this world, the Battle School. Or maybe it's about the end of the world he grew up with as a little boy, his home, coming here. Or maybe it's his way of coping with having broken up so many other kids here. Ender's a sensitive kid, you know, and he's done some pretty bad things to people's bodies, he might be wishing for the end of that world."

"Or none of the above."

"The mind game is a relationship between the child and the computer. Together they create stories. The stories are true, in the sense that they reflect the reality of the child's life. That's all I know."

"And I'll tell you what I know, Major Imbu. That picture of Peter Wiggin was not one that could have been taken from our files here at the school. We have nothing on him, electronically or otherwise, since Ender came here. And that picture is more recent."

"It's only been a year and a half, sir, how much can the boy change?"

"He's wearing his hair completely differently now. His mouth was redone with orthodontia. I got a recent photograph from landside and compared. The only way the computer here in the Battle School could have got that picture was by requisitioning it from a landside computer. And not even one connected with the IF. That takes requisitionary powers. We can't just go into Guilford County North Carolina and pluck a picture out of school files. Did anyone at this school authorize getting this?"

"You don't understand, sir. Our Battle School computer is only a part of the IF network. If we want a picture, we have to get a requisition, but if the mind game program determines that the picture is necessary--"

"It can just go take it."

"Not just every day. Only when it's for the child's own good."

"OK, it's for his good. But why. His brother is dangerous, his brother was rejected for this program because he's one of the worst human beings we've laid hands on. Why is he so important to Ender? Why, after all his time?"

"Honestly, sir. I don't know. And the mind game program is designed so that it can't tell us. It may not know itself, actually. This is uncharted territory."

"You mean the computer's making this up as it goes along?"

"You might put it that way."

"Well, that does make me feel a little better. I thought I was the only one."

Valentine celebrated Ender's eighth birthday alone, in the wooded back yard of their new home in Greensboro. She scraped a patch of ground bare of pine needles and leaves, and there scratched his name in the dirt with a twig. Then she made a small teepee of twigs and needles and lit a small fire. It made smoke that interwove with the branches and needles of the pine overhead. All the way into space, she said silently. All the way to the Battle School.

No letters had ever come, and as far as they knew their own letters had never reached him. When he first was taken, Father and Mother sat at the table and keyed in long letters to him every few days. Soon, though, it was once a week, and when no answers came, once a month. Now it had been two years since he went, and there were no letters, none at all, and no remembrance on his birthday. He is dead, she thought bitterly, because we have forgotten him.

But Valentine had not forgotten him. She did not let her parents know, and above all never hinted to Peter how often she thought about Ender, how often she wrote him letters that she knew he would not answer. And when Mother and Father announced to them that they were leaving the city to move to North Carolina, of all places, Valentine knew that they never expected to see Ender again. They were leaving the only place where he knew to find them. How would Ender find them here, among these trees, under this changeable and heavy sky? He had lived deep in corridors all his life, and if he was still in the Battle School, there was less of nature there. What would he make of this?

Valentine knew why they had moved here. It was for Peter, so that living among trees and small animals, so that nature in as raw a form as Mother and Father could conceive of it, might have a softening influence on their strange and frightening son. And, in a way, it had. Peter took to it right away. Long walks out in the open, cutting through woods and out into the open country-- going sometimes for a whole day, with only a sandwich or two sharing space with his desk in the pack on his back, with only a small pocket knife in his pocket.

But Valentine knew. She had seen a squirrel half-skinned, spiked by its little hands and feet with twigs pushed into the dirt. She pictured Peter trapping it, staking it, then carefully parting and peeling back the skin without breaking into the abdomen, watching the muscles twist and ripple. How long had it taken the squirrel to die? And all the while Peter had sat nearby, leaning against the tree where perhaps the squirrel had nested, playing with his desk while the squirrel's life seeped away.

At first she was horrified, and nearly threw up at dinner, watching how Peter ate so vigorously, talked so cheerfully. But later she thought about it and realized that perhaps, for Peter, it was a kind of magic, like her little fires; a sacrifice that somehow stilled the dark gods that hunted for his soul. Better to torture squirrels than other children. Peter has always been a husbandman of pain, planting it, nurturing it, devouring it greedily when it was ripe; better he should take it in these small, sharp doses than with dull cruelty to children in the school.

"A model student," said his teachers. "I wish we had a hundred others in the school just like him. Studies all the time, turns in all his work on time. He loves to learn."

But Valentine knew it was a fraud. Peter loved to learn, all right, but the teachers hadn't taught him anything, ever. He did his learning through his desk at home, tapping into libraries and databases, studying and thinking and, above all, talking to Valentine. Yet at

school he acted as though he were excited about the puerile lesson of the day. Oh, wow, I never knew that frogs looked like this inside, he'd say, and then at home he studied the binding of cells into organisms through the phlotic collation of DNA. Peter was a master of flattery, and all his teachers bought it.

Still, it was good. Peter never fought anymore. Never bullied. Got along well with everybody. It was a new Peter.

Everyone believed it. Father and Mother said it so often it made Valentine want to scream at them. It isn't the new Peter! It's the old Peter, only smarter!

How smart? Smarter than you, Father. Smarter than you, Mother. Smarter than anybody you have ever met.

But not smarter than me.

"I've been deciding," said Peter, "whether to kill you or what."

Valentine leaned against the trunk of the pine tree, her little fire a few smoldering ashes. "I love you, too, Peter."

"It would be so easy. You always make these stupid little fires. It's just a matter of knocking you out and burning you up. You're such a firebug."

"I've been thinking of castrating you in your sleep."

"No you haven't. You only think of things like that when I'm with you. I bring out the best in you. No, Valentine, I've decided not to kill you. I've decided that you're going to help me."

"I am?" A few years ago, Valentine would have been terrified at Peter's threats. Now, though, she was not so afraid. Not that she doubted that he was capable of killing her. She couldn't think of anything so terrible that she didn't believe Peter might do it. She also knew, though, that Peter was not insane, not in the sense that he wasn't in control of himself. He was in better control of himself than anyone she knew. Except perhaps herself. Peter could delay any desire as long as he needed to; he could conceal any emotion. And so Valentine knew that he would never hurt her in a fit of rage. He would only do it if the advantages outweighed the risks. And they did not. In a way, she actually preferred Peter to other people because of this. He always, always acted out of intelligent self-interest. And so, to keep herself safe, all she had to do was make sure it was more in Peter's interest to keep her alive than to have her dead.

"Valentine, things are coming to a head. I've been tracking troop movements in Russia."

"What are we talking about?"

"The world, Val. You know Russia? Big empire? Warsaw Pact? Rulers of Eurasia from the Netherlands to Pakistan?"

"They don't publish their troop movements, Peter."

"Of course not. But they do publish their passenger and freight train schedules. I've had my desk analyzing those schedules and figuring out when the secret troop trains are moving over the same tracks. Done it backward over the past three years. In the last six months, they've stepped up, they're getting ready for war. Land war."

"But what about the League? What about the buggers?" Valentine didn't know what Peter was getting at, but he often launched discussions like this, practical discussions of world events. He used her to test his ideas, to refine them. In the process, she also refined her own thinking. She found that while she rarely agreed with Peter about what the world ought to be, they rarely disagreed about what the world actually was. They had become quite deft at sifting accurate information out of the stories of the hopelessly ignorant, gullible news writers. The news herd, as Peter called them.

"The Polemarch is Russian, isn't he? And he knows what's happening with the fleet. Either they've found out the buggers aren't a threat after all, or we're about to have a big battle. One way or another, the bugger war is about to be over. They're getting ready for after the war."

"If they're moving troops, it must be under the direction of the Strategos."

"It's all internal, within the Warsaw Pact."

This was disturbing. The facade of peace and cooperation had been undisturbed almost since the bugger wars began. What Peter had detected was a fundamental disturbance in the world order. She had a mental picture, as clear as memory, of the way the world had been before the buggers forced peace upon them. "So it's back to the way it was before."

"A few changes. The shields make it so nobody bothers with nuclear weapons anymore. We have to kill each other thousands at a time instead of millions." Peter grinned. "Val, it was bound to happen. Right now there's a vast international fleet and army in existence, with American hegemony. When the bugger wars are over, all that power will vanish, because it's all built on fear of the buggers. And suddenly we'll look around and discover that all the old alliances are gone, dead and gone, except one, the Warsaw Pact. And it'll be the dollar against five million lasers. We'll have the asteroid belt, but they'll have Earth, and you run out of raisins and celery kind of fast out there, without Earth."

What disturbed Valentine most of all was that Peter did not seem at all worried. "Peter, why do I get the idea that you are thinking of this as a golden opportunity for Peter Wiggin?"

"For both of us, Val."

"Peter, you're twelve years old. I'm ten. They have a word for people our age. They call us children and they treat us like mice."

"But we don't think like other children, do we, Val? We don't talk like other children. And above all, we don't write like other children."

"For a discussion that began with death threats, Peter, we've strayed from the topic, I think." Still, Valentine found herself getting excited. Writing was something Val did better than Peter. They both knew it. Peter had even named it once, when he said that he could always see what other people hated most about themselves, and bully them, while Val could always see what other people liked best about themselves, and flatter them. It was a cynical way of putting it, but it was true. Valentine could persuade other people to her point of view-- she could convince them that they wanted what she wanted them to want. Peter, on the other hand, could only make them fear what he wanted them to fear. When he first pointed this out to Val, she resented it. She had wanted to believe she was good at persuading people because she was right, not because she was clever. But no matter how much she told herself that she didn't ever want to exploit people the way Peter did, she enjoyed knowing that she could, in her way, control other people. And not just control what they did. She could control, in a way, what they wanted to do. She was ashamed that she took pleasure in this power, and yet she found herself using it sometimes. To get teachers to do what she wanted, and other students. To get Mother and Father to see things her way. Sometimes, she was able to persuade even Peter. That was the most frightening thing of all-- that she could understand Peter well enough, could empathize with him enough to get inside him that way. There was more Peter in her than she could bear to admit, though sometimes she dared to think about it anyway. This is what she thought as Peter spoke: You dream of power, Peter, but in my own way I am more powerful than you.

"I've been studying history," Peter said. "I've been learning things about patterns in human behavior. There are times when the world is rearranging itself, and at times like that, the right words can change the world. Think what Pericles did in Athens, and Demosthenes--"

"Yes, they managed to wreck Athens twice."

"Pericles, yes, but Demosthenes was right about Philip--"

"Or provoked him--"

"See? This is what historians usually do, quibble about cause and effect when the point is, there are times when the world is in flux and the right voice in the right place can move the world. Thomas Paine and Ben Franklin, for instance. Bismarek. Lenin."

"Not exactly parallel cases, Peter." Now she was disagreeing with him out of habit; she saw what he was getting at, and she thought it might just be possible.

"I didn't expect you to understand. You still believe that teachers know something worth learning."

I understand more than you think, Peter. "So you see yourself as Bismarck?"

"I see myself as knowing how to insert ideas into the public mind. Haven't you ever thought of a phrase, Val, a clever thing to say, and said it, and then two weeks or a month later you hear some adult saying it to another adult, both of them strangers? Or you see it on a video or pick it up on a net?"

"I always figured I heard it before and only thought I was making it up."

"You were wrong. There are maybe two or three thousand people in the world as smart as us, little sister. Most of them are making a living somewhere. Teaching, the poor bastards, or doing research. Precious few of them are actually in positions of power."

"I guess we're the lucky few."

"Funny as a one-legged rabbit, Val."

"Of which there are no doubt several in these woods."

"Hopping in neat little circles."

Valentine laughed at the gruesome image and hated herself for thinking it was funny.

"Val, we can say the words that everyone else will be saying two weeks later. We can do that. We don't have to wait until we're grown up and safely put away in some career."

"Peter, you're twelve."

"Not on the nets I'm not. On the nets I can name myself anything I want, and so can you."

"On the nets we are clearly identified as students, and we can't even get into the real discussions except in audience mode, which means we can't say anything anyway."

"I have a plan."

"You always do." She pretended nonchalance but she listened eagerly.

"We can get on the nets as full-fledged adults. with whatever net names we want to adopt, if Father gets us onto his citizen's access."

"And why would he do that? We already have student access. What do you tell him, I need citizen's access so I can take over the world?"

"No, Val. I won't tell him anything. You'll tell him how you're worried about me. How I'm trying so very hard to do well at school, but you know it's driving me crazy because I can never talk to anybody intelligent, everybody always talks down to me because I'm young, I never get to converse with my peers. You can prove that the stress is getting to me."

Valentine thought of the corpse of the squirrel in the woods and realized that even that discovery was part of Peter's plan. Or at least he had made it part of his plan, after it happened.

"So you get him to authorize us to share his citizen's access. To adopt our own identities there, to conceal who we are so people will give us the intellectual respect we deserve."

Valentine could challenge him on ideas, but never on things like this. She could not say, What makes you think you deserve respect? She had read about Adolf Hitler. She wondered what he was like at the age of twelve. Not this smart, not like Peter that way, but craving honor, probably that. And what would it have meant to the world if in childhood he had been caught in a thresher or trampled by a horse?

"Val," Peter said. "I know what you think of me. I'm not a nice person, you think."

Valentine threw a pine needle at him. "An arrow through your heart."

"I've been planning to come talk to you for a long time. But I kept being afraid."

She put a pine needle in her mouth and blew it at him. It dropped almost straight down. "Another failed launch." Why was he pretending to be weak?

"Val, I was afraid you wouldn't believe me. That you wouldn't believe I could do it."

"Peter, I believe you could do anything, and probably will."

"But I was even more afraid that you'd believe me and try to stop me."

"Come on, threaten to kill me again, Peter." Did he actually believe she could be fooled by his nice-and-humble-kid act?

"So I've got a sick sense of humor. I'm sorry. You know I was teasing. I need your help."

"You're just what the world needs. A twelve-year-old to solve all our problems."

"It's not my fault I'm twelve right now. And it's not my fault that right now is when the opportunity is open. Right now is the time when I can shape events. The world is always a democracy in times of flux, and the man with the best voice will win. Everybody thinks Hitler got to power because of his armies, because they were willing to kill, and that's partly true, because in the real world power is always built on the threat of death and dishonor. But mostly he got to power on words-- on the right words at the right time."

"I was just thinking of comparing you to him."

"I don't hate Jews, Val. I don't want to destroy anybody. And I don't want war, either. I want the world to hold together. Is that so bad? I don't want us to go back to the old way. Have you read about the world wars?"

"Yes."

"We can go back to that again. Or worse. We could find ourselves locked into the Warsaw Pact. Now, there's a cheerful thought."

"Peter, we're children, don't you understand that? We're going to school, we're growing up--" But even as she resisted, she wanted him to persuade her. She had wanted him to persuade her from the beginning.

But Peter didn't know that he had already won. "If I believe that, if I accept that, then I've got to sit back and watch while all the opportunities vanish, and then when I'm old enough it's too late. Val, listen to me. I know how you feel about me, you always have. I was a vicious, nasty brother. I was cruel to you and crueler to Ender before they took him. But I didn't hate you. I loved you both, I just had to be-- had to have control, do you understand that? It's the most important thing to me, it's my greatest gift, I can see where the weak points are, I can see how to get in and use them, I just see those things without even trying. I could become a businessman and run some big corporation, I'd scramble and maneuver until I was at the top of everything and what would I have? Nothing. I'm going to rule, Val, I'm going to have control of something. But I want it to be something worth ruling. I want to accomplish something worthwhile. A Pax Americana through the whole world. So that when somebody else comes, after we beat the buggers, when somebody else comes here to defeat us, they'll find we've already spread over a thousand worlds, we're at peace with ourselves and impossible to destroy. Do you understand? I want to save mankind from self-destruction."

She had never seen him speak with such sincerity. With no hint of mockery, no trace of a lie in his voice. He was getting better at this. Or maybe he was actually touching on the truth. "So a twelve-year-old boy and his kid sister are going to save the world?"

"How old was Alexander? I'm not going to do it overnight. I'm just going to start now. If you'll help me."

"I don't believe what you did to those squirrels was part of an act. I think you did it because you love to do it."

Suddenly Peter wept into his hands. Val assumed that he was pretending, but then she wondered. It was possible, wasn't it, that he loved her, and that in this time of terrifying opportunity he was willing to weaken himself before her in order to win her love. He's manipulating me, she thought, but that doesn't mean he isn't sincere. His cheeks were wet when he took his hands away, his eyes rimmed in red. "I know," he said. "It's what I'm most afraid of. That I really am a monster. I don't want to be a killer but I just can't help it."

She had never seen him show such weakness. You're so clever, Peter. You saved your weakness so you could use it to move me now. And yet it did move her. Because if it were true, even partly true. then Peter was not a monster, and so she could satisfy her Peter-like love of power without fear of becoming monstrous herself. She knew that Peter was calculating even now, but she believed that under the calculations he was telling the truth. It had been hidden layers deep, but he had probed her until he found her trust.

"Val, if you don't help me, I don't know what I'll become. But if you're there, my partner in everything, you can keep me from becoming -- like that. Like the bad ones."

She nodded. You are only pretending to share power with me, she thought, but in fact I have power over you. even though you don't know it. "I will. I'll help you."

As soon as Father got them both onto his citizen's access, they began testing the waters. They stayed away from the nets that required use of a real name. That wasn't hard because real names only had to do with money. They didn't need money. They needed respect, and that they could earn. With false names, on the right nets, they could be anybody. Old men, middle-aged women, anybody, as long as they were careful about the way they wrote. All that anyone would see were their words, their ideas. Every citizen started equal, on the nets.

They used throwaway names with their early efforts. not the identities that Peter planned to make famous and influential. Of course they were not invited to take part in the great national and international political forums -- they could only be audiences there until they were invited or elected to take part. But they signed on and watched, reading some of the essays published by the great names, witnessing the debates that played across their desks.

And in the lesser conferences, where common people commented about the great debates, they began to insert their comments. At first Peter insisted that they be deliberately inflammatory. "We can't learn how our style of writing is working unless we get responses -- and if we're bland, no one will answer."

They were not bland, and people answered. The responses that got posted on the public nets were vinegar; the responses that were sent as mail, for Peter and Valentine to read privately, were poisonous. But they did learn what attributes of their writing were seized upon as childish and immature. And they got better.

When Peter was satisfied that they knew how to sound adult, he killed the old identities and they began to prepare to attract real attention.

"We have to seem completely separate. We'll write about different things at different times. We'll never refer to each other. You'll mostly work on the west coast nets, and I'll mostly work in the south. Regional issues, too. So do your homework."

They did their homework. Mother and Father worried sometimes, with Peter and Valentine constantly together, their desks tucked under their arms. But they couldn't complain-- their grades were good, and Valentine was such a good influence on Peter. She had changed his whole attitude toward everything. And Peter and Valentine sat together in the woods, in good weather, and in pocket restaurants and indoor parks when it rained, and they composed their political commentaries. Peter carefully designed both characters so neither one had all of his ideas; there were even some spare identities that they used to drop in third party opinions. "Let both of them find a following as they can," said Peter.

Once, tired of writing and rewriting until Peter was satisfied, Val despaired and said, "Write it yourself, then!"

"I can't," he answered. "They can't both sound alike. Ever. You forget that someday we'll be famous enough that somebody will start running analyses. We have to come up as different people every time."

So she wrote on. Her main identity on the nets was Demosthenes -- Peter chose the name. He called himself Locke. They were obvious pseudonyms, but that was part of the plan. "With any luck, they'll start trying to guess who we are."

"If we get famous enough, the government can always get access and find out who we really are."

"When that happens, we'll be too entrenched to suffer much loss. People will be shocked that Demosthenes and Locke are two kids, but they'll already be used to listening to us."

They began composing debates for their characters. Valentine would prepare an opening statement, and Peter would invent a throwaway name to answer her. His answer would be intelligent and the debate would be lively, lots of clever invective and good political rhetoric. Valentine had a knack for alliteration that made her phrases memorable. Then they would enter the debate into the network, separated by a reasonable amount of time, as if they were actually making them up on the spot. Sometimes a few other netters

would interpose comments, but Peter and Val would usually ignore them or change their own comments only slightly to accommodate what had been said.

Peter took careful note of all their most memorable phrases and then did searches from time to time to find those phrases cropping up in other places. Not all of them did, but most of them were repeated here and there, and some of them even showed up in the major debates on the prestige nets. "We're being read," Peter said. "The ideas are seeping out."

"The phrases, anyway."

"That's just the measure. Look, we're having some influence. Nobody quotes us by name, yet, but they're discussing the points we raise. We're helping set the agenda. We're getting there."

"Should we try to get into the main debates?"

"No. We'll wait until they ask us."

They had been doing it only seven months when one of the west coast nets sent Demosthenes a message. An offer for a weekly column in a pretty good newsnet.

"I can't do a weekly column," Valentine said. "I don't even have a monthly period yet."

"The two aren't related," Peter said.

"They are to me. I'm still a kid."

"Tell them yes, but since you prefer not to have your true identity revealed, you want them to pay you in network time. A new access code through their corporate identity."

"So when the government traces me--"

"You'll just be a person who can sign on through CalNet. Father's citizen's access doesn't get involved. What I can't figure out is why they wanted Demosthenes before Locke."

"Talent rises to the top."

As a game, it was fun. But Valentine didn't like some of the positions Peter made Demosthenes take. Demosthenes began to develop as a fairly paranoid anti-Warsaw writer. It bothered her because Peter was the one who knew how to exploit fear in his writing -- she had to keep coming to him for ideas on how to do it. Meanwhile, his Locke followed her moderate, empathic strategies. It made sense, in a way. By having her write Demosthenes, it meant he also had some empathy, just as Locke also could play on others' fears. But the main effect was to keep her inextricably tied to Peter. She couldn't go off

and use Demosthenes for her own purposes. She wouldn't know how to use him. Still, it worked both ways. He couldn't write Locke without her. Or could he?

"I thought the idea was to unify the world. If I write this like you say I should, Peter, I'm pretty much calling for war to break up the Warsaw Pact."

"Not war, just open nets and prohibition of interception. Free flow of information. Compliance with the League rules, for heaven's sake."

Without meaning to, Valentine started talking in Demosthenes' voice, even though she certainly wasn't speaking Demosthenes' opinions. Everyone knows that from the beginning the Warsaw Pact was to be regarded as a single entity where those rules were concerned. International free flow is still open. But between the Warsaw Pact nations these things are internal matters. That was why they were willing to allow American hegemony in the League."

"You're arguing Locke's part, Val. Trust me. You have to call for the Warsaw Pact to lose official status. You have to get a lot of people really angry. Then, later, when you begin to recognize the need for compromise--"

"Then they stop listening to me and go off and fight a war."

"Val, trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"How do you know? You're not any smarter than me, and you've never done this before either."

"I'm thirteen and you're ten."

"Almost eleven."

"And I know how these things work."

"All right, I'll do it your way. But I won't do any of these liberty or death things."

"You will too."

"And someday when they catch us and they wonder why your sister was such a warmonger. I can just bet you'll tell them that you told me to do it."

"Are you sure you're not having a period, little woman?"

"I hate you, Peter Wiggin."

What bothered Valentine most was when her column got syndicated into several other regional newsnets, and Father started reading it and quoting from it at table. "Finally, a

man with some sense," he said. Then he quoted some of the passages Valentine hated worst in her own work. "It's fine to work with these hegemonist Russians with the buggers out there, but after we win, I can't see leaving half the civilized world as virtual helots, can you, dear?"

"I think you're taking this all too seriously," said Mother.

"I like this Demosthenes. I like the way he thinks. I'm surprised he isn't in the major nets. I looked for him in the international relations debates and you know, he's never taken part in any of them."

Valentine lost her appetite and left the table. Peter followed her after a respectable interval.

"So you don't like lying to Father," he said. "So what? You're not lying to him. He doesn't think that you're really Demosthenes, and Demosthenes isn't saying things you really believe. They cancel each other out, they amount to nothing."

"That's the kind of reasoning that makes Locke such an ass." But what really bothered her was not that she was lying to Father -- it was the fact that Father actually agreed with Demosthenes. She had thought that only fools would follow him.

A few days later Locke got picked up for a column in a New England newsnet, specifically to provide a contrasting view for their popular column from Demosthenes. "Not bad for two kids who've only got about eight pubic hairs between them," Peter said.

"It's a long way between writing a newsnet column and ruling the world," Valentine reminded him. "It's such a long way that no one has ever done it."

"They have, though. Or the moral equivalent. I'm going to say snide things about Demosthenes in my first column."

"Well, Demosthenes isn't even going to notice that Locke exists. Ever."

"For now."

With their identities now fully supported by their income from writing columns, they used Father's access now only for the throwaway identities. Mother commented that they were spending too much time on the nets. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," she reminded Peter.

Peter let his hand tremble a little, and he said, "If you think I should stop, I think I might be able to keep things under control this time. I really do."

"No, no," Mother said. "I don't want you to stop. Just be careful, that's all."

"I'm careful, Mom."

Nothing was different -- nothing had changed in a year. Ender was sure of it, and yet it all seemed to have gone sour. He was still the leading soldier in the standings, and no one doubted that he deserved it now. At the age of nine he was a toon leader in the Phoenix Army, with Petra Arkanian as his commander. He still led his evening practice sessions, and now they were attended by an elite group of soldiers nominated by their commanders, though any Launchy who wanted to could still come. Alai was also a toon leader, in another army, and they were still good friends; Shen was not a leader, but that was no barrier. Dink Meeker had finally accepted command and succeeded Rose the Nose in Rat Army's command. All is going well, very well, I couldn't ask for anything better--

So why do I hate my life?

He went through the paces of the practices and games. He liked teaching the boys in his toon, and they followed him loyally. He had the respect of everyone, and he was treated with deference in his evening practices. Commanders came to study what he did. Other soldiers approached his table at mess and asked permission to sit down. Even the teachers were respectful.

He had so much damn respect he wanted to scream.

He watched the young kids in his army, fresh out of their launch groups, watched how they played, how they made fun of their leaders when they thought no one was looking. He watched the camaraderie of old friends who had known each other in the Battle School for years, who talked and laughed about old battles and long-graduated soldiers and commanders.

But with his old friends there was no laughter, no remembering. Just work. Just intelligence and excitement about the game, but nothing beyond that. Tonight it had come to a head in the evening practice. Ender and Alai were discussing the nuances of open-space maneuvers when Shen came up and listened for a few moments, then suddenly took Alai by the shoulders and shouted, "Nova! Nova! Nova!" Alai burst out laughing, and for a moment or two Ender watched them remember together the battle where open-room maneuvering had been for real, and they had dodged past the older boys and--

Suddenly they remembered that Ender was there. "Sorry, Ender," Shen said.

Sorry. For what? For being friends? "I was there, too, you know," Ender said.

And they apologized again. Back to business. Back to respect. And Ender realized that in their laughter, in their friendship, it had not occurred to them that he was included.

How could they think I was part of it? Did I laugh? Did I join in? Just stood there, watching, like a teacher.

That's how they think of me, too. Teacher. Legendary soldier. Not one of them. Not someone that you embrace and whisper Salaam in his ear. That only lasted while Ender still seemed a victim. Still seemed vulnerable. Now he was the master soldier, and he was completely, utterly alone.

Feel sorry for yourself, Ender. He typed the words on his desk as he lay on his bunk. POOR ENDER. Then he laughed at himself and cleared away the words. Not a boy or girl in this school who wouldn't he glad to trade places with me.

He called up the fantasy game. He walked as he often did through the village that the dwarves had built in the hill made by the Giant's corpse. It was easy to build sturdy walls, with the ribs already curved just right, just enough space between them to leave windows. The whole corpse was cut into apartments, opening onto the path down the Giant's spine. The public amphitheatre was carved into the pelvic bowl, and the common herd of ponies was pastured between the Giant's legs. Ender was never sure what the dwarves were doing as they went about their business, but they left him alone as he picked his way through the village, and in return he did them no harm either.

He vaulted the pelvic bone at the base of the public square, and walked through the pasture. The ponies shied away from him. He did not pursue them. Ender did not understand how the game functioned anymore. In the old days, before he had first gone to the End of the World, everything was combat and puzzles to solve defeat the enemy before he kills you, or figure out how to get past the obstacle. Now, though, no one attacked, there was no war, and wherever he went, there was no obstacle at all.

Except, of course, in the room in the castle at the End of the World. It was the one dangerous place left. And Ender, however often he vowed that he would not, always went back there, always killed the snake, always looked his brother in the face, and always, no matter what he did next, died.

It was no different this time. He tried to use the knife on the table to pry through the mortar and pull out a stone from the wall. As soon as he breached the seal of the mortar, water began to gush in through the crack, and Ender watched his death as his figure, now out of his control, struggled madly to stay alive, to keep from drowning. The windows of his room were gone, the water rose, and his figure drowned. All the while, the face of Peter Wiggin in the mirror stayed and looked at him.

I'm trapped here, Ender thought, trapped at the End of the World with no way out. And he knew at last the sour taste that had come to him, despite all his successes in the Battle School. It was despair.

There were uniformed men at the entrances to the school when Valentine arrived. They weren't standing like guards, but rather slouched around as if they were waiting for someone inside to finish his business. They wore the uniforms of IF Marines, the same uniforms that everyone saw in bloody combat on the videos. It lent an air of romance to that day at school: all the other kids were excited about it.

Valentine was not. It made her think of Ender, for one thing. And for another it made her afraid. Someone had recently published a savage commentary on the Demosthenes' collected writings. The commentary, and therefore her work, had been discussed on the open conference of the international relations net, with some of the most important people of the day attacking and defending Demosthenes. What worried her most was the comment of an Englishman: "Whether he likes it or not, Demosthenes cannot remain incognito forever. He has outraged too many wise men and pleased too many fools to hide behind his too-appropriate pseudonym much longer. Either he will unmask himself in order to assume leadership of the forces of stupidity he has marshalled, or his enemies will unmask him in order to better understand the disease that has produced such a warped and twisted mind."

Peter had been delighted, but then he would be. Valentine was afraid, that enough powerful people had been annoyed by the vicious persona of Demosthenes that she would indeed be tracked down. The IF could do it, even if the American government was constitutionally bound not to. And here were IF troops gathered at Western Guilford Middle School, of all places. Nor exactly the regular recruiting grounds for the IF Marines.

So she was not surprised to find a message marching around her desk as soon as she logged in.

PLEASE LOG OFF AND GO TO DR. LINEBERRY'S OFFICE AT ONCE.

Valentine waited nervously outside the principal's office until Dr. Lineberry opened the door and beckoned her inside. Her last doubt was removed when she saw the soft-bellied man in the uniform of an IF colonel sitting in the one comfortable chair in the room.

"You're Valentine Wiggin," he said.

"Yes," she whispered.

"I'm Colonel Graff. We've met before."

Before? When had she had any dealings with the IF?

"I've come to talk to you in confidence, about your brother."

It's not just me, then, she thought. They have Peter. Or is this something new? Has he done something crazy? I thought he stopped doing crazy things.

"Valentine, you seem frightened. There's no need to be. Please, sit down. I assure you that your brother is well. He has more than fulfilled our expectations."

And now, with a great inward gush of relief, she realized that it was Ender they had come about. Ender. It wasn't punishment at all, it was little Ender, who had disappeared so long ago, who was no part of Peter's plots now. You were the lucky one, Ender. You got away before Peter could trap you into his conspiracy.

"How do you feel about your brother, Valentine?"

"Ender?"

"Of course."

"How can I feel about him? I haven't seen him or heard from him since I was eight."

"Dr. Lineberry, will you excuse us?"

Lineberry was annoyed.

"On second thought, Dr. Lineberry, I think Valentine and I will have a much more productive conversation if we walk outside. Away from the recording devices that your assistant principal has placed in this room."

It was the first time Valentine had seen Dr. Lineberry speechless. Colonel Graff lifted a picture out from the wall and peeled a sound-sensitive membrane from the wall, along with its small broadcast unit. "Cheap," said Graff, "but effective. I thought you knew."

Lineberry took the device and sat down heavily at her desk. Graff led Valentine outside,

They walked out into the football field. The soldiers followed at a discreet distance: they split up and formed a large circle, to guard them from the widest possible perimeter.

"Valentine, we need your help for Ender."

"What kind of help?"

"We aren't even sure of that. We need you to help us figure out how you can help us."

"Well, what's wrong?"

"That's part of the problem. We don't know."

Valentine couldn't help but laugh. "I haven't seen him in three years! You've got him up there with you all the time!"

"Valentine, it costs more nuoney than your father will make in his lifetime for me to fly to Earth and back to the Battle School again. I don't commute casually."

"The king had a dream," said Valentine, "but he forgot what it was, so he told his wise men to interpret the dream or they'd die. Only Daniel could interpret it, because he was a prophet."

"You read the Bible?"

"We're doing classics this year in advanced English. I'm not a prophet."

"I wish I could tell you everything about Ender's situation. But it would take hours, maybe days, and afterward I'd have to put you in protective confinement because so much of it is strictly confidential. So let's see what we can do with limited information. There's a game that our students play with the computer." And he told her about the End of the World and the closed room and the picture of Peter in the mirror.

"It's the computer that puts the picture there, not Ender. Why not ask the computer?"

"The computer doesn't know."

"I'm supposed to know?"

"This is the second time since Ender's been with us that he's taken this game to a dead end. To a game that seems to have no solution."

"Did he solve the first one?"

"Eventually."

"Then give him time, he'll probably solve this one."

"I'm not sure. Valentine, your brother is a very unhappy little boy."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know much, do you?"

Valentine thought for a moment that the man might get angry. Instead, though, he decided to laugh. "No, not much. Valentine, why would Ender keep seeing your brother Peter in the mirror?"

"He shouldn't. It's stupid."

"Why is it stupid?"

"Because if there's ever anybody who was the opposite of Ender, it's Peter."

"How?"

Valentine could not think of a way to answer that wasn't dangerous. Too much questioning about Peter could lead to real trouble. Valentine knew enough about the world to know that no one would take Peter's plans for world domination seriously, as a danger to existing governments. But they might well decide he was insane and needed treatment for his megalomania.

"You're preparing to lie to me," Graff said.

"I'm preparing not to talk to you anymore," Valentine answered.

"And you're afraid. Why are you afraid?"

"I don't like questions about my family. Just leave my family out of this."

"Valentine, I'm trying to leave your family out of this. I'm coming to you so I don't have to start a battery of tests on Peter and question your parents. I'm trying to solve this problem now, with the person Ender loves and trusts most in the world, perhaps the only person he loves and trusts at all. If we can't solve it this way, then we'll sequester your family and do as we like from then on. This is not a trivial matter, and I won't just go away."

The only person Ender loves and trusts at all. She felt a deep stab of pain, of regret, of shame that now it was Peter she was close to. Peter who was the center of her life. For you, Ender, I light fires on your birthday. For Peter I help fulfil all his dreams. "I never thought you were a nice man. Not when you came to take Ender away, and not now."

"Don't pretend to be an ignorant little girl. I saw your tests when you were little, and at the present moment there aren't very many college professors who could keep up with you."

"Ender and Peter hate each other."

"I knew that. You said they were opposites. Why?"

"Peter -- can be hateful sometimes."

"Hateful in what way?"

"Mean. Just mean, that's all."

"Valentine, for Ender's sake, tell me what he does when he's being mean."

"He threatens to kill people a lot. He doesn't mean it. But when we were little, Ender and I were both afraid of him. He told us he'd kill us. Actually, he told us he'd kill Ender."

"We monitored some of that."

"It was because of the monitor."

"Is that all? Tell me more about Peter."

So she told him about the children in every school that Peter attended. He never hit them, but he tortured them just the same. Found what they were most ashamed of and told it to the person whose respect they most wanted. Found what they most feared and made sure they faced it often.

"Did he do this with Ender?"

Valentine shook her head.

"Are you sure? Didn't Ender have a weak place? A thing he feared most, or that he was ashamed of?"

"Ender never did anything to be ashamed of." And suddenly, deep in her own shame for having forgotten and betrayed Ender, she started to cry.

"Why are you crying?"

She shook her head. She couldn't explain what it was like to think of her little brother, who was so good, whom she had protected for so long, and then remember that now she was Peter's ally, Peter's helper, Peter's slave in a scheme that was completely out of her control. Ender never surrendered to Peter, but I have turned, I've become part of him, as Ender never was. "Ender never gave in," she said.

"To what?"

"To Peter. To being like Peter."

They walked in silence along the goal line.

"How would Ender ever be like Peter?"

Valentine shuddered, "I already told you."

"But Ender never did that kind of thing. He was just a little boy."

"We both wanted to, though. We both wanted to to kill Peter."

"Ah."

"No, that isn't true. We never said it, Ender never said that he wanted to do that. I just -- thought it. It was me, not Ender. He never said that he wanted to kill him."

"What did he want?"

"He just didn't want to be--"

"To be what?"

"Peter tortures squirrels. He stakes them out on the ground and skins them alive and sits and watches them until they die. He did that, he doesn't do it now. But he did it. If Ender knew that, if Ender saw him, I think that he'd--"

"He'd what? Rescue the squirrels? Try to heal them?"

"No, in those days you didn't undo what Peter did. You didn't cross him. But Ender would be kind to squirrels. Do you understand? He'd feed them."

"But if he fed them, they'd become tame, and that much easier for Peter to catch."

Valentine began to cry again. "No matter what you do, it always helps Peter. Everything helps Peter, everything, you just can't get away, no matter what."

"Are you helping Peter?" asked Graff.

She didn't answer.

"Is Peter such a very bad person, Valentine?"

She nodded.

"Is Peter the worst person in the world?"

"How can he be? I don't know. He's the worst person I know."

"And yet you and Ender are his brother and sister. You have the same genes, the same parents, how can he be so bad if--"

Valentine turned and screamed at him, screamed as if he were killing her. "Ender is not like Peter! He is not like Peter in any way! Except that he's smart, that's all-- in every

other way a person could possibly be like Peter he is nothing nothing nothing like Peter! Nothing!"

"I see," said Graff.

"I know what you're thinking, you bastard, you're thinking that I'm wrong, that Ender's like Peter. Well maybe I'm like Peter, but Ender isn't, he isn't at all, I used to tell him that when he cried, I told him that lots of times, you're not like Peter, you never like to hurt people, you're kind and good and not like Peter at all!"

"And it's true."

His acquiescence calmed her. "Damn right it's true. It's true."

"Valentine, will you help Ender?"

"I can't do anything for him now."

"It's really the same thing you always did for him before. Just comfort him and tell him that he never likes to hurt people, that he's good and kind and not like Peter at all, That's the most important thing. That he's not like Peter at all."

"I can see him?"

"No. I want you to write a letter."

"What good does that do? Ender never answered a single letter I sent."

Graff sighed. "He answered every letter he got."

It took only a second for her to understand. "You really stink."

"Isolation is -- the optimum environment for creativity. It was *his* ideas we wanted, not the -- never mind, I don't have to defend myself to you."

Then why are you doing it, she did not ask.

"But he's slacking off. He's coasting. We want to push him forward, and he won't go."

"Maybe I'd be doing Ender a favor if I told you to go stuff yourself."

"You've already helped me. You can help me more. Write to him."

"Promise you won't cut out anything I write."

"I won't promise any such thing."

"Then forget it."

"No problem. I'll write your letter myself. We can use your other letters to reconcile the writing styles. Simple matter."

"I want to see him."

"He gets his first leave when he's eighteen."

"You told him it would be when he was twelve."

"We changed the rules."

"Why should I help you!"

"Don't help me. Help Ender. What does it matter if that helps us, too?"

"What kind of terrible things are you doing to him up there?"

Graff chuckled. "Valentine, my dear little girl, the terrible things are only about to begin."

Ender was four lines into the letter before he realized that it wasn't from one of the other soldiers in the Battle School. It had come in the regular way -- a MAIL WAITING message when he signed into his desk. He read four lines into it, then skipped to the end and read the signature. Then he went back to the beginning, and curled up on his bed to read the words over and over again.

ENDER,

THE BASTARDS WOULDN'T PUT ANY OF MY LETTERS THROUGH TILL NOW. I MUST HAVE WRITTEN A HUNDRED TIMES BUT YOU MUST HAVE THOUGHT I NEVER DID. WELL, I DID. I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN YOU. I REMEMBER YOUR BIRTHDAY. I REMEMBER EVERYTHING. SOME PEOPLE MIGHT THINK THAT BECAUSE YOU'RE BEING A SOLDIER YOU ARE NOW A CRUEL AND HARD PERSON WHO LIKES TO HURT PEOPLE, LIKE THE MARINES IN THE VIDEOS, BUT I KNOW THAT ISN'T TRUE. YOU ARE NOTHING LIKE YOU-KNOW-WHO. HE'S NICER-SEEMING BUT HE'S STILL A SLUMBITCH INSIDE. MAYBE YOU SEEM MEAN, BUT IT WON'T FOOL ME. STILL PADDLING THE OLD KNEW, ALL MY LOVE TURKEY LIPS,

VAL

DON'T WRITE BACK THEY'LL PROBABLY SIKOWANALIZE YOUR LETTER.

Obviously it was written with the full approval of the teachers. But there was no doubt it was written by Val. The spelling of psychoanalyze, the epithet slumbitch for Peter, the joke about pronouncing knew like canoe were all things that no one could know but Val.

And yet they came pretty thick, as though someone wanted to make very sure that Ender believed that the letter was genuine. Why should they be so eager if it's the real thing?

It isn't the real thing anyway. Even if she wrote it in her own blood, it isn't the real thing because they made her write it. She'd written before, and they didn't let any of those letters through. Those might have been real, but this was asked for, this was part of their manipulation.

And the despair filled him again. Now he knew why. Now he knew what he hated so much. He had no control over his own life. They ran everything. They made all the choices. Only the game was left to him, that was all, everything else was them and their rules and plans and lessons and programs, and all he could do was go this way or that way in battle. The one real thing, the one precious real thing was his memory of Valentine, the person who loved him before he ever played a game, who loved him whether there was a bugger war or not, and they had taken her and put her on their side. She was one of them now.

He hated them and all their games. Hated them so badly that he cried, reading Val's empty asked-for letter again. The other boys in Phoenix Army noticed and looked away. Ender Wiggin crying? That was disturbing. Something terrible was going on. The best soldier in any army, lying on his bunk crying. The silence in the room was deep.

Ender deleted the letter, wiped it out of memory and then punched up the fantasy game. He was not sure why he was so eager to play the game, to get to the End of the World, but he wasted no time getting there. Only when he coasted on the cloud, skimming over the autumnal colors of the pastoral world, only then did he realize what he hated most about Val's letter. All that it said was about Peter. About how he was not at all like Peter. The words she had said so often as she held him, comforted him as he trembled in fear and rage and loathing after Peter had tortured him, that was all that the letter had said.

And that was what they had asked for. The bastards knew about that, and they knew about Peter in the mirror in the castle room, they knew about everything and to them Val was just one more tool to use to control him, just one more trick to play. Dink was right, they were the enemy, they loved nothing and cared for nothing and he was not going to do what they wanted, he was damn well not going to do anything for them. He had had only one memory that was safe, one good thing, and those bastards had plowed it into him with the rest of the manure -- and so he was finished, he wasn't going to play.

As always the serpent waited in the tower room, unraveling itself from the rug on the floor. But this time Ender didn't grind it underfoot. This time he caught it in his hands, knelt before it, and gently, so gently, brought the snake's gaping mouth to his lips.

And kissed.

He had not meant to do that. He had meant to let the snake bite him on the mouth. Or perhaps he had meant to eat the snake alive, as Peter in the mirror had done, with his bloody chin and the snake's tail dangling from his lips. But he kissed it instead.

And the snake in his hands thickened and bent into another shape. A human shape. It was Valentine, and she kissed him again.

The snake could not be Valentine. He had killed it too often for it to be his sister. Peter had devoured it too often to bear it that it might have been Valentine all along.

Was this what they planned when they let him read her letter? He didn't care.

She arose from the floor of the tower room and walked to the mirror. Ender made his figure also rise and go with her. They stood before the mirror, where instead of Peter's cruel reflection there stood a dragon and a unicorn. Ender reached out his hand and touched the mirror; the wall fell open and revealed a great stairway downward, carpeted and lined with shouting, cheering multitudes. Together, arm in arm, he and Valentine walked down the stairs. Tears filled his eyes, tears of relief that at last he had broken free of the End of the World. And because of the tears, he didn't notice that every member of the multitude wore Peter's face. He only knew that wherever he went in this world, Valentine was with him.

Valentine read the letter that Dr. Lineberry had given her. "Dear Valentine," it said, "We thank you and commend you for your efforts on behalf of the war effort. You are hereby notified that you have been awarded the Star of the Order of the League of Humanity, First Class, which is the highest military award that can be given to a civilian. Unfortunately, IF security forbids us to make this award public until after the successful conclusion of current operations, but we want you to know that your efforts resulted in complete success. Sincerely, General Shimon Levy, Strategos."

When she had read it twice Dr. Lineberry took it from her hands. "I was instructed to let you read it, and then destroy it." She took a cigarette lighter from a drawer and set the paper afire. It burned brightly in the ashtray. "Was it good or bad news?" she asked.

"I sold my brother," Valentine said, "and they paid me for it."

"That's a bit melodramatic, isn't it, Valentine?"

Valentine went back to class without answering.

That night Demosthenes published a scathing denunciation of the population limitation laws. People should be allowed to have as many children as they like, and the surplus population should be sent to other worlds, to spread mankind so far across the galaxy that no disaster, no invasion could ever threaten the human race with annihilation. "The most noble title any child can have," Demosthenes wrote, "is Third."

For you, Ender, she said to herself as she wrote.

Peter laughed in delight when he read it. "That'll make them sit up and take notice. Third! A noble title! Oh, you have a wicked streak."

Chapter 10 -- Dragon

"Now?"

"I suppose so.

"It has to be an order, Colonel Graff. Armies don't move because a commander says 'I suppose it's time to attack.'"

"I'm not a commander. I'm a teacher of little children."

"Colonel, sir, I admit I was on you, I admit I was a pain in the ass, but it worked, everything worked just like you wanted it to. The last few weeks Ender's even been, been--"

"Happy."

"Content. He's doing well. His mind is keen, his play is excellent. Young as he is. we've never had a boy better prepared for command. Usually they go at eleven. but at nine and a half he's top flight."

"Well, yes. For a few minutes there, it actually occurred to me to wonder what kind of a man would heal a broken child of some of his hurt, just so he could throw him back into battle again. A little private moral dilemma. Please overlook it. I was tired."

"Saving the world, remember?"

"Call him in."

"We're doing what must be done, Colonel Graff."

"Come on, Anderson, you're just dying to see how he handles all those rigged games I had you work out."

"That's a pretty low thing to--"

"So I'm a low kind of guy. Come on, Major. We're both the scum of the earth. I'm dying to see how he handles them, too. After all, our lives depend on him doing real well. Neh?"

"You're not starting to use the boys' slang, are you?"

"Call him in, Major. I'll dump the rosters into his files and give him his security system. What we're doing to him isn't all bad, you know. He gets his privacy again."

"Isolation, you mean."

"The loneliness of power. Go call him in."

"Yes sir. I'll be back with him in fifteen minutes."

"Good-bye. Yes sir yessir yezzir. I hope you had fun, I hope you had a nice, nice time being happy, Ender. It might be the last time in your life. Welcome, little boy. Your dear Uncle Graff has plans for you."

Ender knew what was happening from the moment they brought him in. Everyone expected him to go commander early. Perhaps not this early, but he had topped the standings almost continuously for three years, no one else was remotely close to him, and his evening practices had become the most prestigious group in the school. There were some who wondered why the teachers had waited this long.

He wondered which army they'd give him. Three commanders were graduating soon, including Petra, but it was beyond hope for them to give him Phoenix Army. No one ever succeeded to command of the same army he was in when he was promoted.

Anderson took him first to his new quarters. That sealed it -- only commanders had private rooms. Then he had him fitted for new uniforms and a new flash suit. He looked on the forms to discover the name of his army.

Dragon, said the form. There was no Dragon Army.

"I've never heard of Dragon Army," Ender said.

"That's because there hasn't been a Dragon Army in four years. We discontinued the name because there was a superstition about it. No Dragon Army in the history of the Battle School ever won even a third of its games. It got to be a joke."

"Well, why are you reviving it now?"

"We had a lot of extra uniforms to use up."

Graff sat at his desk, looking fatter and wearier than the last time Ender had seen him. He handed Ender his hook, the small box that commanders used to go where they wanted in the battleroom during practices. Many times during his evening practice sessions Ender wished that he had a hook, instead of having to rebound off walls to get where he wanted to go. Now that he'd got quite deft at maneuvering without one, here it was. "It only works," Anderson pointed out, "during your regularly scheduled practice sessions." Since Ender already planned to have extra practices, it meant the hook would only be useful some of the time. It also explained why so many commanders never held extra practices. They depended on the hook, and it wouldn't do anything for them during the extra times. If they felt that the hook was their authority, their power over the other boys, then they were even less likely to work without it. That's an advantage I'll have over some of my enemies, Ender thought.

Graff's official welcome speech sounded bored and over-rehearsed. Only at the end did he begin to sound interested in his own words. "We're doing something unusual with Dragon Army. I hope you don't mind. We've assembled a new army by advancing the equivalent of an entire launch course early and delaying the graduation of quite a few advanced students. I think you'll be pleased with the quality of your soldiers. I hope you are, because we're forbidding you to transfer any of them."

"No trades?" asked Ender. It was how commanders always shored up their weak points, by trading around.

"None. You see, you have been conducting your extra practice sessions for three years now. You have a following. Many good soldiers would put unfair pressure on their commanders to trade them into your army. We've given you an army that can, in time, be competitive. We have no intention of letting you dominate unfairly."

"What if I've got a soldier I just can't get along with?"

"Get along with him." Graff closed his eyes. Anderson stood up and the interview was over.

Dragon was assigned the colors grey, orange, grey; Ender changed into his flash suit, then followed the ribbons of light until he came to the barracks that contained his army. They were there already, milling around near the entrance. Ender took charge at once. "Bunking will be arranged by seniority. Veterans to the back of the room, newest soldiers to the front."

It was the reverse of the usual pattern, and Ender knew it. He also knew that he didn't intend to be like many commanders, who never even saw the younger boys because they were always in the back.

As they sorted themselves out according to their arrival dates, Ender walked up and down the aisle. Almost thirty of his soldiers were new, straight out of their launch group, completely inexperienced in battle. Some were even underage -- the ones nearest the door were pathetically small. Ender reminded himself that that's how he must have looked to Bonzo Madrid when he first arrived. Still, Bonzo had had only one underage soldier to cope with.

Not one of the veterans belonged to Ender's elite practice group. None had ever been a toon leader. None, in fact, was older than Ender himself, which meant that even his veterans didn't have more than eighteen months' experience. Some he didn't even recognize, they had made so little impression.

They recognized Ender, of course, since he was the most celebrated soldier in the school. And some, Ender could see, resented him. At least they did me one favor -- none of my soldiers is older than me.

As soon as each soldier had a bunk, Ender ordered them to put on their flash suits and come to practice. "We're on the morning schedule, straight to practice after breakfast. Officially you have a free hour between breakfast and practice. We'll see what happens after I find out how good you are." After three minutes, though many of them still weren't dressed, he ordered them out of the room.

"But I'm naked!" said one boy.

"Dress faster next time. Three minutes from first call to running out the door -- that's the rule this week. Next week the rule is two minutes. Move!" It would soon be a joke in the rest of the school that Dragon Army was so dumb they had to practice getting dressed.

Five of the boys were completely naked, carrying their flash suits as they ran through the corridors; few were fully dressed. They attracted a lot of attention as they passed open classroom doors. No one would be late again if he could help it.

In the corridors leading to the battleroom, Ender made them run back and forth in the halls, fast, so they were sweating a little, while the naked ones got dressed. Then he led them to the upper door, the one that opened into the middle of the battleroom just like the doors in the actual games. Then he made them jump up and use the ceiling handholds to hurl themselves into the room. "Assemble on the far wall," he said. "As if you were going for the enemy's gate."

They revealed themselves as they jumped, four at a time, through the door. Almost none of them knew how to establish a direct line to the target, and when they reached the far wall few of the new ones had any idea how to catch on or even control their rebounds.

The last boy out was a small kid, obviously underage. There was no way he was going to reach the ceiling handhold.

"You can use a side handhold if you want," Ender said.

"Go suck on it," said the boy. He took a flying leap, touched the ceiling handhold with a finger tip, and hurtled through the door with no control at all, spinning in three directions at once. Ender tried to decide whether to like the little kid for refusing to take a concession or to be annoyed at his insubordinate attitude.

They finally got themselves together along the wall. Ender noticed that without exception they had lined up with their heads still in the direction that had been up in the corridor. So Ender deliberately took hold of what they were treating as a floor and dangled from it upside down. "Why are you upside down, soldiers?" he demanded.

Some of them started to turn the other way.

"Attention!" They held still. "I said why are you upside down!"

No one answered. They didn't know what he expected.

"I said why does every one of you have his feet in the air and his head toward the ground!"

Finally one of them spoke. "Sir, this is the direction we were in coming out of the door."

"Well what difference is that supposed to make! What difference does it make what the gravity was back in the corridor! Are we going to fight in the corridor? Is there any gravity here?"

No sir. No *sir*.

"From now on, you forget about gravity before you go through that door. The old gravity is gone, erased. Understand me? Whatever your gravity is when you get to the door, remember -- the enemy's gate is down. Your feet are toward the enemy's gate. Up is toward your own gate. North is that way, south is that way, east is that way, west is -- what way?"

They pointed.

"That's what I expected. The only process you've mastered is the process of elimination, and the only reason you've mastered that is because you can do it in the toilet. What was

the circus I saw out here! Did you call that forming up? Did you call that flying? Now everybody, launch and form up on the ceiling! Right now! Move!"

As Ender expected, a good number of them instinctively launched, not toward the wall with the door in it, but toward the wall that Ender had called north, the direction that had been up when they were in the corridor. Of course they quickly realized their mistake, but too late -- they had to wait to change things until they had rebounded off the north wall.

In the meantime, Ender was mentally grouping them into slow learners and fast learners. The littlest kid, the one who had been last out of the door, was the first to arrive at the correct wall, and he caught himself adroitly. They had been right to advance him. He'd do well. He was also cocky and rebellious, and probably resented the fact that he had been one of the ones Ender had sent naked through the corridors.

"You!" Ender said, pointing at the small one. "Which way is down?"

"Toward the enemy door." The answer was quick. It was also surly, as if to say, OK, OK, now get on with the important stuff.

"Name, kid?"

"This soldier's name is Bean, sir."

"Get that for size or for brains?" The other boys laughed a little. "Well, Bean, you're right onto things. Now listen to me, because this matters. Nobody's going to get through that door without a good chance of getting hit. In the old days, you had ten, twenty seconds before you even had to move. Now if you aren't already streaming out of the door when the enemy comes out, you're frozen. Now, what happens when you're frozen?"

"Can't move," one of the boys said.

"That's what frozen means," Ender said. "But what happens to you?"

It was Bean, not intimidated at all, who answered intelligently. "You keep going in the direction you started in. At the speed you were going when you were flashed."

"That's true. You five, there on the end, move!"

Startled, the boys looked at each other, Ender flashed them all. "The next five, move!"

They moved. Ender flashed them, too, but they kept moving, heading toward the walls. The first five, though, were drifting uselessly near the main group.

"Look at these so-called soldiers," Ender said. "Their commander ordered them to move, and now look at them. Not only are they frozen, they're frozen right here, where

they can get in the way. While the others, because they moved when they were ordered, are frozen down there, plugging up the enemy's lanes, blocking the enemy's vision. I imagine that about five of you have understood the point of this. And no doubt Bean is one of them. Right, Bean?"

He didn't answer at first. Ender looked at him until he said, "Right, sir."

"Then what is the point?"

"When you are ordered to move, move fast, so if you get iced you'll bounce around instead of getting in the way of your own army's operations."

"Excellent. At least I have one soldier who can figure things out." Ender could see resentment growing in the way the other soldiers shifted their weight and glanced at each other, the way they avoided looking at Bean. Why am I doing this? What does this have to do with being a good commander, making one boy the target of all the others? Just because they did it to me, why should I do it to him? Ender wanted to undo his taunting of the boy, wanted to tell the others that the little one needed their help and friendship more than anyone else. But of course Ender couldn't do that. Not on the first day. On the first day even his mistakes had to look like part of a brilliant plan.

Ender hooked himself nearer the wall and pulled one of the boys away from the others. "Keep your body straight," said Ender. He rotated the boy in midair so his feet pointed toward the others. When the boy kept moving his body, Ender flashed him. The others laughed. "How much of his body could you shoot?" Ender asked a boy directly under the frozen soldier's feet.

"Mostly all I can hit is his feet."

Ender turned to the boy next to him. "What about you?"

"I can see his body."

"And you?"

A boy a little farther down the wall answered. "All of him."

"Feet aren't very big. Not much protection." Ender pushed the frozen soldier out of the way. Then he doubled his legs under him, as if he were kneeling in midair, and flashed his own legs. Immediately the legs of his suit went rigid, holding them in that position.

Ender twisted himself in the air so that he knelt above the other boys.

"What do you see?" he asked.

A lot less, they said.

Ender thrust his gun between his legs. "I can see time," he said, and proceeded to flash the boys directly under him. "Stop me!" he shouted. "Try and flash me!"

They finally did, but not until he had flashed more than a third of them. He thumbed his hook and thawed himself and every other frozen soldier. "Now," he said "which way is the enemy's gate?"

"Down!"

"And what is our attack position?"

Some started to answer with words, but Bean answered by flipping himself away from the wall with his legs doubled under him, straight toward the opposite wall, flashing between his legs all the way.

For a moment Ender wanted to shout at him, to punish him; then he caught himself, rejected the ungenerous impulse. Why should I be so angry at this little boy? "Is Bean the only one who knows how?" Ender shouted.

Immediately the entire army pushed off toward the opposite wall, kneeling in the air, firing between their legs, shouting at the top of their lungs. There may be a time, thought Ender, when this is exactly the strategy I'll need -- forty screaming boys in an unbalancing attack.

When they were all at the other side, Ender called for them to attack him, all at once. Yes, thought Ender. Not bad. They gave me an untrained army, with no excellent veterans, but at least it isn't a crop of fools. I can work with this.

When they were assembled again, laughing and exhilarated, Ender began the real work. He had them freeze their legs in the kneeling position. "Now, what are your legs good for, in combat?"

Nothing, said some boys.

"Bean doesn't think so," said Ender.

"They're the best way to push off walls."

"Right," Ender said, The other boy's started to complain that pushing off walls was movement, not combat.

"There is no combat without movement," Ender said. They fell silent and hated Bean a little more. "Now, with your legs frozen like this, can you push off walls?"

No one dared answer, for fear they'd be wrong. "Bean?" asked Ender.

"I've never tried it, but maybe if you faced the wall and doubled over at the waist--"

"Right but wrong. Watch me. My back's to the wall, legs are frozen. Since I'm kneeling, my feet are against the wall. Usually, when you push off you have to push downward, so you spring out your body behind you like a string bean, right?"

Laughter.

"But with my legs frozen, I use pretty much the same force, pushing downward from the hips and thighs, only now it pushes my shoulders and my feet backward, shoots out my hips, and when I come loose my body's tight, nothing stringing out behind me. Watch this."

Ender forced his hips forward, which shot him away from the wall; in a moment he readjusted his position and was kneeling, legs downward, rushing toward the opposite wall. He landed on his knees, flipped over on his back, and jackknifed off the wall in another direction. "Shoot me!" he shouted. Then he set himself spinning in the air as he took a course roughly parallel to the boys along the far wall. Because he was spinning, they couldn't get a continuous beam on him.

He thawed his suit and hooked himself back to them. "That's what we're working on for the first half hour today. Build up some muscles you didn't know you had. Learn to use your legs as a shield and control your movements so you can get that spin. Spinning doesn't do any good up close, but far away, they can't hurt you if you're spinning -- at that distance the beam has to hit the same spot for a couple of moments, and if you're spinning it can't happen. Now freeze yourself and get started."

"Aren't you going to assign lanes?" asked a boy.

"No I'm not going to assign lanes. I want you bumping into each other and learning how to deal with it all the time, except when we're practicing formations, and then I'll usually have you bump into each other on purpose. Now move!"

When he said move, they moved.

Ender was the last one out after practice, since he stayed to help some of the slower ones improve on technique. They'd had good teachers, but the inexperienced soldiers fresh out of their launch groups were completely helpless when it came to doing two or three things at the same time. It was fine to practice jackknifing with frozen legs, they had no trouble maneuvering in midair, but to launch in one direction, fire in another, spin twice, rebound with a jackknife off a wall, and come out firing, facing the right direction -- that was way beyond them. Drill drill drill, that was all Ender would be able to do with them for a while. Strategies and formations were nice, but they were nothing if the army didn't know how to handle themselves in battle.

He had to get this army ready now. He was early at being a commander, and the teachers were changing the rules now, not letting him trade, giving him no top-notch veterans. There was no guarantee that they'd give him the usual three months to get his army together before sending them into battle.

At least in the evenings he'd have Alai and Shen to help him train his new boys.

He was still in the corridor leading out of the battleroom when he found himself face to face with little Bean. Bean looked angry. Ender didn't want problems right now.

"Ho, Bean."

"Ho, Ender."

Pause.

"*Sir*," Ender said softly.

"I know what you're doing, Ender, sir, and I'm warning you."

"Warning me?"

"I can be the best man you've got, but don't play games with me."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll be the worst man you've got. One or the other,"

"And what do you want, love and kisses?" Ender was getting angry now.

Bean looked unworried. "I want a toon."

Ender walked back to him and stood looking down into his eyes. "Why should you get a toon?"

"Because I'd know what to do with it."

"Knowing what to do with a toon is easy," Ender said. "It's getting them to do it that's hard. Why would any soldier want to follow a little pinprick like you?"

"They used to call you that, I hear. I hear Bonzo Madrid still does."

"I asked you a question, soldier."

"I'll earn their respect, if you don't stop me."

Ender grinned. "I'm helping you."

"Like hell," said Bean.

"Nobody would notice you, except to feel sorry for the little kid. But I made sure they all noticed you today. They'll be watching every move you make. All you have to do to earn their respect now is be perfect."

"So I don't even get a chance to learn before I'm being judged."

"Poor kid. Nobody's treatin him fair." Ender gently pushed Bean back against the wall. "I'll tell you how to get a toon. Prove to me you know what you're doing as a soldier. Prove to me you know how to use other soldiers. And then prove to me that somebody's willing to follow you into battle. Then you'll get your toon. But not bloody well until."

Bean smiled. "That's fair. If you actually work that way, I'll be a toon leader in a month."

Ender reached down and grabbed the front of his uniform and shoved him into the wall. "When I say I work a certain way, Bean, then that's the way I work."

Bean just smiled. Ender let go of him and walked away. When he got to his room he lay down on his bed and trembled. What am I doing? My first practice session and I'm already bullying people the way Bonzo did. And Peter. Shoving people around. Picking on some poor little kid so the others'll have somebody they all hate. Sickening. Everything I hated in a commander, and I'm doing it.

Is it some law of human nature that you inevitably become whatever your first commander was? I can quit right now, if that's so.

Over and over he thought of the things he did and said in his first practice with his new army. Why couldn't he talk like he always did in his evening practice group? No authority except excellence. Never had to give orders, just made suggestions. But that wouldn't work, not with an army. His informal practice group didn't have to learn to do things together. They didn't have to develop a group feeling; they never had to learn how to hold together and trust each other in battle. They didn't have to respond instantly to command.

And he could go to the other extreme, too. He could be as lax and incompetent as Rose the Nose, if he wanted. He could make stupid mistakes no matter what he did. He had to have discipline, and that meant demanding -- and getting -- quick, decisive obedience. He had to have a well-trained army, and that meant drilling the soldiers over and over again, long after they thought they had mastered a technique, until it was so natural to them that they didn't have to think about it anymore.

But what was this thing with Bean? Why had he gone for the smallest, weakest, and possibly the brightest of the boys? Why had he done to Bean what had been done to Ender by commanders that he despised.

Then he remembered that it hadn't begun with his commanders. Before Rose and Bonzo had treated him with contempt, he had been isolated in his launch group. And it wasn't Bernard who began that, either. It was Graff.

It was the teachers who had done it. And it wasn't an accident. Ender realized that now. It was a strategy. Graff had deliberately set him up to be separate from the other boys, made it impossible for him to be close to them. And he began now to suspect the reasons behind it. It wasn't to unify the rest of the group -- in fact, it was divisive. Graff had isolated Ender to make him struggle. To make him prove, not that he was competent, but that he was far better than everyone else. That was the only way he could win respect and friendship. It made him a better soldier than he would ever have been otherwise. It also made him lonely, afraid, angry, untrusting. And maybe those traits, too, made him a better soldier.

That's what I'm doing to you, Bean. I'm hurting you to make you a better soldier in every way. To sharpen your wit. To intensify your effort. To keep you off balance, never sure what's going to happen next, so you always have to be ready for anything, ready to improvise, determined to win no matter what. I'm also making you miserable. That's why they brought you to me, Bean. So you could be just like me. So you could grow up to be just like the old man.

And me -- am I supposed to grow up like Graff? Fat and sour and unfeeling, manipulating the lives of little boys so they turn out factory perfect, generals and admirals ready to lead the fleet in defense of the homeland. You get all the pleasures of the puppeteer. Until you get a soldier who can do more than anyone else. You can't have that. It spoils the symmetry. You must get him in line, break him down, isolate him, beat him until he gets in line with everyone else.

Well, what I've done to you this day, Bean, I've done. But I'll be watching you, more compassionately than you know, and when the time is right you'll find that I'm your friend, and you are the soldier you want to be.

Ender did not go to classes that afternoon. He lay on his bunk and wrote down his impressions of each of the boys in his army, the things he noticed right about them, the things that needed more work. In practice tonight, he would talk with Alai and they'd figure out ways to teach small groups the things they needed to know. At least he wouldn't be in this thing alone.

But when Ender got to the battleroom that night, while most others were still eating, he found Major Anderson waiting for him. "There has been a rule change, Ender. From now on, only members of the same army may work together in a battleroom during freetime.

And, therefore, battlerooms are available only on a scheduled basis. After tonight, your next turn is in four days."

"Nobody else is holding extra practices."

"They are row, Ender. Now that you command another army, they don't want their boys practicing with you. Surely you can understand that. So they'll conduct their own practices."

"I've always been in another army from them. They still sent their soldiers to me for training."

"You weren't commander then."

"You gave me a completely green army, Major Anderson, sir--"

"You have quite a few veterans."

"They aren't any good."

"Nobody gets here without being brilliant, Ender. Make them good."

"I needed Alai and Shen to--"

"It's about time you grew up and did some things on your own, Ender. You don't need these other boys to hold your hand. You're a commander now. So kindly act like it, Ender."

Ender walked past Anderson toward the battleroom. Then he stopped, turned, asked a question. "Since these evening practices are now regularly scheduled, does it mean I can use the hook?"

Did Anderson almost smile? No. Not a chance of that. "We'll see," he said.

Ender turned his back and went on into the battleroom. Soon his army arrived, and no one else; either Anderson waited around to intercept anyone coming to Ender's practice group, or word had already passed through the whole school that Ender's informal evenings were through.

It was a good practice, they accomplished a lot, but at the end of it Ender was tired and lonely. There was a half hour before bedtime. He couldn't go into his army's barracks -- he had long since learned that the best commanders stay away unless they have some reason to visit. The boys have to have a chance to be at peace, at rest, without someone listening to favor or despise them depending on the way they talk and act and think.

So he wandered to the game room, where a few other boys were using the last half hour before final bell to settle bets or beat their previous scores on the games. None of the games looked interesting, but he played one anyway, an easy animated game designed for Launchies. Bored, he ignored the objectives of the game and used the little player-figure, a bear, to explore the animated scenery around him.

"You'll never win that way."

Ender smiled, "Missed you at practice, Alai."

"I was there. But they had your army in a separate place. Looks like you're big time now, can't play with the little boys anymore."

"You're a full cubit taller than I am."

"Cubit! Has God been telling you to build a boat or something? Or are you in an archaic mood?"

"Not archaic, just arcane. Secret, subtle, roundabout. I miss you already, you circumcised dog."

"Don't you know? We're enemies now. Next time I meet you in battle, I'll whip your ass."

It was banter, as always, but now there was too much truth behind it. Now when Ender heard Alai talk as if it were all a joke, he felt the pain of losing a friend, and the worse pain of wondering if Alai really felt as little pain as he showed.

"You can try," said Ender. "I taught you everything you know. But I didn't teach you everything I know."

"I knew all along that you were holding something back, Ender."

A pause. Ender's bear was in trouble on the screen. He climbed a tree. "I wasn't, Alai. Holding anything back."

"I know." said Alai. "Neither was I."

"Salaam, Alai."

"Alas, it is not to be."

"What isn't?"

"Peace. It's what salaam means. Peace be unto you."

The words brought forth an echo from Ender's memory. His mother's voice reading to him softly, when he was very young. Think not that I came to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword. Ender had pictured his mother piercing Peter the Terrible with a bloody rapier, and the words had stayed in his mind along with the image.

In the silence, the bear died. It was a cute death, with funny music. Ender turned around. Alai was already gone. He felt like part of himself had been taken away, an inward prop that was holding up his courage and confidence. With Alai, to a degree impossible even with Shen, Ender had come to feel a unity so strong that the word we came to his lips much more easily than I.

But Alai had left something behind. Ender lay in bed, dozing into the night, and felt Alai's lips on his cheek as he muttered the word peace. The kiss, the word, the peace were with him still. I am only what I remember, and Alai is my friend in memories so intense that they can't tear him out. Like Valentine, the strongest memory of all.

The next day he passed Alai in the corridor, and they greeted each other, touched hands, talked, but they both knew that there was a wall now. It might be breached, that wall, sometime in the future, but for now the only real conversation between them was the roots that had already grown low and deep, under the wall, where they could not be broken.

The most terrible thing, though, was the fear that the wall could never be breached, that in his heart Alai was glad of the separation, and was ready to be Ender's enemy. For now that they could not be together, they must be infinitely apart, and what had been sure and unshakable was now fragile and insubstantial; from the moment we are not together, Alai is a stranger, for he has a life now that will be no part of mine, and that means that when I see him we will not know each other.

It made him sorrowful, but Ender did not weep. He was done with that. When they had turned Valentine into a stranger, when they had used her as a tool to work on Ender, from that day forward they could never hurt him deep enough to make him cry again. Ender was certain of that.

And with that anger, he decided he was strong enough to defeat them, the teachers, his enemies.

Chapter 11 -- Veni Vidi Vici

"You can't be serious about this schedule of battles."

"Yes I can."

"He's only had his army three and a half weeks."

"I told you. We did computer simulations on probable results. And here is what the computer estimated Ender would do."

"We want to teach him, not give him a nervous breakdown."

"The computer knows him better than we do."

"The computer is also not famous for having mercy."

"If you wanted to be merciful, you should have gone to a monastery."

"You mean this isn't a monastery?"

"This is best for Ender, too. We're bringing him to his full potential."

"I thought we'd give him two years as commander. We usually give them a battle every two weeks, starting after three months. This is a little extreme."

"Do we have two years to spare?"

"I know. I just have this picture of Ender a year from now. Completely useless, worn out, because he was pushed farther than he or any living person could go."

"We told the computer that our highest priority was having the subject remain useful after the training program."

"Well, as long as he's usefull--"

"Look, Colonel Graff, you're the one who made me prepare this, over my protests, if you'll remember."

"I know, you're right, I shouldn't burden you with my conscience. But my eagerness to sacrifice little children in order to save mankind is wearing thin. The Polemarch has been to see the Hegemon. It seems Russian intelligence is concerned that some of the active citizens on the nets are already figuring how America ought to use the IF to destroy the Warsaw Pact as soon as the buggers are destroyed."

"Seems premature."

"It seems insane. Free speech is one thing, but to jeopardize the League over nationalistic rivalries -- and it's for people like that, short-sighted, suicidal people, that we're pushing Ender to the edge of human endurance."

"I think you underestimate Ender."

"But I fear that I also underestimate the stupidity of the rest of mankind. Are we absolutely sure that we ought to win this war?"

"Sir, those words sound like treason."

"It was black humor."

"It wasn't funny. When it comes to the buggers, nothing--"

"Nothing is funny, I know."

Ender Wiggin lay on his bed staring at the ceiling. Since becoming commander, he never slept more than five hours a night. But the lights went off at 2200 and didn't come on again until 0600. Sometimes he worked at his desk, anyway, straining his eyes to use the dim display. Usually, though, he stared at the invisible ceiling and thought.

Either the the teachers had been kind to him after all, or he was a better commander than he thought. His ragged little group of veterans, utterly without honor in their previous armies, were blossoming into capable leaders. So much so that instead of the usual four toons, he had created five, each with a toon leader and a second; every veteran had a position. He had the army drill in eight man toon maneuvers and four-man half-toons, so that at a single command, his army could be assigned as many as ten separate maneuvers and carry them out at once. No army had ever fragmented itself like that before, but Ender was not planning to do anything that had been done before, either. Most armies practiced mass maneuvers, preformed strategies. Ender had none. Instead he trained his toon leaders to use their small units effectively in achieving limited goals. Unsupported, alone, on their own initiative. He staged mock wars after the first week, savage affairs in the practice room that left everybody exhausted. But he knew, with less than a month of training, that his army had the potential of being the best fighting group ever to play the game.

How much of this did the teachers plan? Did they know they were giving him obscure but excellent boys? Did they give him thirty Launchies, many of them underage, because they knew the little boys were quick learners, quick thinkers? Or was this what any similar group could become under a commander who knew what he wanted his army to do, and knew how to teach them to do it?

The question bothered him, because he wasn't sure whether he was confounding or fulfilling their expectations.

All he was sure of was that he was eager for battle. Most armies needed three months because they had to memorize dozens of elaboration formations. We're ready now. Get us into battle.

The door opened in darknes. Ender listened. A shuffling step. The door closed.

He rolled off his bunk and crawled in the darkness the two meters to the door. There was a slip of paper there. He couldn't read it, of course, but he knew what it was. Battle. How kind of them. I wish, and they deliver.

Ender was already dressed in his Dragon Army flash suit when the lights came on. He ran down the corridor at once, and by 0601 he was at the door of his army's barracks.

"We have a battle with Rabbit Army at 0700. I want us warmed up in gravity and ready to go. Strip down and get to the gym. Bring your flash suits and we'll go to the battleroom from there."

What about breakfast?

"I don't want anybody throwing up in the battleroom."

Can we at least take a leak first?

"No more than a decaliter."

They laughed. The ones who didn't sleep naked stripped down; everyone bundled up their flash suits and followed Ender at a jog through the corridors to the gym. He put them through the obstacle course twice, then split them into rotations on the tramp, the mat, and the bench. "Don't wear yourselves out, just wake yourselves up." He didn't need to worry about exhaustion. They were in good shape, light and agile, and above all excited about the battle to come. A few of them spontaneously began to wrestle -- the gym, instead of being tedious, was suddenly fun, because of the battle to come. Their confidence was the supreme confidence of those who have never been into the contest, and think they are ready. Well, why shouldn't they think so? They are. And so am I.

At 0640 he had them dress out. He talked to the toon leaders and their seconds while they dressed. "Rabbit Army is mostly veterans, but Carn Carby was made their commander only five months ago, and I never fought them under him. He was a pretty good soldier, and Rabbit has done fairly well in the standings over the years. But I expect to see formations, and so I'm not worried."

At 0650 he made them all lie down on the mats and relax. Then, at 0656, he ordered them up and they jogged along the corridor to the battleroom, Ender occasionally leaped up to touch the ceiling. The boys all jumped to touch the same spot on the ceiling. Their ribbon of color led to the left; Rabbit Army had already passed through to the right. And at 0658 they reached their gate to the battleroom.

The toons lined up in five columns. A and F ready to grab the side handholds and flip themselves out toward the sides. B and D lined up to catch the two parallel ceiling holds and flip upward into nul gravity. C toon were ready to slap the sill of the doorway and flip downward.

Up, down, left, right; Ender stood at front, between columns so he'd be out of the way and reoriented them. "Which way is the enemy's gate?"

Down, they all said, laughing. And in that moment up became north, down became south, and left and right became east and west.

The grey wall in front of them disappeared, and the battleroom was visible. It wasn't a dark game, but it wasn't a bright one either -- the lights were about half, like dusk. In the distance, in the dim light, he could see the enemy door, their lighted flash suits already pouring out. Ender knew a moment's pleasure. Everyone had learned the wrong lesson from Booze's misuse of Ender Wiggin. They all dumped through the door immediately, so that there was no chance to do anything other than name the formation they would use. Commanders didn't have time to think. Well, Ender would take the time, and trust his soldiers' ability to fight with flashed legs to keep them intact as they came late through the door.

Ender sized up the shape of the battleroom. The familiar open grid of most early games, like the monkey bars at the park, with seven or eight stars scattered through the grid. There were enough of them, and in forward enough positions, that they were worth going for. "Spread to the near stars," Ender said. "C try to slide the wall. If it works, A and F will follow. If it doesn't, I'll decide from there. I'll be with D. Move."

All the soldiers knew what was happening, but tactical decisions were entirely up to the toon leaders. Even with Ender's instructions, they were only ten seconds late getting through the gate. Rabbit Army was already doing some elaborate dance down at their end of the room. In all the other armies Ender had fought in, he would have been worrying right now about making sure he and his toon were in their proper place in their own formation. Instead, he and all his men were only thinking of ways to slip around past the formation, control the stars and the corners of the room, and then break the enemy formation into meaningless chunks that didn't know what they were doing. Even with less than four weeks together, the way they fought already seemed like the only intelligent way, the only possible way. Ender was almost surprised that Rabbit Army didn't know already that they were hopelessly out of date.

C toon slipped along the wall, coasting with their bent knees facing the enemy. Crazy Tom, the leader of C toon, had apparently ordered his men to flash their own legs already. It was a pretty good idea in this dim light, since the lighted flash suits went dark wherever they were frozen. It made them less easily visible. Ender would commend him for that.

Rabbit Army was able to drive back C toon's attack, but not until Crazy Tom and his boys had carved them up, freezing a dozen Rabbits before they retreated to the safety of a star. But it was a star behind the Rabbit formation, which meant they were going to be easy pickings now.

Han Tzu, commonly called Hot Soup, was the leader of D toon. He slid quickly along the lip of the star to where Ender knelt. "How about flipping off the north wall and kneeling on their faces?"

"Do it." Ender said. "I'll take B south to get behind them." Then he shouted, "A and E slow on the rvalls!" He slid footward along the star, hooked his feet on the lip, and flipped himself up to the top wall, then rebounded down to E toon's star. In a moment he was leading them down against the south wall. They rebounded in near perfect unison and came up behind the two stars that Carn Carby's soldiers were defending. It was like cutting butter with a hot knife. Rabbit Army was gone, just a little cleanup left to do. Ender broke his toons up into half-toons to scour the corners for any enemy soldiers who were whole or merely damaged. In three minutes his toon leaders reported the room clean. Only one of Ender's boys was completely frozen -- one of C toon, which had borne the brunt of the assault -- and only five were disabled. Most were damaged, but those were leg shots and many of them were self-inflicted. All in all, it had gone even better than Ender expected.

Ender had his toon leaders do the honors at the gate -- four helmets at the corners, and Crazy Tom to pass through the gate. Most commanders took whoever was left alive to pass the gate; Ender could have picked practically anyone. A good battle.

The lights went full, and Major Anderson himself came through the teachergate at the south end of the battleroom. He looked very solemn as he offered Ender the teacher hook that was ritually given to the victor in the game. Ender used it to thaw his own army's flash suits, of course, and he assembled them in toons before thawing the enemy. Crisp, military appearance, that's what he wanted when Carby and Rabbit Army got their bodies under control again. They may curse us and lie about us, but they'll remember that we destroyed them, and no matter what they say other soldiers and other commanders will see that in their eyes; in those Rabbit eyes, they'll see us in neat formation, victorious and almost undamaged in our first battle. Dragon Army isn't going to be an obscure name for long.

Carn Carby came to Ender as soon as he was unfrozen. He was a twelve-year-old, who had apparently made commander only in his last year at the school. So he wasn't cocky, like the ones who made it at eleven. I will remember this, thought Ender, when I am defeated. To keep dignity, and give honor where it's due, so that defeat is not disgrace. And I hope I don't have to do it often.

Anderson dismissed Dragon Army last, after Rabbit Army had straggled through the door that Ender's boy's had come through. Then Ender led his army through the enemy's door. The light along the bottom of the door reminded them of which way was down

once they got back to gravity. They all landed lightly on their feet, running. They assembled in the corridor. "It's 0715," Ender said, "and that means you have fifteen minutes for breakfast before I see you all in the battleroom for the morning practice." He could hear them silently saying, Come on, we won, let us celebrate. All right, Ender answered, you may. "And you have your commander's permission to throw food at each other during breakfast."

They laughed, they cheered, and then he dismissed them and sent them jogging on to the barracks. He caught his toon leaders on the way out and told them he wouldn't expect anyone to come to practice till 0745, and that practice would be over early so the boys could shower. Half an hour for breakfast, and no shower after a battle -- it was still stingy, but it would look lenient compared to fifteen minutes. And Ender liked having the announcement of the extra fifteen minutes come from the toon leaders. Let the boys learn that leniency comes from their toon leaders, and harshness from their commander -- it will bind them better in the small, tight knots of this fabric.

Ender ate no breakfast. He wasn't hungry. Instead he went to the bathroom and showered, putting his flash suit in the cleaner so it would be ready when he was dried off. He washed himself twice and let the water run and run on him. It would all be recycled. Let everybody drink some of my sweat today. They had given him an untrained army, and he had won, and not just nip and tuck, either. He had won with only six frozen or disabled. Let's see how long other commanders keep using their formations now that they've seen what a flexible strategy can do.

He was floating in the middle of the battleroom when his soldiers began to arrive. No one spoke to him, of course. He would speak, they knew, when he was ready, and not before.

When all were there, Ender hooked himself near them and looked at them, one by one. "Good first battle," he said, which was excuse enough for a cheer, and an attempt to start a chant of Dragon, Dragon, which he quickly stopped. "Dragon Army did all right against the Rabbits. But the enemy isn't always going to be that bad. If that had been a good army, C toon, your approach was so slow they would have had you from the flanks before you got into good position. You should have split and angled in from two directions, so they couldn't flank you. A and E, your aim was wretched. The tallies show that you averaged only one hit for every two soldiers. That means most of the hits were made by attacking soldiers close in. That can't go on -- a competent enemy would cut up the assault force unless they have much better cover from the soldiers at a distance. I want every toon to work on distance marksmanship at moving and unmoving targets. Half-toons take turns being targets. I'll thaw the flash suits every three minutes. Now move."

"Will we have any stars to work with?" asked Hot Soup. "To steady our aim?"

"I don't want you to get used to having something to steady your arms. If your arm isn't steady, freeze your elbows! Now move!"

The toon leaders quickly got things going, and Ender moved from group to group to make suggestions and help soldiers who were having particular trouble. The soldiers knew by now that Ender could be brutal in the way he talked to groups, but when he worked with an individual he was always patient, explaining as often as necessary, making suggestions quietly, listening to questions and problems and explanations. But he never laughed when they tried to banter with him, and they soon stopped trying. He was commander every moment they were together. He never had to remind them of it; he simply was.

They worked all day with the taste of victory in their mouths, and cheered again when they broke half an hour early for lunch. Ender held the toon leaders until the regular lunch hour, to talk about the tactics they had used and evaluate the work of their individual soldiers. Then he went to his own room and methodically changed into his uniform for lunch. He would enter the commanders' mess about ten minutes late. Exactly the timing that he wanted. Since this was his first victory, he had never seen the inside of the commanders' mess hall and had no idea what new commanders were expected to do, but he did know that he wanted to enter last today, when the scores of the morning's battles were already posted. Dragon Army will not be an obscure name now.

There was no great stir when he came in. But when some of them noticed how small he was, and saw the Dragons on the sleeves of the uniform, they stared at him openly, and by the time he got his food and sat at a table, the room was silent. Ender began to eat, slowly and carefully, pretending not to notice that he was the center of attention. Gradually conversation and noise started up again, and Ender could relax enough to look around.

One entire wall of the room was a scoreboard. Soldiers were kept aware of an army's overall record for the past two years; in here, however, records were kept for each commander. A new commander couldn't inherit a good standing from his predecessor -- he was ranked according to what he had done.

Ender had the best ranking. A perfect won-lost record, of course, but in the other categories he was far ahead. Average soldiers-disabled, average enemy-disabled, average time-elapsed-before-victory -- in every category he was ranked first.

When he was nearly through eating, someone came up behind him and touched his shoulder.

"Mind if I sit?" Ender didn't have to turn around to know it was Dink Meeker.

"Ho Dink," said Ender. "Sit."

"You gold-plated fart," said Dink cheerfully, "We're all trying to decide whether your scores up there are a miracle or a mistake."

"A habit," said Ender.

"One victory is not a habit," Dink said. "Don't get cocky. When you're new they seed you against weak commanders."

"Carn Carby isn't exactly on the bottom of the rankings." It was true, Carby was just about in the middle.

"He's OK," Dink said, "considering that he only just started. Shows some promise. You don't show promise. You show threat."

"Threat to what? Do they feed you less if I win? I thought you told me this was all a stupid game and none of it mattered."

Dink didn't like having his words thrown back at him, not under these circumstances. "You were the one who got me playing along with them. But I'm not playing games with you, Ender. You won't beat me."

"Probably not," Ender said.

"I taught you," Dink said.

"Everything I know," said Ender. "I'm just playing it by ear right now."

"Congratulations," said Dink.

"It's good to know I have a friend here." But Ender wasn't sure Dink was his friend anymore. Neither was Dink. After a few empty sentences, Dink went back to his table.

Ender looked around when he was through with his meal. There were quite a few small conversations going on. Ender spotted Bonzo, who was now one of the oldest commanders. Rose the Nose had graduated. Petra was with a group in a far corner, and she didn't look at him once. Since most of the others stole glances at him from time to time, including the ones Petra was talking with, Ender was pretty sure she was deliberately avoiding his glance. That's the problem with winning right from the start, thought Ender. You lose friends.

Give them a few weeks to get used to it. By the time I have my next battle, things will have calmed down in here.

Carn Carby made a point of coming to greet Ender before the lunch period ended. It was, again, a gracious gesture, and, unlike Dink, Carby did not seem wary. "Right now I'm in disgrace," he said frankly. "They won't believe me when I tell them you did things that nobody's ever seen before. So I hope you beat the snot out of the next army you fight. As a favor to me."

"As a favor to you," Ender said. "And thanks for talking to me."

"I think they're treating you pretty badly. Usually new commanders are cheered when they first join the mess. But then, usually a new commander has had a few defeats under his belt before he first makes it in here. I only got in here a month ago. If anybody deserves a cheer, it's you. But that's life. Make them eat dust."

"I'll try." Carn Carby left, and Ender mentally added him to his private list of people who also qualified as human beings.

That night, Ender slept better than he had in a long time. Slept so well, in fact, that he didn't wake up until the lights came on. He woke up feeling good, jogged on out to take his shower, and did not notice the piece of paper on his floor until he came back and started dressing in his uniform. He only saw the paper because it moved in the wind as he snapped out the uniform to put it on. He picked up the paper and read it.

PETRA ARKANIAN, PHOENIX ARMY, 0700

It was his old army, the one he had left less than four weeks before, and he knew their formations backward and forward. Partly because of Ender's influence, they were the most flexible of armies, responding relatively quickly to new situations. Phoenix Army would be the best able to cope with Ender's fluid, unpatterned attack. The teachers were determined to make life interesting for him.

0700, said the paper, and it was already 0630. Some of his boys might already be heading for breakfast. Ender tossed his uniform aside, grabbed his flash suit, and in a moment stood in the doorway of his army's barracks.

"Gentlemen, I hope you learned something yesterday, because today we're doing it again."

It took a moment for them to realize that he meant a battle, not a practice. It had to be a mistake, they said. Nobody ever had battles two days in a row.

He handed the paper to Fly Molo, the leader of A toon, who immediately shouted "Flash suits" and started changing clothes.

"Why didn't you tell us earlier?" demanded Hot Soup. Hot had a way of asking Ender questions that nobody else dared ask.

"I thought you needed the shower," Ender said. "Yesterday Rabbit Army claimed we only won because the stink knocked them out."

The soldiers who heard him laughed.

"Didn't find the paper till you got back from the showers, right?"

Ender looked for the source of the voice. It was Bean, already in his flash suit, looking insolent. Time to repay old humiliations, is that it, Bean?

"Of course," Ender said, contemptuously. "I'm not as close to the floor as you are."

More laughter. Bean flushed with anger.

"It's plain we can't count on old ways of doing things." Ender said. "So you'd better plan on battles anytime. And often. I can't pretend I like the way they're screwing around with us, but I do like one thing -- that I've got an army that can handle it."

After that, if he had asked them to follow him to the moon without space suits, they would have done it.

Petra was not Carn Carby; she had more flexible patterns and responded much more quickly to Ender's darting, improvised, unpredictable attack. As a result, Ender had three boys flashed and nine disabled at the end of the battle. Petra was not gracious about bowing over his hand at the end, either. The anger in her eyes seemed to say, I was your friend, and you humiliate me like this?

Ender pretended not to notice her fury. He figured that after a few more battles, she'd realize that in fact she had scored more hits against him than he expected anyone ever would again. And he was still learning from her. In practice today he would teach his toon leaders how to counter the tricks Petra had played on them. Soon they would be friends again.

He hoped.

At the end of the week Dragon Army had fought seven battles in seven days. The score stood 7 wins and 0 losses. Ender had never had more losses than in the battle with Phoenix Army, and in two battles he had suffered not one soldier frozen or disabled. No one believed anymore that it was a fluke that put him first in the standings. He had beaten top armies by unheard-of margins. It was no longer possible for the other commanders to ignore him. A few of them sat with him at every meal, carefully trying to learn from him how he had defeated his most recent opponents. He told them freely, confident that few of them would know how to train their soldiers and their toon leaders to duplicate what he could do. And while Ender talked with a few commanders, much larger groups gathered around the opponents Ender had defeated, trying to find out how Ender might be beaten.

There were many who who hated him. Hated him for being young, for being excellent, for having made their victories look paltry and weak. Ender saw it first in their faces when he passed them in the corridors; then he began to notice that some boys would get

up in a group and move to another table if he sat near them in the commanders' mess; and there began to be elbows that accidentally jostled him in the game room, feet that got entangled with his when he walked into and out of the gym, spittle and wads of wet paper that struck him from behind as he jogged through the corridors. They couldn't beat him in the battleroom, and knew it -- so instead they would attack him where it was safe, where he was not a giant but just a little boy. Ender despised them, but secretly, so secretly that he didn't even know it himself, he feared them. It was just such little torments that Peter had always used, and Ender was beginning to feel far too much at home.

These annoyances were petty, though, and Ender persuaded himself to accept them as another form of praise. Already the other armies were beginning to imitate Ender. Now most soldiers attacked with knees tucked under them; formations were breaking up now, and more commanders were sending out toons to slip along the walls. None had caught on yet to Ender's five-toon organization -- it gave him the slight advantage that when they had accounted for the movements of four units, they wouldn't be looking for a fifth.

Ender was teaching them all about null gravity tactics. But where could Ender go to learn new things?

He began to use the video room, filled with propaganda vids about Mazer Rackham and other great commanders of the forces of humanity in the First and Second Invasion. Ender stopped the general practice an hour early, and allowed his toon leaders to conduct their own practice in his absence. Usually they staged skirmishes, toon against toon. Ender stayed long enough to see that things were going well, then left to watch the old battles.

Most of the vids were a waste of time. Heroic music, closeups of commanders and medal-winning soldiers, confused shots of marines invading bugger installations. But here and there he found useful sequences: ships, like points of light, maneuvering in the dark of space, or, better still, the lights on shipboard plotting screens, showing the whole of a battle. It was hard, from the videos, to see all three dimensions, and the scenes were often short and unexplained. But Ender began to see how well the buggers used seemingly random flight paths to create confusion, how they used decoys and false retreats to draw the IF ships into traps. Some battles had been cut into many scenes, which were scattered through the various videos; by watching them in sequence, Ender was able to reconstruct whole battles. He began to see things that the official commentators never mentioned. They were always trying to arouse pride in human accomplishments and loathing of the buggers, but Ender began to wonder how humanity had won at all. Human ships were sluggish; fleets responded to new circumstances unbearably slowly, while the bugger fleet seemed to act in perfect unity, responding to each challenge instantly. Of course, in the First Invasion the human ships were completely unsuited to fast combat, but then so were the bugger ships; it was only in the Second Invasion that the ships and weapons were swift and deadly.

So it was from the buggers, not the humans, that Ender learned strategy. He felt ashamed and afraid of learning from them, since they were the most terrible enemy, ugly

and murderous and loathsome. But they were also very good at what they did. To a point. They always seemed to follow one basic strategy only -- gather the greatest number of ships at the key point of conflict. They never did anything surprising, anything that seemed to show either brilliance or stupidity in a subordinate officer. Discipline was apparently very tight.

And there was one oddity. There was plenty of talk about Mazer Rackham but precious little video of his actual battle. Some scenes from early in the battle, Rackham's tiny force looking pathetic against the vast power of the main bugger fleet. The buggers had already beaten the main human fleet out in the comet shield, wiping out the earliest starships and making a mockery of human attempts at high strategy -- that film was often shown, to arouse again and again the agony and terror of bugger victory. Then the fleet coming to Mazer Rackham's little force near Saturn, the hopeless odds, and then--

Then one shot from Mazer Rackham's little cruiser, one enemy ship blowing up. That's all that was ever shown. Lots of film showing marines carving their way into bugger ships. Lots of bugger corpses lying around inside. But no film of buggers killing in personal combat, unless it was spliced in from the First Invasion. It frustrated Ender that Mazer Rackham's victory was so obviously censored. Students in the Battle School had much to learn from Mazer Rackham, and everything about his victory was concealed from view. The passion for secrecy was not very helpful to the children who had to learn to accomplish again what Mazer Rackham had done.

Of course, as soon as word got around that Ender Wiggin was watching the war vids over and over again, the video room began to draw a crowd. Almost all were commanders, watching the same vids Ender watched, pretending they understood why he was watching and what he was getting out of it. Ender never explained anything. Even when he showed seven scenes from the same battle, but from different vids, only one boy asked, tentatively, "Are some of those from the same battle?"

Ender only shrugged, as if it didn't matter.

It was during the last hour of practice on the seventh day, only a few hours after Ender's army had won its seventh battle, that Major Anderson himself came into the video room. He handed a slip of paper to one of the commanders sitting there, and then spoke to Ender. "Colonel Graff wishes to see you in his office immediately."

Ender got up and followed Anderson through the corridors. Anderson palmed the locks that kept students out of the officers' quarters; finally they came to where Graff had taken root on a swivel chair bolted to the steel floor. His belly spilled over both armrests now, even when he sat upright. Ender tried to remember. Graff hadn't seemed particularly fat at when Ender first met him, only four years ago. Time and tension were not being kind to the administrator of the Battle School.

"Seven days since your first battle, Ender," said Graff.

Ender did not reply.

"And you've won seven battles, once a day."

Ender nodded.

"Your scores are unusually high, too."

Ender blinked.

"To what, commander, do you attribute your remarkable success?"

"You gave me an army that does whatever I can think for it to do."

"And what have you thought for it to do?"

"We orient downward toward the enemy gate and use our lower legs as a shield. We avoid formations and keep our mobility. It helps that I've got five toons of eight instead of four of ten. Also, our enemies haven't had time to respond effectively to our new techniques, so we keep beating them with the same tricks. That won't hold up for long."

"So you don't expect to keep winning."

"Not with the same tricks."

Graff nodded. "Sit down, Ender."

Ender and Anderson both sat. Graff looked at Anderson, and Anderson spoke next. "What condition is your army in, fighting so often?"

"They're all veterans now."

"But how are they doing? Are they tired?"

"If they are, they won't admit it."

"Are they still alert?"

"You're the ones with the computer games that play with people's minds. You tell me."

"We know what we know. We want to know what you know."

"These are very good soldiers, Major Anderson. I'm sure they have limits, but we haven't reached them yet. Some of the newer ones are having trouble because they never really mastered some basic techniques, but they're working hard and improving. What do you want me to say, that they need to rest? Of course they need to rest. They need a

couple of weeks off. Their studies are shot to hell, none of us are doing any good in our classes. But you know that, and apparently you don't care, so why should I?"

Graff and Anderson exchanged glances. "Ender, why are you studying the videos of the bugger wars?"

"To learn strategy, of course."

"Those videos were created for propaganda purposes. All our strategies have been edited out."

"I know."

Graff and Anderson exchanged glances again. Graff drummed on his table. "You don't play the fantasy game anymore," he said.

Ender didn't answer.

"Tell me why you don't play it."

"Because I won."

"You never win everything in that game. There's always more."

"I won everything."

"Ender, we want to help you be as happy as possible, but if you--"

"You want to make me the best soldier possible. Go down and look at the standings. Look at the all-time standings. So far you're doing an excellent job with me. Congratulations. Now when are you going to put me up against a good army?"

Graff's set lips turned to a smile, and he shook a little with silent laughter.

Anderson handed Ender a slip of paper. "Now," he said.

BONZO MADRID, SALAMANDER ARMY, 1200

"That's ten minutes from now," said Ender. "My army will be in the middle of showering up after practice."

Graff smiled. "Better hurry, then, boy."

He got to his army's barracks five minutes later. Most were dressing after their showers; some had already gone to the game room or the video room to wait for lunch. He sent three younger boys to call everyone in, and made everyone else dress for battle as quickly as they could.

"This one's hot and there's no time," Ender said. "They gave Bonzo notice about twenty minutes ago, and by the time we get to the door they'll have been inside for a good five minutes at least."

The boys were outraged, complaining loudly in the slang that they usually avoided around the commander. What they doing to us? They be crazy, neh?

"Forget why, we'll worry about that tonight. Are you tired?"

Fly Molo answered. "We worked our butts off in practice today. Not to mention beating the crap out of Ferret Army this morning."

"Same day nobody ever do two batties!" said Crazy Tom.

Ender answered in the same tone. "Nobody ever beat Dragon Army, either. This be your big chance to lose?" Ender's taunting question was the answer to their complaints. Win first, ask questions later.

All of them were back in the room, and most of them were dressed. "Move!" shouted Ender, and they ran along behind him, some of them still dressing when they reached the corridor outside the battleroom. Many of them were panting, a bad sign; they were too tired for this battle. The door was already open. There were no stars at all. Just empty, empty space in a dazzlingly bright room. Nowhere to hide, not even in darkness.

"My heart," said Crazy Tom, "they haven't come out yet, either."

Ender put his hand across his own mouth, to tell them to be silent. With the door open, of course the enemy could hear every word they said. Ender pointed all around the door, to tell them that Salamander Army was undoubtedly deployed against the wall all around the door, where they couldn't be seen but could easily flash anyone who came out.

Ender motioned for them all to back away from the door. Then he pulled forward a few of the taller boys, including Crazy Tom, and made them kneel, not squatting back to sit on their heels, but fully upright, so they formed an L with their bodies. He flashed them. In silence the army watched him. He selected the smallest boy, Bean, handed him Tom's gun, and made Bean kneel on Tom's frozen legs. Then pulled Bean's hands, each holding a gun, through Tom's armpits.

Now the boys understood. Tom was a shield, an armored spacecraft, and Bean was hiding inside. He was certainly not invulnerable, but he would have time.

Ender assigned two more boys to throw Tom and Bean through the door and signalled them to wait. He went on through the army quickly assigning groups of four -- a shield, a shooter, and two throwers. Then, when all were frozen or armed or ready to throw, he signalled the throwers to pick up their burdens, throw them through the door, and then jump through themselves.

"Move!" shouted Ender.

They moved. Two at a time the shield-pairs went through the door, backwards so that the shield would be between the shooter and the enemy. The enemy opened fire at once, but they mostly hit the frozen boy in front. In the meantime, with two guns to work with and their targets neatly lined up and spread flat along the wall, the Dragons had an easy time of it. It was almost impossible to miss. And as the throwers also jumped through the door, they got handholds on the same wall with the enemy, shooting at a deadly angle so that the Salamanders couldn't figure out whether to shoot at the shield-pairs slaughtering them from above or the throwers shooting at them from their own level. By the time Ender himself came through the door, the battle was over. It hadn't taken a full minute from the time the first Dragon passed through the door until the shooting stopped. Dragon had lost twenty frozen or disabled, and only twelve boys were undamaged. It was their worst score yet, but they had won.

When Major Anderson came out and gave Ender the hook, Ender could not contain his anger. "I thought you were going to put us against an army that could match us in a fair fight."

"Congratulations on the victory, commander."

"Bean!" shouted Ender. "If you had commanded Salamander Army, what would you have done?"

Bean, disabled but not completely frozen, called out from where he drifted near the enemy door. "Keep a shifting pattern of movement going in front of the door. You never hold still when the enemy knows exactly where you are."

"As long as you're cheating," Ender said to Anderson, "why don't you train the other army to cheat intelligently!"

"I suggest that you remobilize your army," said Anderson.

Ender pressed the buttons to thaw both armies at once. "Dragon Army dismissed!" he shouted immediately. There would be no elaborate formation to accept the surrender of the other army. This had not been a fair fight, even though they had won -- the teachers had meant them to lose, and it was only Bonzo's ineptitude that had saved them. There was no glory in that.

Only as Ender himself was leaving the battleroom did he realize that Bonzo would not realize that Ender was angry at the teachers. Spanish honor. Bonzo would only know that he had been defeated even when the odds were stacked in his favor; that Ender had had the youngest child in his army publicly state what Bonzo should have done to win; and that Ender had not even stayed to receive Bonzo's dignified surrender. If Bonzo had not already hated Ender he would surely have begun; and hating him as he did, this would surely turn his rage murderous. Bonzo was the last person to strike me, thought Ender. I'm sure he has not forgotten that.

Nor had he forgotten the bloody affair in the battleroom when the older boys tried to break up Ender's practice session. Nor had many others. They were hungry for blood then; Bonzo will be thirsting for it now. Ender toyed with the idea of going back to take advanced personal defense; but with battles now possible not only every day, but twice in the same day, Ender knew he could not spare the time. I'll have to take my chances. The teachers got me into this -- they can keep me safe.

Bean flopped down on his bunk in utter exhaustion -- half the boys in the barracks were already asleep, and it was still fifteen minutes before lights out. Wearily he pulled his desk from its locker and signed on. There was a test tomorrow in geometry and Bean was woefully unprepared. He could always reason things out if he had enough time, and he had read Euclid when he was five, but the test had a time limit so there wouldn't be a chance to think. He had to know. And he didn't know. And he would probably do badly on the test. But they had won twice today, and so he felt good.

As soon as he signed on, however, all thoughts of geometry were banished. A message paraded around the desk:

SEE ME AT ONCE -- ENDER

The time was 2150, only ten minutes before lights out. How long ago had Ender sent it? Still, he'd better not ignore it. There might be another battle in the morning -- the thought made him weary -- and whatever Ender wanted to talk to him about, there wouldn't be time then. So Bean rolled off the bunk and walked emptily through the corridor to Ender's room. He knocked.

"Come in," said Ender.

"Just saw your message."

"Fine," said Ender.

"It's near lights out."

"I'll help you find your way in the dark."

"I just didn't know if you knew what time it was--"

"I always know what time it is."

Bean sighed inwardly. It never failed. Whenever he had any conversation with Ender, it turned into an argument. Bean hated it. He recognized Ender's genius and honored him for it. Why couldn't Ender ever see anything good in him?

"Remember four weeks ago, Bean? When you told me to make you a toon leader?"

"Eh."

"I've made five toon leaders and five assistants since then. And none of them was you." Ender raised his eyebrows. "Was I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"So tell me how you've done in these eight battles."

"Today was the first time they disabled me, but the computer listed me as getting eleven hits, before I had to stop. I've never had less than five hits in a battle. I've also completed every assignment I've been given."

"Why did they make you a soldier so young, Bean?"

"No younger than you were."

"But why?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do, and so do I."

"I've tried to guess, but they're just guesses. You're-- very good. They knew that, they pushed you ahead--"

"Tell me why, Bean."

"Because they need us, that's why." Bean sat down on the floor and stared at Ender's feet. "Because they need somebody to beat the buggers. That's the only thing they care about."

"It's important that you know that, Bean. Because most boys in this school think the game is important for itself-- but it isn't. It's only important because it helps them find

kids who might grow up to be real commanders, in the real war. But as for the game, screw that. That's what they're doing. Screwing up the game."

"Funny. I thought they were just doing it to us."

"A game nine weeks earlier than it should have come. A game every day. And now two games in the same day. Bean, I don't know what the teachers are doing, but my army is getting tired, and I'm getting tired, and they don't care at all about the rules of the game. I've pulled the old charts up from the computer. No one has ever destroyed so many enemies and kept so many of his own soldiers whole in the history of the game."

"You're the best, Ender."

Ender shook his head. "Maybe. But it was no accident that I got the soldiers I got. Launchies, rejects from other armies, but put them together and my worst soldier could be a toon leader in another army. They've loaded things my way, but now they're loading it all against me. Bean, they want to break us down."

"They can't break you."

"You'd be surprised." Ender breathed sharply, suddenly, as if there were a stab of pain, or he had to catch a sudden breath in a wind; Bean looked at him and realized that the impossible was happening. Far from baiting him, Ender Wiggin was actually confiding in him. Not much. But a little. Ender was human and Bean had been allowed to see.

"Maybe you'll be surprised," said Bean.

"There's a limit to how many clever new ideas I can come up with every day. Somebody's going to come up with something to throw at me that I haven't thought of before, and I won't be ready."

"What's the worst that could happen? You lose one game."

"Yes. That's the worst that could happen. I can't lose any games. Because if I lose any--"

He didn't explain himself, and Bean didn't ask.

"I need you to be clever, Bean. I need you to think of solutions to problems we haven't seen yet. I want you to try things that no one has ever tried because they're absolutely stupid."

"Why me?"

"Because even though there are some better soldiers than you in Dragon Army -- not many, but some -- there's nobody who can think better and faster than you." Bean said nothing. They both knew it was true.

Ender showed him his desk. On it were twelve names. Two or three from each toon. "Choose five of these," said Ender. "One from each toon. They're a special squad, and you'll train them. Only during the extra practice sessions. Talk to me about what you're training them to do. Don't spend too long on any one thing. Most of the time you and your squad will be part of the whole army, part of your regular toons. But when I need you. When there's something to be done that only you can do."

"These are all new," said Bean. "No veterans."

"After last week, Bean, all our soldiers are veterans. Don't you realize that on the individual soldier standings, all forty of our soldiers are in the top fifty? That you have to go down seventeen places to find a soldier who isn't a Dragon?"

"What if I can't think of anything?"

"Then I was wrong about you."

Bean grinned. "You weren't wrong."

The lights went out.

"Can you find your way back, Bean?"

"Probably not."

"Then stay here. If you listen very carefully you can hear the good fairy come in the night and leave our assignment for tomorrow."

"They won't give us another battle tomorrow, will they?"

Ender didn't answer. Bean heard him climb into bed.

He got up from the floor and did likewise. He thought of a half dozen ideas before he went to sleep. Ender would be pleased -- every one of them was stupid.

Chapter 12 -- Bonzo

"General Pace, please sit down. I understand you have come to me about a matter of some urgency."

"Ordinarily, Colonel Graff, I would not presume to interfere in the internal workings of the Battle School. Your autonomy is guaranteed, and despite our difference in ranks I am quite aware that it is my authority only to advise, not to order, you to take action."

"Action?"

"Do not be disingenuous with me, Colonel Graff. Americans are quite apt at playing stupid when they choose to, but I am not to be deceived. You know why I am here."

"Ah. I guess this means Dap filed a report?"

"He feels paternal toward the students here. He feels your neglect of a potentially lethal situation is more than negligence -- that it borders on conspiracy to cause the death or serious injury of one of the students here."

"This is a school for children, General Pace. Hardly a matter to bring the chief of IF military police here for."

"Colonel Graff, the name of Ender Wiggin has percolated through the high command. It has even reached my ears -- I have heard him described modestly as our only hope of victory in the upcoming invasion. When it is his life or health that is in danger, I do not think it untoward that the military police take some interest in preserving and protecting the boy. Do you?"

"Damn Dap and damn you too, sir, I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?"

"Better than anyone else."

"Oh, that is obvious, since nobody else has the faintest idea what you're doing. You have known for eight days that there is a conspiracy among some of the more vicious of these 'children' to cause the beating of Ender Wiggin, if they can. And that some members of this conspiracy, notably the boy named Bonito de Madrid, commonly called Bonzo, are quite likely to exhibit no self-restraint when this punishment takes place, so that Ender Wiggin, an inestimably important international resource, will be placed in serious danger of having his brains pasted on the walls of your simple orbiting schoolhouse. And you, fully warned of this danger, propose to do exactly--"

"Nothing."

"You can see how this excites our puzzlement."

"Ender Wiggin has been in this situation before. Bock on Earth, the day he lost his monitor, and again when a large group of older boys--"

"I did not come here ignorant of the past. Ender Wiggin has provoked Bonzo Madrid beyond human endurance. And you have no military police standing by to break up disturbances. It is unconscionable."

"When Ender Wiggin holds our fleets in his control, when he must make the decisions that bring us victory or destruction, will there be military police to come save him if things get out of hand?"

"I fail to see the connection."

"Obviously. But the connection is there Ender Wiggin must believe that no matter what happens, no adult will ever, ever step in to help him in any way. He must believe, to the core of his soul, that he can only do what he and the other children work out for themselves. If he does not believe that, then he will never reach the peak of his abilities."

"He will also not reach the peak of his abilities if he is dead or permanently crippled."

"He won't be."

"Why don't you simply graduate Bonzo? He's old enough."

"Because Ender knows that Bonzo plans to kill him. If we transfer Bonzo ahead of schedule, he'll know that we saved him. Heaven knows Bonzo isn't a good enough commander to be promoted on merit."

"What about the other children? Getting them to help him?"

"We'll see what happens. That is my first, final, and only decision."

"God help you if you're wrong."

"God help us all if I'm wrong."

"I'll have you before a capital court martial. I'll have your name disgraced throughout the world if you're wrong."

"Fair enough. But do remember if I happen to be right to make sure I get a few dozen medals."

"For what?"

"For keeping you from meddling."

Ender sat in a corner of the battleroom, his arm hooked through a handhold watching Bean practice with his squad. Yesterday they had worked on attacks without guns, disarming enemies with their feet. Ender had helped them with some techniques from

gravity personal combat -- many things had to be changed, but inertia in flight was a tool that could be used against the enemy as easily in nullo as in Earth gravity.

Today, though, Bean had a new toy. It was a deadline, one of the thin, almost invisible twines used during construction in space to hold two objects together. Deadlines were sometimes kilometers long. This one was just a bit longer than a wall of the battleroom and yet it looped easily, almost invisibly, around Bean's wrist. He pulled it off like an article of clothing and handed one end to one of his soldiers. "Hook it to a handhold and wind it around a few times." Bean carried the other end across the battle oom.

As a tripwire it wasn't too useful, Bean decided. It was invisible enough, but one strand of twine wouldn't have much chance of stopping an enemy that could easily go above or below it. Then he got the idea of using it to change his direction of movement in midair. He fastened it around his waist, the other end still fastened to a handhold, slipped a few meters away, and launched himself straight out. The twine caught him, changed his direction abruptly, and swung him in an arc that crashed him brutally against the wall.

He screamed and screamed. It took Ender a moment to realize that he wasn't screaming in pain. "Did you see how fast I went! Did you see how I changed direction!"

Soon all of Dragon Army stopped work to watch Bean practice with the twine. The changes in direction were stunning, especially when you didn't know where to look for the twine, When he used the twine to wrap himself around a star, he attained speeds no one had ever seen before,

It was 2140 when Ender dismissed the evening practice. Weary but delighted at having seen something new, his army walked through the corridors back to the barracks. Ender walked among them, not talking, but listening to their talk. They were tired, yes -- a battle every day for more than four weeks, often in situations that tested their abilities to the utmost. But they were proud, happy, close -- they had never lost, and they had learned to trust each other. Trust their fellow soldiers to fight hard and well; trust their leaders to use them rather than waste their efforts; above all trust Ender to prepare them for anything and everything that might happen.

As they walked the corridor, Ender noticed several older boys seemingly engaged in conversations in branching corridors and ladderways; some were in their corridor, walking slowly in the other direction. It became too much of a coincidence, however, that so many of them were wearing Salamander uniforms, and that those who weren't were often older boys belonging to armies whose commanders most hated Ender Wiggin. A few of them looked at him, and looked away too quickly; others were too tense, too nervous as they pretended to be relaxed. What will I do if they attack my army here in the corridor? My boys are all young, all small, and completely untrained in gravity combat. When would they learn?

"Ho, Ender!" someone called. Ender stopped and looked back, It was Petra. "Ender, can I talk to you?"

Ender saw in a moment that if he stopped and talked, his army would quickly pass him by and he would be alone with Petra in the hallway. "Walk with me," Ender said.

"It's just for a moment."

Ender turned around and walked on with his army. He heard Petra running to catch up. "All right, I'll walk with you." Ender tensed when she came near. Was she one of them, one of the ones who hated him enough to hurt him?

"A friend of yours wanted me to warn you. There are some boys who want to kill you."

"Surprise," said Ender. Some of his soldiers seemed to perk up at this. Plots against their commander were interesting news, it seemed.

"Ender, they can do it. He said they've been planning it ever since you went commander."

"Ever since I beat Salamander, you mean."

"I hated you after you beat Phoenix Army, too, Ender."

"I didn't say I blamed anybody."

"It's true. He told me to take you aside today and warn you, on the way back from the battleroom, to be careful tomorrow because--"

"Petra, if you had actually taken me aside just now, there are about a dozen boys following along who would have taken me in the corridor. Can you tell me you didn't notice them?"

Suddenly her face flushed. "No. I didn't. How can you think I did? Don't you know who your friends are?" She pushed her way through Dragon Army, got ahead of him, and scrambled up a ladderway to a higher deck.

"Is it true?" asked Crazy Tom.

"Is what true?" Ender scanned the room and shouted for two roughhousing boys to get to bed.

"That some of the older boys want to kill you?"

"All talk," said Ender. But he knew that it wasn't. Petra had known something, and what he saw on the way here tonight wasn't imagination.

"It may be all talk, but I hope you'll understand when I say you've got five toon leaders who are going to escort you to your room tonight."

"Completely unnecessary."

"Humor us. You owe us a favor."

"I owe you nothing." He'd be a fool to turn them down. "Do as you want." He turned and left. The toon leaders trotted along with him. One ran ahead and opened his door. They checked the room, made Ender promise to lock it, and left him just before lights out.

There was a message on his desk.

DON'T BE ALONE. EVER. -- DINK

Ender grinned. So Dink was still his friend. Don't worry. They won't do anything to me. I have my army.

But in the darkness he did not have his army. He dreamed that night of Stilson, only he saw now how small Stilson was, only six years old, how ridiculous his tough-guy posturing was; and yet in the dream Stilson and his friends tied Ender so he couldn't fight back, and then everything that Ender had done to Stilson in life, they did to Ender in the dream. And afterward Ender saw himself babbling like an idiot, trying hard to give orders to his army, but all his words came out as nonsense.

He awoke in darkness, and he was afraid. Then he calmed himself by remembering that the teachers obviously valued him, or they wouldn't be putting so much pressure on him; they wouldn't let anything happen to him, nothing bad, anyway. Probably when the older kids attacked him in the battleroom years ago, there were teachers just outside the room, waiting to see what would happen; if things had got out of hand, they would have stepped in and stopped it. I probably could have sat here and done nothing, and they would have seen to it I came through all right. They'll push me as hard as they can in the game, but outside the game they'll keep me safe.

With that assurance, he slept again, until the door opened softly and the morning's war was left on the floor for him to find.

They won, of course, but it was a grueling affair, with the battleroom so filled with a labyrinth of stars that hunting down the enemy during mop-up took forty-five minutes. It was Pol Slattery's Badger Army, and they refused to give up. There was a new wrinkle in the game, too -- when they disabled or damaged an enemy, he thawed in about five minutes, the way it worked in practice. Only when the enemy was completely frozen did he stay out of action the whole time. But the gradual thawing did not work for Dragon

Army. Crazy Tom was the one who realized what was happening, when they started getting hit from behind by people they thought were safely out of the way. And at the end of the battle, Slattery shook Ender's hand and said, "I'm glad you won. If I ever beat you, Ender, I want to do it fair."

"Use what they give you," Ender said. "If you've ever got an advantage over the enemy, use it."

"Oh, I did," said Slattery. He grinned. "I'm only fair-minded before and after battles."

The battle took so long that breakfast was over. Ender looked at his hot, sweating, tired soldiers waiting in the corridor and said, "Today you know everything. No practice. Get some rest. Have some fun. Pass a test." It was a measure of their weariness that they didn't even cheer or laugh or smile, just walked into the barracks and stripped off their clothes. They would have practiced if he had asked them to, but they were reaching the end of their strength, and going without breakfast was one unfairness too many.

Ender meant to shower right away, but he was also tired. He lay down on his bed in his flash suit, just for a moment, and woke up at the beginning of lunchtime. So much for his idea of studying more about the buggers this morning. Just time to clean up, go eat, and head for class.

He peeled off his flash suit, which stank from his sweat. His body felt cold, his joints oddly weak. Shouldn't have slept in the middle of the day. I'm beginning to slack off. I'm beginning to wear down. Can't let it get to me.

So he jogged to the gym and forced himself to climb the rope three times before going to the bathroom to shower. It didn't occur to him that his absence in the commanders' mess would be noticed, that showering during the noon hour, when his own army would be wolfing down their first meal of the day, he would be completely, helplessly alone.

Even when he heard them come into the bathroom he paid no attention. He was letting the water pour over his head, over his body; the muffled sound of footsteps was hardly noticeable. Maybe lunch was over, he thought. He started to soap himself again. Maybe somebody finished practice late.

And maybe not. He turned around, There were seven of them, leaning back against the metal sinks or standing closer to the showers, watching him. Bonzo stood in front of them, Many were smiling, the condescending leer of the hunter for his cornered victim. Bonzo was not smiling, however.

"Ho," Ender said,

Nobody answered.

So Ender turned off the shower even though there was still soap on him, and reached for his towel. It wasn't there. One of the boys was holding it. It was Bernard. All it would take for the picture to be complete was for Stilson and Peter to be there, too. They needed Peter's smile; they needed Stilson's obvious stupidity.

Ender recognized the towel as their opening point. Nothing would make him look weaker than to chase naked after the towel. That was what they wanted, to humiliate him, to break him down. He wasn't going to play. He refused to feel weak because he was wet and cold and unclothed. He stood strongly, facing them, his arms at his sides. He fastened his gaze on Bnnzo.

"Your move," Ender said,

"This is no game," said Bernard. "We're tired of you, Ender. You graduate today. On ice."

Ender did not look at Bernard. It was Bonzo who hungered for his death, even though he was silent. The others were along for the ride, daring themselves to see how far they might go. Bonzo knew how far he would go.

"Bonzo," Ender said softly. "Your father would be proud of you."

Bonzo stifened.

"He would love to see you now, come to fight a naked boy in a shower, smaller than you, and you brought six friends. He would say, Oh, what honor."

"Nobody came to fight you," said Bernard, "We just came to talk you into playing fair with the games. Maybe lose a couple now and then."

The others laughed, but Bonzo didn't laugh, and neither did Ender.

"Be proud, Bonito, pretty boy. You can go home and tell your father, Yes, I beat up Ender Wiggin, who was barely ten years old, and I was thirteen. And I had only six of my friends to help me, and somehow we managed to defeat him, even though he was naked and wet and alone -- Ender Wiggin is so dangerous and terrifying it was all we could do not to bring two hundred."

"Shut your mouth, Wiggin," said one of the boys.

"We didn't come to hear the little bastard talk," said another.

"You shut up," said Bonzo. "Shut up and stand out of the way." He began to take off his uniform. "Naked and wet and alone, Ender, so we're even. I can't help that I'm bigger than you. You're such a genius, you figure out how to handle me." He turned to the others. "Watch the door. Don't let anyone else in."

The bathroom wasn't large, and plumbing fixtures protruded everywhere. It had been launched in one piece, as a low-orbit satellite, packed full of the water reclamation equipment; it was designed to have no wasted space. It was obvious what their tactics would have to be. Throw the other boy against fixtures until one of them does enough damage that he stops.

When Ender saw Bonzo's stance, his heart sank. Bonzo had also taken classes. And probably more recently than Ender. His reach was better, he was stronger, and he was full of hate. He would not be gentle. He will go for my head, thought Ender. He will try above all to damage my brain. And if this fight is long, he's bound to win. His strength can control me. If I'm to walk away from here, I have to win quickly, and permanently. He could feel again the sickening way that Stilson's bones had given way. But this time it will be my body that breaks, unless I can break him first.

Ender stepped back, flipped the showerhead so it turned outward, and turned on pure hot water. Almost at once the steam began to rise. He turned on the next and the next.

"I'm not afraid of hot water," said Bonzo. His voice was soft.

But it wasn't the hot water that Ender wanted. It was the heat. His body still had soap on it, and his sweat moistened it, made his skin more slippery than Bonzo would expect.

Suddenly there was a voice from the door. "Stop it!" For a moment Ender thought it was a teacher, come to stop the fight, but it was only Dink Meeker. Bonzo's friends caught him at the door held him. "Stop it, Bonzo!" Dink cried. "Don't hurt him!"

"Why not?" asked Booze, and for the first time he smiled. Ah, thought Ender, he loves to have someone recognize that he is the one in control, that he has power.

"Because he's the best, that's why! Who else can fight the buggers! That's what matters, you fool, the buggers!"

Bonzo stopped smiling. It was the thing he hated most about Ender, that Ender really mattered to other people, and in the end, Bonzo did not. You've killed me with those words, Dink. Bonzo doesn't want to hear that I might save the world.

Where are the teachers? thought Ender. Don't they realize that the first contact between us in this fight might be the end of it? This isn't like the fight in the battleroom, where no one had the leverage to do any terrible damage. There's gravity in here, and the floor and walls are hard and jugged with metal. Stop this now or not at all.

"If you touch him you're a buggerlover!" cried Dink. "You're a traitor, if you touch him you deserve to die!" They jammed Dink's face backward into the door and he was silent.

The mist from the showers dimmed the room, and the sweat was streaming down Ender's body. Now, before the soap is carried off me. Now, while I'm still too slippery to hold.

Ender stepped back, letting the fear he felt show in his face. "Bonzo, don't hurt me," he said. "Please."

It was what Bonzo was waiting for, the confession that he was in power. For other boys it might have been enough that Ender had submitted; for Bonzo, it was only a sign that his victory was sure. He swung his leg as if to kick, but changed it to a leap at the last moment. Ender noticed the shifting weight and stooped lower, so that Bonzo would be more off-balance when he tried to grab Ender and throw him.

Bonzo's tight, hard ribs came against Ender's face, and his hands slapped against his back, trying to grip him. But Ender twisted, and Bonzo's hands slipped. In an instant Ender was completely turned, yet still inside Bonzo's grasp. The classic move at this moment would be to bring up his heel into Bonzo's crotch, but for that move to be effective required too much accuracy, and Bonzo expected it. He was already rising onto his toes, thrusting his hips backward to keep Ender from reaching his groin. Without seeing him, Ender knew it would bring his face closer, almost in Ender's hair; so instead of kicking he lunged upward off the floor, with the powerful lunge of the soldier bounding from the wall, and jammed his head into Bonzo's face.

Ender whirled in time to see Bonzo stagger backward, his nose bleeding, gasping from surprise and pain. Ender knew that at this moment he might be able to walk out of the room and end the battle. The way he had escaped from the battleroom after drawing blood. But the battle would only be fought again. Again and again until the will to fight was finished. The only way to end things completely was to hurt Bonzo enough that his fear was stronger than his hate.

So Ender leaned back against the wall behind him, then jumped up and pushed off with his arms. His feet landed in Bonzo's belly and chest. Ender spun in the air and landed on his toes and hands; he flipped over, scooted under Bonzo, and this time when he kicked upward into Bonzo's crotch, he connected, hard and sure.

Bonzo did not cry out in pain. He did not react at all, except that his body rose a little in the air. It was as if Ender had kicked a piece of furniture. Bonzo collapsed, fell to the side, and sprawled directly under the spray of streaming water from a shower. He made no movement whatever to escape the murderous heat.

"My God!" someone shouted. Bonzo's friends leaped to turn off the water. Ender slowly rose to his feet. Someone thrust his towel at him. It was Dink. "Come on out of here," Dink said. He led Ender away. Behind them they heard the heavy clatter of adults running down a ladderway. Now the teachers would come. The medical staff. To dress the wounds of Ender's enemy. Where were they before the fight, when there might have been no wounds at all?

There was no doubt now in Ender's mind. There was no help for him. Whatever he faced, now and forever, no one would save him from it. Peter might be scum, but Peter had been right, always right; the power to cause pain is the only power that matters, the power to kill and destroy, because if you can't kill then you are always subject to those who can, and nothing and no one will ever save you.

Dink led him to his room, made him lie on the bed. "Are you hurt anywhere?" he asked,

Ender shook his head.

"You took him apart. I thought you were dead meat, the way he grabbed you. But you took him apart. If he'd stood up longer, you would've killed him."

"He meant to kill me."

"I know it. I know him. Nobody hates like Bonzo. But not anymore. If they don't ice him for this and send him home, he'll never look you in the eye again. You or anybody. He had twenty centimeters on you, and you made him look like a crippled cow standing there chewing her cud."

All Ender could see, though, was the way Bonzo looked as Ender kicked upward into his groin. The empty, dead look in his eyes. He was already finished then. Already unconscious. His eyes were open, but he wasn't thinking or moving anymore, just that dead, stupid look on his face, that terrible look, the way Stilson looked when I finished with him.

"They'll ice him, though," Dink said. "Everybody knows he started it. I saw them get up and leave the commanders' mess. Took me a couple of seconds to realize you weren't there, either, and then a minute more to find out where you had gone. I told you not to be alone."

"Sorry."

"They're bound to ice him. Troublemaker. Him and his stinking honor."

Then, to Dink's surprise, Ender began to cry. Lying on his back, still soaking wet with sweat and water, he gasped his sobs, tears seeping out of his closed eyelids and disappearing in the water on his face.

"Are you all right?"

"I didn't want to hurt him!" Ender cried. "Why didn't he just leave me alone!"

He heard his door open softly, then close. He knew at once that it was his battle instructions, He opened his eyes, expecting to find the darkness of early morning, before 0600. Instead, the lights were on, He was naked and when he moved the bed was soaking wet, His eyes were puffy and painful from crying. He looked at the clock on his desk. 1820, it said. It's the same day. I already had a battle today, I had two battles today -- the bastards know what I've been through, and they're doing this to me.

WILLIAM BEE, GRIFFIN ARMY, TALO MOMOE, TIGER ARMY, 1900

He sat on the edge of the bed. The note trembled in his hand. I can't do this, he said silently. And then not silently. "I can't do this."

He got up, bleary, and looked for his flash suit. Then he remembered -- he had put it in the cleaner while he showered. It was still there.

Holding the paper, he walked out of his room. Dinner was nearly over, and there were a few people in the corridor, but no one spoke to him, just watched him, perhaps in awe of what had happened at noon in the bathroom, perhaps because of the forbidding, terrible look on his face. Most of his boys were in the barracks.

Ho, Ender. There gonna be a practice tonight?

Ender handed the paper to Hot Soup. "Those sons of bitches," he said. "Two at once?"

"Two armies!" shouted Crazy Tom.

"They'll just trip over each other," said Bean.

"I've got to clean up," Ender said. "Get them ready, get everybody together, I'll meet you there, at the gate."

He walked out of the barracks. A tumult of conversation rose behind him. He heard Crazy Tom scream, "Two farteating armies! We'll whip their butts!"

The bathroom was empty. All cleaned up. None of the blood that poured from Bonzo's nose into the shower water. All gone. Nothing bad ever happened here.

Ender stepped under the water and rinsed himself, took the sweat of combat and let it run down the drain. All gone, except they recycled it and we'll be drinking Bonzo's bloodwater in the morning. All the life gone out of it, but his blood just the same, his blood and my sweat, washed down in their stupidity or cruelty or whatever it was that made them let it happen.

He dried himself, dressed in his flash suit, and walked to the battleroom. His army was waiting in the corridor, the door still not opened. They watched him in silence as he walked to the front to stand by the blank grey forcefield. Of course they all knew about

his fight in the bathroom today; that and their own weariness from the battle that morning kept them quiet, while the knowledge that they would be facing two armies filled them with dread.

Everything they can do to beat me, thought Ender. Everything they can think of, change all the rules, they don't care, just so they beat me. Well, I'm sick of the game. No game is worth Bonzo's blood pinking the water on the bathroom floor. Ice me, send me home, I don't want to play anymore.

The door disappeared. Only three meters out there were four stars together, completely blocking the view from the door.

Two armies weren't enough. They had to make Ender deploy his forces blind.

"Bean," said Ender. "Take your boys and tell me what's on the other side of this star."

Bean pulled the coil of twine from his waist, tied one end around him, handed the other end to a boy in his squad, and stepped gently through the door. His squad quickly followed. They had practiced this several times, and it took only a moment before they were braced on the star, holding the end of the twine. Bean pushed off at great speed, in a line almost parallel to the door; when he reached the corner of the room, he pushed off again and rocketed straight out toward the enemy. The spots of light on the wall showed that the enemy was shooting at him. As the rope was stopped by each edge of the star in turn, his arc became tighter, his direction changed, and he became an impossible target to hit. His squad caught him neatly as he came around the star from the other side. He moved all his arms and legs so those waiting inside the door would know that the enemies hadn't flashed him anywhere.

Ender dropped through the gate.

"It's really dim," said Bean, "but light enough you can't follow people easily by the lights on their suits. Worst possible for seeing. It's all open space from this star to the enemy side of the room. They've got eight stars making a square around their door. I didn't see anybody except the ones peeking around the boxes. They're just sitting there waiting for us."

As if to corroborate Bean's statement, the enemy began to call out to them. "Hey! We be hungry, come and feed us! Your ass is draggin'! Your ass is Dragon!"

Ender's mind felt dead. This was stupid. He didn't have a chance, outnumbered two to one and forced to attack a protected enemy. "In a real war, any commander with brains at all would retreat and save his army."

"What the hell," said Bean. "It's only a game."

"It stopped being a game when they threw away the rules."

"So, you throw 'em away, too."

Ender grinned. "OK. Why not, Let's see how they react to a formation."

Bean was appalled. "A formation! We've never done a formation in the whole time we've been an army!"

"We've still got a month to go before our training period is normally supposed to end. About time we started doing formations. Always have to know formations," He formed an A with his fingers, showed it to the blank door, and beckoned, A toon quickly emerged and Ender began arranging them behind the star. Three meters wasn't enough room to work in, the boys were frightened and confused, and it took nearly five minutes just to get them to understand what they were doing.

Tiger and Griffin soldiers were reduced to chanting catcalls, while their commanders argued about whether to try to use their overwhelming force to attack Dragon Army while they were still behind the star. Momoe was all for attacking -- "We outnumber him two to one" -- while Bee said, "Sit tight and we can't lose, move out and he can figure out a way to beat us."

So they sat tight, until finally in the dusky light they saw a large mass slip out from behind Ender's star. It held its shape, even when it abruptly stopped moving sideways and launched itself toward the dead center of the eight stars where eighty-two soldiers waited.

"Doobie doe," said a Griffin. "They're doing a formation."

"They must have been putting that together for all five minutes," said Momoe. "If we'd attacked while they were doing it, we could've destroyed them."

"Eat it, Momoe," whispered Bee. "You saw the way that little kid flew. He went all the way around the star and back behind without ever touching a wall. Maybe they've all got hooks, did you think of that? They've got something new there."

The formation was a strange one. A square formation of tightly-packed bodies in front, making a wall. Behind it, a cylinder, six boys in circumference and two boys deep, their limbs outstretched and frozen so they couldn't possibly be holding on to each other. Yet they held together as tightly as if they had been tied -- which, in fact, they were.

From inside the formation, Dragon Army was firing with deadly accuracy, forcing Griffins and Tigers to stay tightly packed on their stars.

"The back of that sucker is open," said Bee. "As soon as they get between the stars, we can get around behind--"

"Don't talk about it, do it!" said Momoe. Then he took his own advice and ordered his boys to launch against the wall and rebound out behind the Dragon formation.

In the chaos of their takeoff, while Griffin Army held tight to their stars, the Dragon formation abruptly changed. Both the cylinder and the front wall split in two, as boys inside it pushed off; almost at once, the formations also reversed direction, heading back toward the Dragon gate. Most of the Griffins fired at the formations and the boys moving backward with them; and the Tigers took the survivors of Dragon Army from behind.

But there was something wrong. William Bee thought for a moment and realized what it was. Those formations couldn't have reversed direction in midflight unless someone pushed off in the opposite direction, and if they took off with enough force to make that twenty-man formation move backward, they must be going fast.

There they were, six small Dragon soldiers down near William Bee's own door. From the number of lights showing on their flash suits, Bee could see that three of them were disabled and two of them damaged; only one was whole. Nothing to be frightened of. Bee casually aimed at them, pressed the button, and--

Nothing happened.

The lights went on.

The game was over.

Even though he was looking right at them, it took Bee a moment to realize what had just happened. Four of the Dragon soldiers had their helmets pressed on the corners of the door. And one of them had just passed through. They had just carried out the victory ritual. They were getting destroyed, they had hardly inflicted any casualties, and they had the gall to perform the victory ritual and end the game right under their noses.

Only then did it occur to William Bee that not only had Dragon Army ended the game, it was possible that, under the rules, they had won it. After all, no matter what happened, you were not certified as the winner unless you had enough unfrozen soldiers to touch the corners of the gate and pass someone through into the enemy's corridor. Therefore, by one way of thinking, you could argue that the ending ritual was victory. The battleroom certainly recognized it as the end of the game.

The teahergate opened and Major Anderson came into the room. "Ender," he called, looking around.

One of the frozen Dragon soldiers tried to answer him through jaws that were clamped shut by the flash suit. Anderson hooked over to him and thawed him.

Ender was smiling. "I beat you again, sir," he said.

"Nonsense, Ender," Anderson said softly. "Your battle was with Griffin and Tiger."

"How stupid do you think I am?" said Ender.

Loudly, Anderson said, "After that little maneuver, the rules are being revised to require that all of the enemy's soldiers must be frozen or disabled before the game can be reversed."

"It could only work once anyway," Ender said.

Anderson handed him the hook. Ender unfroze everyone at once. To hell with protocol. To hell with everything. "Hey!" he shouted as Anderson moved away. "What is it next time? My army in a cage without guns, with the rest of the Battle School against them? How about a little equality?"

There was a loud murmur of agreement from the other boys, and not all of it came from Dragon Army. Anderson did not so much as turn around to acknowledge Ender's challenge. Finally, it was William Bee who answered. "Ender, if you're on one side of the battle, it won't be equal no matter what the conditions are."

Right! called the boys. Many of them laughed. Talo Momoe began clapping his hands. "Ender Wiggin!" he shouted. The other boys also clapped and shouted Ender's name.

Ender passed through the enemy gate. His soldiers followed him. The sound of them shouting his name followed him through the corridors.

"Practice tonight?" asked Craty Tom.

Ender shook his head.

"Tomorrow morning then?"

"No."

"Well, when?"

"Never again, as far as I'm concerned."

He could hear the murmurs behind him.

"Hey, that's not fair," said one of the boys. "It's not our fault the teachers are screwing up the game. You can't just stop teaching us stuff because--"

Ender slammed his open hand against the wall and shouted at the boy. "I don't care about the game anymore!" His voice echoed through the corridor. Boys from other

armies came to their doors. He spoke quietly into the silence -- "Do you understand that?" And he whispered. "The game is over."

He walked back to his room alone. He wanted to lie down, but he couldn't because the bed was wet. It reminded him of all that had happened today, and in fury he tore the mattress and blankets from the bedframe and shoved them out into the corridor. Then he wadded up a uniform to serve as a pillow and lay on the fabric of wires strung across the frame. It was uncomfortable, but Ender didn't care enough to get up.

He had only been there a few minutes when someone knocked on his door.

"Go away," he said softly. Whoever was knocking didn't hear him or didn't care. Finally, Ender said to come in.

It was Bean.

"Go away, Bean."

Bean nodded but didn't leave. Instead he looked at his shoes. Ender almost yelled at him, cursed at him, screamed at him to leave. Instead he noticed how very tired Bean looked, his whole body bent with weariness, his eyes dark from lack of sleep; and yet his skin was still soft and translucent, the skin of a child, the soft curved cheek, the slender limbs of a little boy. He wasn't eight years old yet. It didn't matter he was brilliant and dedicated and good. He was a child. He was *young*.

No he isn't, thought Ender. Small, yes. But Bean has been through a battle with a whole army depending on him and on the soldiers that he led, and he performed splendidly, and they won. There's no youth in that. No childhood.

Taking Ender's silence and softening expression as permission to stay, Bean took another step into the room. Only then did Ender see the small slip of paper in his hand.

"You're transferred?" asked Ender. He was incredulous, but his voice came out sounding uninterested, dead.

"To Rabbit Army."

Ender nodded. Of course. It was obvious. If I can't be defeated with my army, they'll take my army away. "Carn Carby's a good man," said Ender. "I hope he recognizes what you're worth."

"Carn Carby was graduated today. He got his notice while we were fighting our battle."

"Well, who's commanding Rabbit then?"

Bean held his hands out helplessly. "Me."

Ender looked at the ceiling and nodded. "Of course. After all, you're only four years younger than the regular age."

"It isn't funny. I don't know what's going on here. All the changes in the game. And now this. I wasn't the only one transferred, you know. They graduated half the commanders, and transferred a lot of our guys to command their armies."

"Which guys?"

"It looks like -- every toon leader and every assistant."

"Of course. If they decide to wreck my army, they'll cut it to the ground. Whatever they're doing, they're thorough.""

"You'll still win, Ender. We all know that. Crazy Tom, he said, 'You mean I'm supposed to figure out how to beat Dragon Army?' Everybody knows you're the best. They can't break you down, no matter what they--"

"They already have."

"No, Ender, they can't--"

"I don't care about their game anymore, Bean. I'm not going to play it anymore. No more practices. No more battles. They can put their little slips of paper on the floor all they want, but I won't go. I decided that before I went through the door today. That's why I had you go for the gate. I didn't think it would work, but I didn't care. I just wanted to go out in style."

"You should've seen William Bee's face. He just stood there trying to figure out how he had lost when you only had seven boys who could wiggle their toes and he only had three who couldn't."

"Why should I want to see William Bee's face? Why should I want to beat anybody?" Ender pressed his palms against his eyes. "I hurt Bonzo really bad today, Bean. I really hurt him bad."

"He had it coming."

"I knocked him out standing up. It was like he was dead, standing there. And I kept hurting him."

Bean said nothing.

"I just wanted to make sure he never hurt me again."

"He won't," said Bean. "They sent him home."

"Already?"

"The teachers didn't say much, they never do. The official notice says he was graduated, but where they put the assignment -- you know, tactical school, support, precommand, navigation, that kind of thing -- it just said Cartagena, Spain. That's his home."

"I'm glad they graduated him."

"Hell, Ender, we're just glad he's gone. If we'd known what he was doing to you, we would've killed him on the spot. Was it true he had a whole bunch of guys gang up on you?"

"No. It was just him and me. He fought with honor." If it weren't for his honor, he and the others would have beaten me together. They might have killed me, then. His sense of honor saved my life. "I didn't fight with honor," Ender added. "I fought to win."

Bean laughed. "And you did. Kicked him right out of orbit."

A knock on the door, Before Ender could answer, the door opened. Ender had been expecting more of his soldiers. Instead it was Major Anderson. And behind him came Colonel Graff.

"Ender Wiggin," said Graff.

Ender got to his feet. "Yes sir."

"Your display of temper in the battleroom today was insubordinate and is not to be repeated."

"Yes sir," said Ender,

Bean was still feeling insubordinate, and he didn't think Ender deserved the rebuke. "I think it was about time somebody told a teacher how we felt about what you've been doing."

The adults ignored him. Anderson handed Ender a sheet of paper. A full-sized sheet. Not one of the little slips of paper that served for internal orders within the Battle School; it was a full-fledged set of orders. Bean knew what it meant. Ender was being transferred out of the school.

"Graduated?" asked Bean. Ender nodded. "What took them so long? You're only two or three years early. You've already learned how to walk and talk and dress yourself. What will they have left to teach you?"

Ender shook his head, "All I know is, the game's over." He folded up the paper. "None too soon. Can I tell my army?"

"There isn't time," said Graff. "Your shuttle leaves in twenty minutes. Besides, it's better not to talk to them after you get your orders. It makes it easier."

"For them or for you?" Ender asked. He didn't wait for an answer. He turned quickly to Bean, took his hand for a moment, and then headed for the door.

"Wait," said Bean. "Where are you going? Tactical? Navigational? Support?"

"Command School," Ender answered.

"Pre-command?"

"Command," said Ender, and then he was out the door, Anderson followed him closely. Bean grabbed Colonel Graff by the sleeve. "Nobody goes to Command School until they're sixteen!"

Graff shook off Bean's hand and left, closing the door behind him.

Bean stood alone in the room, trying to grasp what this might mean. Nobody went to Command School without three years of Pre-command in either Tactical or Support. But then, nobody left Battle School without at least six years, and Ender had had only four.

The system is breaking up. No doubt about it. Either somebody at the top is going crazy, or something's gone wrong with the war, the real war, the bugger war. Why else would they break down the training system like this, wreck the game the way they did? Why else would they put a little kid like me in command of an army?

Bean wondered about it as he walked back down the corridor to his own bed. The lights went out just as he reached his bunk. He undressed in darkness, fumbling to put his clothing in a locker he couldn't see. He felt terrible. At first he thought he felt bad because he was afraid of leading an army, but it wasn't true. He knew he'd make a good commander. He felt himself wanting to cry. He hadn't cried since the first few days of homesickness after he got here. He tried to put a name on the feeling that put a lump in his throat and made him sob silently, however much he tried to hold it down. He bit down on his hand to stop the feeling, to replace it with pain. It didn't help. He would never see Ender again.

Once he named the feeling, he could control it. He lay back and forced himself to go through the relaxing routine until he didn't feel like crying anymore. Then he drifted off to sleep. His hand was near his mouth. It lay on his pillow hesitantly, as if Bean couldn't decide whether to bite his nails or suck on his fingertips. His forehead was creased and furrowed. His breathing was quick and light. He was a soldier, and if anyone had asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he wouldn't have known what they meant.

When he was crossing into the shuttle, Ender noticed for the first time that the insignia on Major Anderson's uniform had changed. "Yes, he's a colonel now," said Graff. "In fact, Major Anderson has been placed in command of the Battle School, as of this afternoon. I have been reassigned to other duties."

Ender did not ask him what they were.

Graff strapped himself into a seat across the aisle from him. There was only one other passenger, a quiet man in civilian clothes who was introduced as General Pace. Pace was carrying a briefcase, but carried no more luggage than Ender did. Somehow that was comforting to Ender, that Graff also came away empty.

Ender spoke only once on the voyage home. "Why are we going home?" he asked. "I thought Command School was in the asteroids somewhere."

"It is," said Graff. "But the Battle School has no facilities for docking long-range ships. So you get a short landside leave."

Ender wanted to ask if that meant he could see his family. But suddenly, at the thought that it might be possible, he was afraid, and so he didn't ask. Just closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Behind him, General Pace was studying him; for what purpose, Ender could not guess.

It was a hot summer afternoon in Florida when they landed. Ender had been so long without sunlight that the light nearly blinded him. He squinted and sneezed and wanted to get back indoors. Everything was far away and flat; the ground, lacking the upward curve of Battle School floors, seemed instead to fall away, so that on level ground Ender felt as though he were on a pinnacle. The pull of real gravity felt different and he scuffed his feet when he walked. He hated it. He wanted to go back home, back to the Battle School, the only place in the universe where he belonged.

"Arrested?"

"Well, it's a natural thought. General Pace is the head of the military police. There *was* a death in the Battle School."

"They didn't tell me whether Colonel Graff was being promoted or court-martialed. Just transferred, with orders to report to the Polemarch."

"Is that a good sign or bad?"

"Who knows? On the one hand, Ender Wiggin not only survived, he passed a threshold, he graduated in dazzlingly good shape, you have to give old Graff credit for that. On the other hand, there's the fourth passenger on the shuttle. The one travelina in a bag."

"Only the second death in the history of the school. At least it wasn't a suicide this time."

"How is murder better, Major Imbu?"

"It wasn't murder, Colonel. We have it on video from two angles. No one can blame Ender."

"But they might blame Graff. After all this is over, the civilians can rake over our files and decide what was right and what was not. Give us medals where they think we were right, take away our pensions and put us in jail where they decide we were wrong. At least they had the good sense not to tell Ender that the boy died."

"Its the second time, too."

"They didn't tell him about Stilson, either."

"The kid is scary."

"Ender Wiggin isn't a killer. He just wins -- thoroughly. If anybody's going to be scared, let it be the buggers"

"Makes you almost feel sorry for them, knowing Ender's going to be coming after them."

"The only one I feel sorry for is Ender. But not sorry enough to suggest they ought to let up on him. I just got access to the material that Graff's been geffing all this time. About fleet movements, that sort of thing. I used to sleep easy at night."

"Time's getting short?"

"I shouldn't have mentioned it. I can't tell you secured information."

"I know."

"Let's leave it at this: they didn't get him to Command School a day too soon. And maybe a couple of years too late."

Chapter 13 -- Valentine

"Children?"

"Brother and sister. They had layered themselves five times through the nets -- writing for companies that paid for their memberships, that sort of thing. Devil of a time tracking them down."

"What are they hiding?"

"Could be anything. The most obvious thing to hide, though, is their ages. The boy is fourteen, the girl is twelve."

"Which one is Demosthenes?"

"The girl. The twelve-year-old."

"Pardon me. I don't really think it's funny, but I can't help but laugh. All this time we've been worried, all the time we've been trying to persuade the Russians not to take Demosthenes too seriously, we held up Locke as proof that Americans weren't all crazy warmongers. Brother and sister, prepubescent--"

"And their last name is Wiggin."

"Ah. Coincidence?"

"*The* Wiggin is a third. They are one and two."

"Oh, excellent. The Russians will never believe--"

"That Demosthenes and Locke aren't as much under our control as *the* Wiggin."

"Is there a conspiracy? Is someone controlling them?"

"We have been able to detect no contact between these two children and any adult who might be directing them."

"That is not to say that someone might not have invented some method you can't detect. It's hard to believe that two children--"

"I interviewed Colonel Graff when he arrived from the Battle School. It is his best judgment that nothing these children have done is out of their reach. Their abilities are virtually identical with -- *the* Wiggin. Only their temperaments are different. What surprised him, however, was the orientation of the two personas. Demosthenes is definitely the girl, but Graff says the girl was rejected for Battle School because she was too pacific, too conciliatory, and above all, too empathic."

"Definitely not Demosthenes."

"And the boy has the soul of a jackal."

"Wasn't it Locke that was recently praised as 'The only truly open mind in America'?"

"It's hard to know what's really happening. But Graff recommended, and I agree, that we should leave them alone. Not expose them. Make no report at this time except that we have determined that Locke and Demosthenes have no foreign connections and have no connections with any domestic group, either, except those publicly declared on the nets."

"In other words, give them a clean bill of health,"

"I know Demosthenes seems dangerous, in part because he or she has such a wide following. But I think it's significant that the one of the two of them who is most ambitious has chosen the moderate, wise persona. And they're still just talking. They have influence, but no power."

"In my experience, influence is power."

"If we ever find them getting out of line, we can easily expose them."

"Only in the next few years. The longer we wait, the older they get, and the less shocking it is to discover who they are."

"You know what the Russian troop movements have been. There's always the chance that Demosthenes is right. In which case--"

"We'd better have Demosthenes around. All right. We'll show them clean, for now. But watch them. And I, of course, have to find ways of keeping the Russians calm."

In spite of all her misgivings, Valentine was having fun being Demosthenes. Her column was now being carried on practically every newsnet in the country, and it was fun to watch the money pile up in her attorney's accounts. Every now and then she and Peter would, in Demosthenes' name, donate a carefully calculated sum to a particular candidate or cause: enough money that the donation would be noticed, but not so much that the candidate would feel she was trying to buy a vote. She was getting so many letters now that her newsnet had hired a secretary to answer certain classes of routine correspondence for her. The fun fetters, from national and international leaders, sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly, always diplomatically trying to pry into Demosthenes' mind -- those she and Peter read together, laughing in delight sometimes that people like *this* were writing to children, and didn't know it.

Sometimes, though, she was ashamed. Father was reading Demosthenes regularly; he never read Locke, or if he did, he said nothing about it. At dinner, though, he would often

regale them with some telling point Demosthenes had made in that day's column. Peter loved it when Father did that -- "See, it shows that the common man is paying attention" - - but it made Valentine feel humiliated for Father. If he ever found out that all this time *I* was writing the columns he told us about, and that I didn't even believe half the things I wrote, he would be angry and ashamed.

At school, she once nearly got them in trouble, when her history teacher assigned the class to write a paper contrasting the views of Demosthenes and Locke as expressed in two of their early columns. Valentine was careless, and did a brilliant job of analysis. As a result, she had to work hard to talk the principal out of having her essay published on the very newsnet that carried Demosthenes' column. Peter was savage about it. "You write too much like Demosthenes, you can't get published, I should kill Demosthenes now, you're getting out of control."

If he raged about that blunder, Peter frightened her still more when he went silent. It happened when Demosthenes was invited to take part in the President's Council on Education for the Future, a blue-ribbon panel that was designed to do nothing, but do it splendidly. Valentine thought Peter would take it as a triumph, but he did not. "Turn it down," he said,

"Why should I?" she asked, "It's no work at all, and they even said that because of Demosthenes' well-known desire for privacy, they would net all the meetings. It makes Demosthenes into a respectable person, and--"

"And you love it that you got that before I did."

"Peter, it isn't you and me, it's Demosthenes and Locke. We made them up. They aren't real. Besides, this appointment doesn't mean they like Demosthenes better than Locke, it just means that Demosthenes has a much stronger base of support. You knew he would. Appointing him pleases a large number of Russian-haters and chauvinists."

"It wasn't supposed to work this way. Locke was supposed to be the respected one."

"He is! Real respect takes longer than official respect. Peter, don't be angry at me because I've done well with the things you told me to do."

But he was angry, for days, and ever since then he had left her to think through all her own columns, instead of telling her what to write. He probably assumed that this would make the quality of Demosthenes' columns deteriorate, but if it did no one noticed. Perhaps it made him even angrier that she never came to him weeping for help. She had been Demosthenes too long now to need anyone to tell her what Demosthenes would think about things.

And as her correspondence with other politically active citizens grew, she began to learn things, information that simply wasn't available to the general public. Certain military people who corresponded with her dropped hints about things without meaning to, and

she and Peter put them together to build up a fascinating and frightening picture of Warsaw Pact activity. They were indeed preparing for war, a vicious and bloody earthbound war. Demosthenes wasn't wrong to suspect that the Warsaw Pact was not abiding by the terms of the League.

And the character of Demosthenes gradually took on a life of his own. At times she found herself thinking like Demosthenes at the end of a writing session, agreeing with ideas that were supposed to be calculated poses. And sometimes she read Peter's Locke essays and found herself annoyed at his obvious blindness to what was really going on.

Perhaps it's impossible to wear an identity without becoming what you pretend to be. She thought of that, worried about it for a few days, and then wrote a column using that as a premise, to show that politicians who toadied to the Russians in order to keep the peace would inevitably end up subservient to them in everything. It was a lovely bite at the party in power, and she got a lot of good mail about it. She also stopped being frightened of the idea of becoming, to a degree, Demosthenes. He's smarter than Peter and I ever gave him credit for, she thought.

Graff was waiting for her after school. He stood leaning on his car. He was in civilian clothes, and he had gained weight, so she didn't recognize him at first. But he beckoned to her, and before he could introduce himself she remembered his name.

"I won't write another letter," she said. "I never should have written that one."

"You don't like medals, then, I guess."

"Not much."

"Come for a ride with me, Valentine."

"I don't ride with strangers."

He handed her a paper. It was a release form, and her parents had signed it.

"I guess you're not a stranger. Where are we going?"

"To see a young soldier who is in Greensboro on leave."

She got in the car. "Ender's only ten years old," she said. "I thought you told us the first time he'd be eligible for a leave was when he was twelve."

"He skipped a few grades."

"So he's doing well?"

"Ask him when you see him."

"Why me? Why not the whole family?"

Graff sighed. "Ender sees the world his own way. We had to persuade him to see you. As for Peter and your parents, he was not interested. Life at the Battle School was -- intense."

"What do you mean, he's gone crazy?"

"On the contrary, he's the sanest person I know. He's sane enough to know that his parents are not particularly eager to reopen a book of affection that was closed quite tightly four years ago. As for Peter -- we didn't even suggest a meeting, and so he didn't have a chance to tell us to go to hell."

They went out Lake Brandt Road and turned off just past the lake, following a road that wound down and up until they came to a white clapboard mansion that sprawled along the top of a hill. It looked over Lake Brandt on one side and a five-acre private lake on the other. "This is the house that Medly's Mist-E-Rub built," said Graff. "The IF picked it up in a tax sale about twenty years ago. Ender insisted that his conversation with you should not be bugged. I promised him it wouldn't be, and to help inspire confidence, the two of you are going out on a raft he built himself. I should warn you, though. I intend to ask you questions about your conversation when it is finished. You don't have to answer, but I hope you will."

"I didn't bring a swimming suit."

"We can provide one."

"One that isn't bugged?"

"At some point, there must be trust. For instance, I know who Demosthenes really is."

She felt a thrill of fear run through her, but said nothing.

"I've known since I landed from the Battle School, there are, perhaps, six of us in the world who know his identity. Not counting the Russians -- God only knows what they know. But Demosthenes has nothing to fear from us. Demosthenes can trust our discretion. Just as I trust Demosthenes not to tell Locke what's going on here today. Mutual trust. We tell each other things."

Valentine couldn't decide whether it was Demosthenes they approved of, or Valentine Wiggin. If the former, she would not trust them; if the latter, perhaps she could. The fact that they did not want her to discuss this with Peter suggested that perhaps they knew the difference between them. She did not stop to wonder whether she herself knew the difference any more.

"You said he built the raft. How long has he been here?"

"Two months. We meant his leave to last only a few days. But you see, he doesn't seem interested in going on with his education."

"Oh. So I'm therapy again."

"This time we can't censor your letter, We're just taking our chances. We need your brother badly. Humanity is on the cusp."

This time Val had grown up enough to know just how much danger the world was in. And she had been Demosthenes long enough that she didn't hesitate to do her duty.
"Where is he?"

"Down at the boat slip."

"Where's the swimming suit?"

Ender didn't wave when she walked down the hill toward him, didn't smile when she stepped onto the floating boat slip. But she knew that he was glad to see her, knew it because of the way his eyes never left her face.

"You're bigger than I remembered," she said stupidly.

"You too," he said. "I also remembered that you were beautiful."

"Memory does play tricks on us."

"No. Your face is the same, but I don't remember what beautiful means anymore. Come on. Let's go out into the lake."

She looked at the small raft with misgivings.

"Don't stand up on it, that's all," he said. He got on by crawling, spiderlike, on toes and fingers. "It's the first thing I built with my own hands since you and I used to build with blocks. Peter-proof buildings."

She laughed. They used to take pleasure in building things that would stand up even when a lot of the obvious supports had been removed. Peter, in turn, liked to remove a block here or there, so the structure would be fragile enough that the next person to touch it would knock it down. Peter was an ass, but he did provide some focus to their childhood.

"Peter's changed," she said.

"Let's not talk about him," said Ender.

"All right."

She crawled onto the boat, not as deftly as Ender. He used a paddle to maneuver them slowly toward the center of the private lake. She noticed aloud that he was sunbrowned and strong.

"The strong part comes from Battle School. The sunbrowning comes from this lake. I spend a lot of time on the water. When I'm swimming, it's like being weightless. I miss being weightless. Also, when I'm here on the lake, the land slopes up in every direction."

"Like living in a bowl."

"I've lived in a bowl for four years."

"So we're strangers now?"

"Aren't we, Valentine?"

"No," she said. She reached out and touched his leg. Then, suddenly, she squeezed his knee, right where he had always been most ticklish.

But almost at the same moment, he caught her wrist in his hand. His grip was very strong, even though his hands were smaller than hers and his own arms were slender and tight. For a moment he looked dangerous; then he relaxed. "Oh, yes," he said. "You used to tickle me."

In answer, she dropped herself over the side of the raft. The water was clear and clean, and there was no chlorine in it. She swam for a while, then returned to the raft and lay on it in the hazy sunlight. A wasp circled her, then landed on the raft beside her head. She knew it was there, and ordinarily would have been afraid of it. But not today. Let it walk on this raft, let it bake in the sun as I'm doing.

Then the raft rocked, and she turned to see Ender calmly crushing the life out of the wasp with one finger. "These are a nasty breed," Ender said. "They sting you without waiting to be insulted first," He smiled. "I've been learning about preemptive strategies. I'm very good. No one ever beat me. I'm the best soldier they ever had."

"Who would expect less?" she said. "You're a Wiggin."

"Whatever that means," he said.

"It means that you are going to make a difference in the world." And she told him what she and Peter were doing.

"How old is Peter, fourteen? Already planning to take over the world?"

"He thinks he's Alexander the Great. And why shouldn't he be? Why shouldn't you be, too?"

"We can't both be Alexander."

"Two faces of the same coin. And I am the metal in between." Even as she said it, she wondered if it was true. She had shared so much with Peter these last few years that even when she thought she despised him, she understood him. While Ender had been only a memory till now. A very small, fragile boy who needed her protection. Not this cold-eyed, dark-skinned manling who kills wasps with his fingers. Maybe he and Peter and I are all the same, and have been all along. Maybe we only thought we were different from each other out of jealousy.

"The trouble with coins is, when one face is up, the other face is down."

And right now you think you're down. "They want me to encourage you to go on with your studies."

"They aren't studies, they're games. All games, from beginning to end, only they change the rules whenever they feel like it." He held up a limp hand. "See the strings?"

"But you can use them, too."

"Only if they want to be used. Only if they think they're using you. No, it's too hard, I don't want to play anymore. Just when I start to be happy, just when I think I can handle things, they stick in another knife. I keep having nightmares, now that I'm here. I dream I'm in the battleroom, only instead of being weightless, they're playing games with gravity. They keep changing its direction. So I never end up on the wall I launched for. I never end up where I meant to go. And I keep pleading with them just to let me get to the door, and they won't let me out, they keep sucking me back in."

She heard the anger in his voice and assumed it was directed at her. "I suppose that's what I'm here for. To suck you back in."

"I didn't want to see you."

"They told me."

"I was afraid that I'd still love you."

"I hoped that you would."

"My fear, your wish -- both granted."

"Ender, it really is true. We may be young, but we're not powerless. We play by their rules long enough, and it becomes our game." She giggled. "I'm on a presidential commission. Peter is so angry."

"They don't let me use the nets. There isn't a computer in the place, except the household machines that run the security system and the lighting. Ancient things. Installed back a century ago, when they made computers that didn't hook up with anything. They took away my army, they took away my desk, and you know something? I don't really mind."

"You must be good company for yourself."

"Not me. My memories."

"Maybe that's who you are, what you remember."

"No. My memories of strangers. My memories of the buggers."

Valentine shivered, as if a cold breeze had suddenly passed. "I refuse to watch the bugger vids anymore. They're always the same.

"I used to study them for hours. The way their ships move through space. And something funny, that only occurred to me lying out here on the lake. I realized that all the battles in which buggers and humans fought hand to hand, all those are from the First Invasion. All the scenes from the Second Invasion, when our soldiers are in IF uniforms, in those scenes the buggers are always already dead. Lying there, slumped over their controls. Not a sign of struggle or anything. And Mazer Rackham's battle -- they never show us any footage from that battle."

"Maybe it's a secret weapon."

"No, no, I don't care about how we killed them. It's the buggers themselves. I don't know anything about them, and yet someday I'm supposed to fight them. I've been through a lot of fights in my life, sometimes games, sometimes -- not games. Every time, I've won because I could understand the way my enemy thought. From what they *did*. I could tell what they thought I was doing, how they wanted the battle to take shape. And I played off of that. I'm very good at that. Understanding how other people think."

"The curse of the Wiggin children." She joked, but it frightened her, that Ender might understand her as completely as he did his enemies. Peter always understood her, or at least thought he did, but he was such a moral sinkhole that she never had to feel embarrassed when he guessed even her worst thoughts. But Ender -- she did not want him to understand her. It would make her naked before him. She would be ashamed. "You don't think you can beat the buggers unless you know them."

"It goes deeper than that. Being here alone with nothing to do, I've been thinking about myself, too. Trying to understand why I hate myself so badly."

"No, Ender."

"Don't tell me 'No, Ender.' It took me a long time to realize that I did, but believe me, I did. Do. And it came down to this: In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him. I think it's impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves. And then, in that very moment when I love them--"

"You beat them." For a moment she was not afraid of his understanding.

"No, you don't understand. I destroy them. I make it impossible for them to ever hurt me again. I grind them and grind them until they don't exist."

"Of course you don't." And now the fear came again, worse than before. Peter has mellowed, but you, they've made you into a killer. Two sides of the same coin, but which side is which?

"I've really hurt some people, Val. I'm not making this up."

"I know, Ender." How will you hurt me?

"See what I'm becoming, Val?" he said softly. "Even you are afraid of me." And he touched her cheek so gently that she wanted to cry. Like the touch of his soft baby hand when he was still an infant. She remembered that, the touch of his soft and innocent hand on her cheek.

"I'm not," she said, and in that moment it was true.

"You should be."

No. I shouldn't. "You're going to shrivel up if you stay in the water. Also, the sharks might get you."

He smiled. "The sharks learned to leave me alone a long time ago." But he pulled himself onto the raft, bringing a wash of water across it as it tipped. It was cold on Valentine's back.

"Ender, Peter's going to do it. He's smart enough to take the time it takes, but he's going to win his way into power -- if not right now, then later. I'm not sure yet whether that'll be a good thing or a bad thing. Peter can be cruel, but he knows the getting and keeping of power, and there are signs that once the bugger war is over, and maybe even before it

ends, the world will collapse into chaos again. The Warsaw Pact was on its way to hegemony before the First Invasion. If they try for it afterward--"

"So even Peter might be a better alternative."

"You've been discovering some of the destroyer in yourself, Ender. Well, so have I. Peter didn't have a monopoly on that, whatever the testers thought. And Peter has some of the builder in him. He isn't kind, but he doesn't break every good thing he sees anymore. Once you realize that power will always end up with the sort of people who crave it, I think that there are worse people who could have it than Peter."

"With that strong a recommendation, I could vote for him myself."

"Sometimes it seems absolutely silly. A fourteen-year-old boy and his kid sister plotting to take over the world." She tried to laugh. It wasn't funny. "We aren't just ordinary children, are we. None of us."

"Don't you sometimes wish we were?"

She tried to imagine herself being like the other girls at school. Tried to imagine life if she didn't feel responsible for the future of the world. "It would be so dull."

"I don't think so." And he stretched out on the raft, as if he could lie on the water forever.

It was true. Whatever they did to Ender in the Battle School, they had spent his ambition. He really did not want to leave the sun-warmed waters of this bowl.

No, she realized. No, he *believes* that he doesn't want to leave here, but there is still too much of Peter in him. Or too much of me. None of us could be happy for long, doing nothing. Or perhaps it's just that none of us could be happy living with no other company than ourself.

So she began to prod again. "What is the one name that everyone in the world knows?"

"Mazer Rackham."

"And what if you win the next war, the way Mazer did?"

"Mazer Rackham was a fluke. A reserve. Nobody believed in him. He just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

"But suppose you do it. Suppose you beat the buggers and your name is known the way Mazer Rackham's name is known."

"Let somebody else be famous. Peter wants to be famous. Let him save the world."

"I'm not talking about fame, Ender. I'm not talking about power, either. I'm talking about accidents, just like the accident that Mazer Rackham happened to be the one who was there when somebody had to stop the buggers."

"If I'm here," said Ender, "then I won't be there. Somebody else will. Let them have the accident."

His tone of weary unconcern infuriated her. "I'm talking about my life, you self-centered little bastard." If her words bothered him, he didn't show it. Just lay there, eyes closed. "When you were little and Peter tortured you, it's a good thing I didn't lie back and wait for Mom and Dad to save you. They never understood how dangerous Peter was. I knew you had the monitor, but I didn't wait for them, either. Do you know what Peter used to do to me because I stopped him from hurting you?"

"Shut up," Ender whispered.

Because she saw that his chest was trembling, because she knew that she had indeed hurt him, because she knew that just like Peter, she had found his weakest place and stabbed him there, she fell silent.

"I can't beat them," Ender said softly, "I'll be out there like Mazer Rackham one day, and everybody will be depending on me, and I won't be able to do it."

"If you can't, Ender, then nobody could. If you can't beat them, then they deserve to win because they're stronger and better than us. It won't be your fault."

"Tell it to the dead."

"If not you, then who?"

"Anybody."

"Nobody, Ender. I'll tell you something. If you try and lose then it isn't your fault. But if you don't try and we lose, then it's all your fault. You killed us all."

"I'm a killer no matter what."

"What else should you be? Human beings didn't evolve brains in order to lie around on lakes. Killing's the first thing we learned. And a good thing we did, or we'd be dead, and the tigers would own the earth."

"I could never beat Peter. No matter what I said or did. I never could."

So it came back to Peter. "He was years older than you. And stronger."

"So are the buggers."

She could see his reasoning. Or rather, his unreasoning. He could win all he wanted, but he knew in his heart that there was always someone who could destroy him, He always knew that he had not really won, because there was Peter, undefeated champion.

"You want to beat Peter?" she asked.

"No," he answered.

"Beat the buggers. Then come home and see who notices Peter Wiggin anymore. Look him in the eye when all the world loves and reveres you. That'll be defeat in his eyes, Ender. That's how you win."

"You don't understand," he said.

"Yes I do."

"No you don't. I don't want to beat Peter."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want him to love me."

She had no answer. As far as she knew, Peter didn't love anybody.

Ender said nothing more. Just lay there. And lay there.

Finally Valentine, the sweat dripping off her, the mosquitos beginning to hover as the dusk came on, took one final dip in the water and then began to push the raft in to shore. Ender showed no sign that he knew what she was doing, but his irregular breathing told her that he was not asleep. When they got to shore, she climbed onto the dock and said, "I love you, Ender. More than ever. No matter what you decide."

He didn't answer. She doubted that he believed her. She walked back up the hill, savagely angry at them for making her come to Ender like this. For she had, after all, done just what they wanted. She had talked Ender into going back into his training, and he wouldn't soon forgive her for that.

Ender came in the door, still wet from his last dip in the lake. It was dark outside, and dark in the room where Graff waited for him.

"Are we going now?" asked Ender.

"If you want to," Graff said.

"When?"

"When you're ready."

Ender showered and dressed. He was finally used to the way civilian clothes fit together, but he still didn't feel right without a uniform or a flash suit. I'll never wear a flash suit again, he thought. That was the Battle School game, and I'm through with that. He heard the crickets chirping madly in the woods; in the near distance he heard the crackling sound of a car driving slowly on gravel.

What else should he take with him? He had read several of the books in the library, but they belonged to the house and he couldn't take them. The only thing he owned was the raft he had made with his own hands. That would stay here, too.

The lights were on now in the room where Graff waited. He, too, had changed clothing. He was back to uniform.

They sat in the back seat of the car together, driving along country roads to come at the airport from the back. "Back when the population was growing," said Graff, "they kept this area in woods and farms. Watershed land. The rainfall here starts a lot of rivers flowing, a lot of underground water moving around. The Earth is deep, and right to the heart it's alive, Ender. We people only live on the top, like the bugs that live on the scum of the still water near the shore."

Ender said nothing.

"We train our commanders the way we do because that's what it takes -- they have to think in certain ways. They can't be distracted by a lot of things, so we isolate them. You. Keep you separate. And it works. But it's so easy, when you never meet people, when you never know the Earth itself, when you live with metal walls keeping out the cold of space, it's easy to forget why Earth is worth saving. Why the world of people might be worth the price you pay."

So that's why you brought me here, thought Ender. With all your hurry, that's why you took three months, to make me love Earth. Well, it worked. All your tricks worked. Valentine, too; she was another one of your tricks, to make me remember that I'm not going to school for myself. Well, I remember.

"I may have used Valenrine," said Graff, "and you may hate me for it, Ender, but keep this in mind -- it only works because what's between you, that's real, that's what matters. Billions of those connections between human beings. That's what you're fighting to keep alive."

Ender turned his face to the window and watched the helicopters and dirigibles rise and fall.

They took a helicopter to the IF spaceport at Stumpy Point. It was officially named for a dead Hegemon, but everybody called it Stumpy Point, after the pitiful little town that had been paved over when they made the approaches to the vast islands of steel and concrete that dotted Pamlico Sound. There were still waterbirds taking their fastidious little steps in the saltwater, where mossy trees dipped down as if to drink. It began to rain lightly, and the concrete was black and slick; it was hard to tell where it left off and the Sound began.

Graff led him through a maze of clearances. Authority was a little plastic ball that Graff carried. He dropped it into chutes, and doors opened and people stood up and saluted and the chutes spat out the ball and Graff went on. Ender noticed that at first everyone watched Graff, but as they penetrated deeper into the spaceport, people began watching Ender. At first it was the man of real authority they noticed, but later, where everyone had authority, it was his cargo they cared to see.

Only when Graff strapped himself into the shuttle seat beside him did Ender realize Graff was going to launch with him.

"How far?" asked Ender. "How far are you going with me?"

Graff smiled thinly. "All the way, Ender."

"Are they making you administrator of Command School?"

"No."

So they had removed Graff from his post at Battle School solely to accompany Ender to his next assignment. How important am I, he wondered. And like a whisper of Peter's-voice inside his mind, he heard the question, How can I use this?

He shuddered and tried to think of something else. Peter could have fantasies about ruling the world, but Ender didn't have them. Still, thinking back on his life in Battle School, it occurred to him that although he had never sought power, he had always had it. But he decided that it was a power born of excellence, not manipulation. He had no reason to be ashamed of it. He had never, except perhaps with Bean, used his power to hurt someone. And with Bean, things had worked well after all. Bean had become a friend, finally, to take the place of the lost Alai, who in turn took the place of Valentine. Valentine, who was helping Peter in his plotting. Valentine, who still loved Ender no matter what happened. And following that train of thought led him back to Earth, back to the quiet hours in the center of the clear water ringed by a bowl of tree-covered hills. That is Earth, he thought. Not a globe thousands of kilometers around, but a forest with a shining lake, a house hidden at the crest of the hill, high in the trees, a grassy slope leading upward from the water, fish leaping and birds strafing to take the bugs that lived

at the border between water and sky. Earth was the constant noise of crickets and winds and birds. And the voice of one girl, who spoke to him out of his far-off childhood. The same voice that had once protected him from terror. The same voice that he would do anything to keep alive, even return to school, even leave Earth behind again for another four or forty or four thousand years. Even if she loved Peter more.

His eyes were closed, and he had not made any sound but breathing; still, Graff reached out and touched his hand across the aisle. Ender stiffened in surprise, and Graff soon withdrew, but for a moment Ender was struck with the startling thought that perhaps Graff felt some affection for him. But no, it was just another calculated gesture. Graff was creating a commander out of a little boy. No doubt Unit 17 in the course of studies included an affectionate gesture from the teacher.

The shuttle reached the IPL satellite in only a few hours. Inter-Planetary Launch was a city of three thousand inhabitants, breathing oxygen from the plants that also fed them, drinking water that had already passed through their bodies ten thousand times, living only to service the tugs that did all the oxwork in the solar system and the shuttles that took their cargos and passengers back to the Earth or the Moon. It was a world where, briefly, Ender felt at home, since its floors sloped upward as they did in the Battle School.

Their tug was fairly new; the IF was constantly casting off its old vehicles and purchasing the latest models. It had just brought a vast load of drawn steel processed by a factory ship that was taking apart minor planets in the asteroid belt. The steel would be dropped to the Moon, and now the tug was linked to fourteen barges. Graff dropped his ball into the reader again, however, and the barges were uncoupled from the tug. It would be making a fast run this time, to a destination of Graff's specification, not to be stated until the tug had cut loose from IPL.

"It's no great secret," said the tug's captain. "Whenever the destination is unknown, it's for ISL." By analogy with IPL, Ender decided the letters meant Inter-Stellar Launch.

"This time it isn't," said Graff.

"Where then?"

"IF. Command."

"I don't have security clearance even to know where that is, sir."

"Your ship knows," said Graff. "Just let the computer have a look at this, and follow the course it plots." He handed the captain the plastic ball.

"And I'm supposed to close my eyes during the whole voyage, so I don't figure out where we are?"

"Oh, no, of course not. I.E. Command is on the minor planet Eros, which should be about three months away from here at the highest possible speed. Which is the speed you'll use, of course."

"Eros? But I thought that the buggers burned that to a radioactive -- ah. When did I receive security clearance to know this?"

"You didn't. So when we arrive at Eros, you will undoubtedly be assigned to permanent duty there."

The captain understood immediately, and didn't like it. "I'm a pilot, you son of a bitch, and you got no right to lock me up on a rock!"

"I will overlook your derisive language to a superior officer. I do apologize, but my orders were to take the fastest available military tug. At the moment I arrived, that was you. It isn't as though anyone were out to get you. Cheer up. The war may be over in another fifteen years, and then the location of IF Command won't have to be a secret anymore. By the way, you should be aware, in case you're one of those who relies on visuals for docking, that Eros has been blacked out. Its albedo is only slightly brighter than a black hole. You won't see it."

"Thanks," said the captain.

It was nearly a month into the voyage before he managed to speak civilly to Colonel Graff.

The shipboard computer had a limited library -- it was geared primarily to entertainment rather than education. So during the voyage, after breakfast and morning exercises, Ender and Graff would usually talk. About Command School, About Earth. About astronomy and physics and whatever Ender wanted to know.

And above all, he wanted to know about the buggers.

"We don't know much," said Graff. "We've never had a live one in custody. Even when we caught one unarmed and alive, he died the moment it became obvious he was captured. Even the he is uncertain -- the most likely thing, in fact, is that most bugger soldiers are females, but with atrophied or vestigial sexual organs. We can't tell. It's their psychology that would be most useful to you, and we haven't exactly had a chance to interview them."

"Tell me what you know, and maybe I'll learn something that I need."

So Graff told him. The buggers were organisms that could conceivably have evolved on Earth, if things had gone a different way a billion years ago. At the molecular level, there were no surprises. Even the genetic material was the same. It was no accident that they looked insectlike to human beings. Though their internal organs were now much more

complex and specialized than any insects, and they had evolved an internal skeleton and shed most of the exoskeleton, their physical structure still echoed their ancestors, who could easily have been very much like Earth's ants. "But don't be fooled by that," said Graff. "It's just as meaningful to say that our ancestors could easily have been very much like squirrels."

"If that's all we have to go on, that's something," said Ender.

"Squirrels never built starships," said Graff. "There are usually a few changes on the way from gathering nuts and seeds to harvesting asteroids and putting permanent research stations on the moons of Saturn."

The buggers could probably see about the same spectrum of light as human beings, and there was artificial lighting in their ships and ground installations. However, their antennae seemed almost vestigial. There was no evidence from their bodies that smelling, tasting, or hearing were particularly important to them. "Of course, we can't be sure. But we can't see any way that they could have used sound for communication. The oddest thing of all was that they also don't have any communication devices on their ships. No radios, nothing that could transmit or receive any kind of signal."

"They communicate ship to ship. I've seen the videos, they talk to each other."

"True. But body to body, mind to mind. It's the most important thing we learned from them. Their communication, however they do it, is instantaneous. Lightspeed is no barrier. When Mazer Rackham defeated their invasion fleet, they all closed up shop. At once. There was no time for a signal. Everything just stopped."

Ender remembered the videos of uninjured buggers lying dead at their posts.

"We knew then that it was possible to communicate faster than light. That was seventy years ago, and once we knew it could be done, we did it. Not me, mind you, I wasn't born then."

"How is it possible?"

"I can't explain philotic physics to you. Half of it nobody understands anyway. What matters is we built the ansible. The official name is Philotic Parallax Instantaneous Communicator, but somebody dredged the name ansible out of an old book somewhere and it caught on. Not that most people even know the machine exists."

"That means that ships could talk to each other even when they're across the solar system," said Ender.

"It means," said Graff, "that ships could talk to each other even when they're across the galaxy. And the buggers can do it without machines."

"So they knew about their defeat the moment it happened," said Ender. "I always figured -- everybody always said that they probably only found out they lost the battle twenty five years ago."

"It keeps people from panicking," said Graff. "I'm telling you things that you can't know, by the way, if you're ever going to leave IF Command. Before the war's over."

Ender was angry. "If you know me at all, you know I can keep a secret."

"It's a regulation. People under twenty-five are assumed to be a security risk. It's very unjust to a good many responsible children, but it helps narrow the number of people who might let something slip."

"What's all the secrecy for, anyway?"

"Because we've taken some terrible risks, Ender, and we don't want to have every net on earth second-guessing those decisions. You see, as soon as we had a working ansible, we tucked it into our best starships and launched them to attack the buggers home systems."

"Do we know where they are?"

"Yes."

"So we're not waiting for the Third Invasion."

"We *are* the Third Invasion."

"We're attacking them. Nobody says that. Everybody thinks we have a huge fleet of warships waiting in the comet shield--"

"Not one. We're quite defenseless here."

"What if they've sent a fleet to attack us?"

"Then we're dead. But our ships haven't seen such a fleet, not a sign of one."

"Maybe they gave up and they're planning to leave us alone."

"Maybe. You've seen the videos. Would you bet the human race on the chance of them giving up and leaving us alone?"

Ender tried to grasp the amounts of time that had gone by. "And the ships have been traveling for seventy years--"

"Some of them. And some for thirty years, and some for twenty. We make better ships now. We're learning how to play with space a little better. But every starship that is not

still under construction is on its way to a bugger world or outpost. Every starship, with cruisers and fighters tucked into its belly, is out there approaching the buggers. Decelerating. Because they're almost there. The first ships we sent to the most distant objectives, the more recent ships to the closer ones. Our timing was pretty good. They'll all be arriving in combat range within a few months of each other. Unfortunately, our most primitive, outdated equipment will be attacking their homeworld. Still, they're armed well enough -- we have some weapons the buggers never saw before."

"When will they arrive?"

"Within the next five years. Ender. Everything is ready at IF Command. The master ansible is there, in contact with all our invasion fleet; the ships are all working, ready to fight. All we lack, Ender, is the battle commander. Someone who knows what the hell to do with those ships when they get there."

"And what if no one knows what to do with them?"

"We'll just do our best, with the best commander we can get."

Me, thought Ender, they want me to be ready in five years. "Colonel Graff, there isn't a chance I'll be ready to command a fleet in time."

Graff shrugged. "So. Do your best. If you aren't ready, we'll make do with what we've got."

That eased Ender's mind,

But only for a moment, "Of course, Ender, what we've got right now is nobody."

Ender knew that this was another of Graff's games. Make me believe that it all depends on me, so I can't slack off, so I push myself as hard as possible.

Game or not, though, it might also be true. And so he would work as hard as possible. It was what Val had wanted of him. Five years. Only five years until the fleet arrives, and I don't know anything yet, "I'll only be fifteen in five years," Ender said.

"Going on sixteen," said Graff. "It all depends on what you know."

"Colonel Graff," he said. "I just want to go back and swim in the lake."

"After we win the war," said Graff, "Or lose it. We'll have a few decades before they get back here to finish us off. The house will be there, and I promise you can swim to your heart's content."

"But I'll still be too young for security clearance."

"We'll keep you under armed guard at all times. The military knows how to handle these things."

They both laughed, and Ender had to remind himself that Graff was only acting like a friend, that everything he did was a lie or a cheat calculated to turn Ender into an efficient fighting machine. I'll become exactly the tool you want me to be, said Ender silently, but at least I won't be *fooled* into it. I'll do it because I choose to, not because you tricked me, you sly bastard.

The tug reached Eros before they could see it. The captain showed them the visual scan, then superimposed the heat scan on the same screen. They were practically on top of it -- only four thousand kilometers out -- but Eros, only twenty-four kilometers long, was invisible if it didn't shine with reflected sunlight.

The captain docked the ship on one of the three landing platforms that circled Eros. It could not land directly because Eros had enhanced gravity, and the tug, designed for towing eargos, could never escape the gravity well. He bade them an irritable goodbye, but Ender and Graff remained cheerful. The captain was bitter at having to leave his tug; Ender and Graff felt like prisoners finally paroled from jail. When they boarded the shuttle that would take them to the surface of Eros they repeated perverse misquotations of lines from the videos that the captain had endlessly watched, and laughed like madmen. The captain grew surly and withdrew by pretending to go to sleep. Then, almost as an afterthought, Ender asked Graff one last question.

"Why are we fighting the buggers?"

"I've heard all kinds of reasons," said Graff. "Because they have an overcrowded system and they've got to colonize. Because they can't stand the thought of other intelligent life in the universe. Because they don't think we are intelligent life. Because they have some weird religion. Because they watched our old video broadcasts and decided we were hopelessly violent. All kinds of reasons."

"What do you believe?"

"It doesn't matter what I believe."

"I want to know anyway."

"They must talk to each other directly, Ender, mind to mind. What one thinks, another can also think; what one remembers, another can also remember. Why would they ever develop language? Why would they ever learn to read and write? How would they know what reading and writing were if they saw them? Or signals? Or numbers? Or anything that we use to communicate? This isn't just a matter of translating from one language to another. They don't have a language at all. We used every means we could think of to communicate with them, but they don't even have the machinery to know we're signaling.

And maybe they've been trying to think to us, and they can't understand why we don't respond."

"So the whole war is because we can't talk to each other."

"If the other fellow can't tell you his story, you can never be sure he isn't trying to kill you."

"What if we just left them alone?"

"Ender, we didn't go to them first, they came to us. If they were going to leave us alone, they could have done it a hundred years ago, before the First Invasion."

"Maybe they didn't know we were intelligent life. Maybe--"

"Ender, believe me, there's a century of discussion on this very subject. Nobody knows the answer. When it comes down to it, though, the real decision is inevitable: if one of us has to be destroyed, let's make damn sure we're the ones alive at the end. Our genes won't let us decide any other way. Nature can't evolve a species that hasn't a will to survive. Individuals might be bred to sacrifice themselves, but the race as a whole can never decide to cease to exist. So if we can, we'll kill every last one of the buggers, and if they can they'll kill every last one of us."

"As for me," said Ender, "I'm in favor of surviving."

"I know," said Graff. "That's why you're here."

Chapter 14 -- Ender's Teacher

"Took your time, didn't you, Graff? The voyage isn't short, but the three month vacation seems excessive."

"I prefer not to deliver damaged merchandise."

"Some men simply have no sense of hurry. Oh well, it's only the fate of the world. Never mind me, You must understand our anxiety. We're here with the ansible, receiving constant reports of the progress of our starships. We have to face the coming war every day. If you can call them days. He's such a very *little* boy."

"There's greatness in him. A magnitude of spirit."

"A killer instinct, too, I hope."

"Yes."

"We've planned out an impromptu course of study for him. All subject to your approval, of course."

"I'll look at it. I don't pretend to know the subject matter, Admiral Chamrajnagar. I'm only here because I know Ender. So don't be afraid that I'll try to second guess the order of your presentation. Only the pace."

"How much can we tell him?"

"Don't waste his time on the physics of interstellar travel."

"What about the ansible?"

"I already told him about that, and the fleets. I said they would arrive at their destination within five years."

"It seems there's very little left for us to tell him."

"You can tell him about the weapons systems. He has to know enough to make intelligent decisions."

"Ah. We can be useful after all, how very kind, We've devoted one of the five simulators to his exclusive use."

"What about the others?"

"The other simulators?"

"The other children."

"You were brought here to take care of Ender Wiggin."

"Just curious. Remember, they were all my students at one time or another."

"And now they are all mine. They are entering into the mysteries of the fleet, Colonel Graff, to which you, as a soldier, have never been introduced."

"You make it sound like a priesthood."

"And a god. And a religion. Even those of us who command by ansible know the majesty of flight among the stars. I can see you find my mysticism distasteful. I assure you that your distaste only reveals your ignorance. Soon enough Ender Wiggin will also know what I know; he will dance the graceful ghost dance through the stars, and whatever greatness there is within him will be unlocked, revealed, set forth before the

universe far all to see. You have the soul of a stone, Colonel Graff, but I sing to a stone as easily as to another singer. You may go to your quarters and establish yourself."

"I have nothing to establish except the clothing I'm wearing."

"You own nothing?"

"They keep my salary in an account somewhere on Earth. I've never needed it. Except to buy civilian clothes on my vacation."

"A non-materialist. And yet you are unpleasantly fat. A gluttonous ascetic? Such a contradiction."

"When I'm tense, I eat. Whereas when you're tense, you spout solid waste."

"I like you, Colonel Graff. I think we shall get along."

"I don't much care, Admiral Chamrajnagar. I came here for Ender. And neither of us came here for you."

Ender hated Eros from the moment he shuttled down from the tug. He had been uncomfortable enough on Earth, where floors were flat; Eros was hopeless. It was a roughly spindle-shaped rock only six and a half kilometers thick at its narrowest point. Since the surface of the planet was entirely devoted to absorbing sunlight and converting it to energy, everyone lived in the smooth-walled rooms linked by tunnels that laced the interior of the asteroid. The closed-in space was no problem for Ender -- what bothered him was that all the tunnel floors noticeably sloped downward. From the start, Ender was plagued by vertigo as he walked through the tunnels, especially the ones that girdled Eros's narrow circumference. It did not help that gravity was only half of Earth-normal -- the illusion of being on the verge of falling was almost complete.

There was also something disturbing about the proportions of the rooms -- the ceilings were too low for the width, the tunnels too narrow. It was not a comfortable place.

Worst of all, though, was the number of people. Ender had no important memories of cities of Earth. His idea of a comfortable number of people was the Battle School, where he had known by sight every person who dwelt there. Here, though, ten thousand people lived within the rock. There was no crowding, despite the amount of space devoted to life support and other machinery. What bothered Ender was that he was constantly surrounded by strangers.

They never let him come to know anyone. He saw the other Command School students often, but since he never attended any class regularly, they remained only faces. He would attend a lecture here or there, but usually he was tutored by one teacher after

another, or occasionally helped to learn a process by another student, whom he met once and never saw again. He ate alone or with Colonel Graff. His recreation was in a gym, but he rarely saw the same people in it twice.

He recognized that they were isolating him again, this time not by setting the other students to hating him, but rather by giving them no opportunity to become friends. He could hardly have been close to most of them anyway -- except for Ender, the other students were all well into adolescence.

So Ender withdrew into his studies and learned quickly and well. Astrogation and military history he absorbed like water; abstract mathematics was more difficult, but whenever he was given a problem that involved patterns in space and time, he found that his intuition was more reliable than his calculation -- he often saw at once a solution that he could only prove after minutes or hours of manipulating numbers.

And for pleasure, there was the simulator, the most perfect videogame he had ever played. Teachers and students trained him, step by step, in its use. At first, not knowing the awesome power of the game, he had played only at the tactical level, controlling a single fighter in continuous maneuvers to find and destroy an enemy. The computer-controlled enemy was devious and powerful, and whenever Ender tried a tactic he found the computer using it against him within minutes.

The game was a holographic display, and his fighter was represented only by a tiny light. The enemy was another light of a different color, and they danced and spun and maneuvered through a cube of space that must have been ten meters to a side. The controls were powerful. He could rotate the display in any direction, so he could watch from any angle, and he could move the center so that the duel took place nearer or farther from him.

Gradually, as he became more adept at controlling the fighter's speed, direction of movement, orientation, and weapons, the game was made more complex. He might have two enemy ships at once; there might be obstacles, the debris of space; he began to have to worry about fuel and limited weapons; the computer began to assign him particular things to destroy or accomplish, so that he had to avoid distractions and achieve an objective in order to win.

When he had mastered the one-fighter game, they allowed him to step back into the four-fighter squadron. He spoke commands to simulated pilots of four fighters, and instead of merely carrying out the computer's instructions, he was allowed to determine tactics himself, deciding which of several objectives was the most valuable and directing his squadron accordingly. At any time he could take personal command of one of the fighters for a short time, and at first he did this often; when he did, however, the other three fighters in his squadron were soon destroyed, and as the games became harder and harder he had to spend more and more of his time commanding the squadron. When he did, he won more and more often.

By the time he had been at Command School for year, he was adept at running the simulator at any of fifteen levels, from controlling an individual fighter to commanding a fleet. He had long since realized that as the battleroom was to Battle School, so the simulator was to Command School. The classes were valuable, but the real education was the game. People dropped in from time to time to watch him play. They never spoke -- hardly anyone ever did, unless they had something specific to teach him. The watchers would stay, silently, watching him run through a difficult simulation, and then leave just as he finished. What are you doing, he wanted to ask. Judging me? Determining whether you want to trust the fleet to me? Just remember that I didn't ask for it.

He found that a great deal of what he learned at Battle School transferred to the simulator. He would routinely reorient the simulator every few minutes, rotating it so that he didn't get trapped into an up-down orientation, constantly reviewing his position from the enemy point of view. It was exhilarating at last to have such control over the battle, to be able to see every point of it.

It was also frustrating to have so little control, too, for the computer-controlled fighters were only as good as the computer allowed. They took no initiative. They had no intelligence. He began to wish for his toon leaders, so that he could count on some of the squadrons doing well without having his constant supervision.

At the end of his first year he was winning every battle on the simulator, and played the game as if the machine were a natural part of his body. One day, eating a meal with Graff, he asked, "Is that all the simulator does?"

"Is what all?"

"The way it plays now, It's easy, and it hasn't got any harder for a while."

"Oh."

Graff seemed unconcerned. But then, Graff always seemed unconcerned. The next day everything changed. Graff went away, and in his place they gave Ender a companion.

He was in the room when Ender awoke in the morning. He was an old man, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Ender looked at him expectantly, waiting for the man to speak. He said nothing. Ender got up and showered and dressed, content to let the man keep his silence if he wanted. He had long since learned that when something unusual was going on, something that was part of someone else's plan and not his own, he would find out more information by waiting than by asking. Adults almost always lost their patience before Ender did.

The man still hadn't spoken when Ender was ready and went to the door to leave the room. The door didn't open. Ender turned to face the man sitting on the floor. He looked

to be about sixty, by far the oldest man Ender had seen on Eros. He had a day's growth of white whiskers that grizzled his face only slightly less than his close-cut hair. His face sagged a little and his eyes were surrounded by creases and lines. He looked at Ender with an expression that bespoke only apathy.

Ender turned back to the door and tried again to open it.

"All right," he said, giving up. "Why's the door locked?"

The old man continued to look at him blankly.

So this is a game, thought Ender. Well, if they want me to go to class, they'll unlock the door. If they don't, they won't. I don't care.

Ender didn't like games where the rules could be anything and the objective was known to them alone. So he wouldn't play. He also refused to get angry. He went through a relaxing exercise as he leaned on the door, and soon he was calm again. The old man continued to watch him impassively.

It seemed to go on for hours, Ender refusing to speak, the old man seeming to be a mindless mute.

Sometimes Ender wondered if he were mentally ill, escaped from some medical ward somewhere in Eros, living out some insane fantasy here in Ender's room. But the longer it went on, with no one coming to the door, no one looking for him, the more certain he became that this was something deliberate, meant to disconcert him. Ender did not want to give the old man the victory. To pass the time he began to do exercises. Some were impossible without the gym equipment, but others, especially from his personal defense class, he could do without any aids.

The exercises moved him around the room. He was practicing lunges and kicks. One move took him near the old man, as he had come near him before, but this time the old claw shot out and seized Ender's left leg in the middle of a kick. It pulled Ender off his feet and landed him heavily on the floor.

Ender leapt to his feet immediately, furious. He found the old man sitting calmly, cross-legged, not breathing heavily, as if he had never moved. Ender stood poised to fight, but the other's immobility made it impossible for Ender to attack. What, kick the old man's head off? And then explain it to Graff -- oh, the old man kicked me, and I had to get even.

He went back to his exercises; the old man kept watching.

Finally, tired and angry at this wasted day, a prisoner in his room, Ender went back to his bed to get his desk. As he leaned over to pick up the desk, he felt a hand jab roughly between his thighs and another hand grab his hair. In a moment he had been turned

upside down. His face and shoulders were being pressed into the floor by the old man's knee, while his back was excruciatingly bent and his legs were pinioned by the old man's arm.

Ender was helpless to use his arms, he couldn't bend his back to gain slack so he could use his legs. In less than two seconds the old man had completely defeated Ender Wiggin.

"All right," Ender gasped. "You win."

The man's knee thrust painfully downward. "Since when," asked the man, his voice soft and rasping, "do you have to tell the enemy when he has won?"

Ender remained silent.

"I surprised you once, Ender Wiggin. Why didn't you destroy me immediately afterward? Just because I looked peaceful? You turned your back on me. Stupid. You have learned nothing. You have never had a teacher."

Ender was angry now, and made no attempt to control or conceal it. "I've had too many teachers, how was I supposed to know you'd turn out to be a--"

"An enemy, Ender Wiggin," whispered the old man. "I am your enemy, the first one you've ever had who was smarter than you. There is no teacher but the enemy. No one but the enemy will ever tell you what the enemy is going to do. No one but the enemy will ever teach you how to destroy and conquer. Only the enemy shows you where you are weak. Only the enemy tells you where he is strong. And the only rules of the game are what you can do to him and what you can stop him from doing to you. I am your enemy from now on. From now on I am your teacher."

Then the old man let Ender's legs fall. Because he still held Ender's head to the floor, the boy couldn't use his arms to compensate, and his legs hit the surface with a loud crack and a sickening pain. Then the old man stood and let Ender rise.

Slowly Ender pulled his legs under him, with a faint groan of pain. He knelt on all fours for a moment, recovering. Then his right arm flashed out, reaching for his enemy. The old man quickly danced back, and Ender's hand closed on air as his teacher's foot shot forward to catch Ender on the chin.

Ender's chin wasn't there. He was lying flat on his back, spinning on the floor, and during the moment that his teacher was off balance from his kick, Ender's feet smashed into the old man's other leg. He fell in a heap -- but close enough to strike out and hit Ender in the face. Ender couldn't find an arm or a leg that held still long enough to be grabbed, and in the meantime blows were landing on his back and arms. Ender was smaller -- he couldn't reach past the old man's flailing limbs. Finally he managed to pull away and scramble back near the door.

The old man was sitting cross-legged again, but now the apathy was gone. He was smiling. "Better, this time, boy. But slow. You will have to be better with a fleet than you are with your body or no one will be safe with you in command. Lesson learned?"

Ender nodded slowly. He ached in a hundred places.

"Good," said the old man. "Then we'll never have to have such a battle again. All the rest with the simulator. I will program your battles now, not the computer; I will devise the strategy of your enemy, and you will learn to be quick and discover what tricks the enemy has for you. Remember, boy. From now on the enemy is more clever than you. From now on the enemy is stronger than you. From now on you are always about to lose."

The old man's face grew serious again. "You will be about to lose, Ender, but you will win. You will learn to defeat the enemy. He will teach you how."

The teacher got up. "In this school, it has always been the practice for a young student to be chosen by an older student. The two become companions, and the older boy teaches the younger one everything he knows. Always they fight, always they compete, always they are together. I have chosen you."

Ender spoke as the old man walked to the door. "You're too old to be a student."

"One is never too old to be a student of the enemy. I have learned from the buggers. You will learn from me."

As the old man palmed the door open, Ender leaped into the air and kicked him in the small of the back with both feet. He hit hard enough that he rebounded onto his feet, as the old man cried out and collapsed on the floor.

The old man got up slowly, holding onto the door handle, his face contorted with pain. He seemed disabled, but Ender didn't trust him. Yet in spite of his suspicion, he was caught off guard by the old man's speed. In a moment he found himself on the floor near the opposite wall, his nose and lip bleeding where his face had hit the bed. He was able to turn enough to see the old man standing in the doorway, wincing and holding his back. The old man grinned.

Ender grinned back. "Teacher," he said. "Do you have a name?"

"Mazer Rackham," said the old man. Then he was gone.

From then on, Ender was either with Mazer Rackham or alone. The old man rarely spoke, but he was there; at meals, at tutorials, at the simulator, in his room at night. Sometimes Mazer would leave, but always, when Mazer wasn't there, the door was

locked, and no one came until Mazer returned. Ender went through a week in which he called him Jailor Rackham, Mazer answered to the name as readily as to his own, and showed no sign that it bothered him at all. Ender soon gave it up.

There were compensations -- Mazer took Ender through the videos of the old battles from the First Invasion and the disastrous defeats of the IF in the Second Invasion. These were not pieced together from the censored public videos, but whole and continuous. Since many videos were working in the major battles, they studied bugger tactics and strategies from many angles. For the first time in his life, a teacher was pointing out things that Ender had not already seen for himself. For the first time, Ender had found a living mind he could admire.

"Why aren't you dead?" Ender asked him. "You fought your battle seventy years ago. I don't think you're even sixty years old."

"The miracles of relativity," said Mazer. "They kept me here for twenty years after the battle, even though I begged them to let me command one of the starships they launched against the bugger home planet and the bugger colonies. Then they -- came to understand some things about the way soldiers behave in the stress of battle."

"What things?"

"You've never been taught enough psychology to understand. Enough to say that they realized that even though I would never be able to command the fleet -- I'd be dead before the fleet even arrived -- I was still the only person able to understand the things I understood about the buggers. I was, they realized, the only person who had ever defeated the buggers by intelligence rather than luck. They needed me here to teach the person who *could* command the fleet."

"So they sent you out in a starship, got you up to a relativistic speed--"

"And then I turned around and came home. A very dull voyage, Ender. Fifty years in space. Officially, only eight years passed for me, but it felt like five hundred. All so I could teach the next commander everything I knew."

"Am I to be the commander, then?"

"Let's say that you're our best bet at present."

"There are others being prepared, too?"

"No."

"That makes me the only choice, then, doesn't it?"

Mazer shrugged.

"Except you. You're still alive, aren't you? Why not you?"

Mazer shook his head.

"Why not? You won before."

"I cannot be the commander for good and sufficient reasons."

"Show me how you beat the buggers, Mazer."

Mayer's face went inscrutable.

"You've shown me every other battle seven times at least. I think I've seen ways to beat what the buggers did before, but you've never shown me how you actually did beat them."

"The video is a very tightly kept secret, Ender."

"I know. I've pieced it together, partly. You, with your tiny reserve force, and their armada, those great big heavy-bellied starships launching their swarms of fighters. You dart in at one ship, fire at it, an explosion. That's where they always stop the clips. After that, it's just soldiers going into bugger ships and already finding them dead inside."

Mazer grinned. "So much for tightly kept secrets. Come on, let's watch the video."

They were alone in the video room, and Ender palmed the door locked. "All right, let's watch."

The video showed exactly what Ender had pieced together. Mazer's suicidal plunge into the heart of the enemy formation, the single explosion, and then--

Nothing. Mazer's ship went on, dodged the shock wave, and wove his way among the other bugger ships. They did not fire on him. They did not change course. Two of them crashed into each other and exploded a needless collision that either pilot could have avoided. Neither made the slightest movement.

Mazer sped up the action. Skipped ahead. "We waited for three hours," he said. "Nobody could believe it." Then the IF ships began approaching the bugger starships. Marines began their cutting and boarding operations. The videos showed the buggers already dead at their posts.

"So you see," said Mazer, "you already knew all there was to see."

"Why did it happen?"

"Nobody knows. I have my personal opinions. But there are plenty of scientists who tell me I'm less than qualified to have opinions."

"You're the one who won the battle."

"I thought that qualified me to comment, too, but you know how it is. Xenobiologists and xenopsychologists can't accept the idea that a starpilot scooped them by sheer guesswork. I think they all hate me because, after they saw these videos, they had to live out the rest of their natural lives here on Eros. Security, you know. They weren't happy."

"Tell me."

"The buggers don't talk. They think to each other, and it's instantaneous like the phlotic effect. Like the ansible. But most people always thought that meant a controlled communication like language -- I think you a thought and then you answer me. I never believed that. It's too immediate, the way they respond together to things. You've seen the videos. They aren't conversing and deciding among possible courses of action. Every ship acts like part of a single organism. It responds the way your body responds during combat, different parts automatically, thoughtlessly doing everything they're supposed to do. They aren't having a mental conversation between people with different thought processes. All their thoughts are present, together, at once."

"A single person, and each bugger is like a hand or a foot?"

"Yes. I wasn't the first person to suggest it, but I was the first person to believe it. And something else. Something so childish and stupid that the xenobiologists laughed me to silence when I said it after the battle. The buggers are bugs. They're like ants and bees. A queen, the workers. That was maybe a hundred million years ago, but that's how they started, that kind of pattern. It's a sure thing none of the buggers we saw had any way of making more little buggers. So when they evolved this ability to think together, wouldn't they still keep the queen? Wouldn't the queen still be the center of the group? Why would that ever change?"

"So it's the queen who controls the whole group."

"I had evidence, too. Not evidence that any of them could see. It wasn't there in the First Invasion, because that was exploratory. But the Second Invasion was a colony. To set up a new hive, or whatever."

"And so they brought a queen."

"The videos of the Second Invasion, when they were destroying our fleets out in the comet shell." He began to call them up and display the buggers' patterns. "Show me the queen's ship."

It was subtle. Ender couldn't see it for a long time. The bugger ships kept moving, all of them. There was no obvious flagship, no apparent nerve center. But gradually, as Mazer played the videos over and over again, Ender began to see the way that all the movements focused on, radiated from a center point. The center point shifted, but it was obvious, after he looked long enough, that the eyes of the fleet, the *I* of the fleet, the perspective from which all decisions were being made, was one particular ship. He pointed it out.

"You see it. I see it. That makes two people out of all of those who have seen this video. But it's true, isn't it."

"They make that ship move just like any other ship."

"They know it's their weak point."

"But you're right. That's the queen. But then you'd think that when you went for it, they would have immediately focused all their power on you. They could have blown you out of the sky."

"I know. That part I don't understand. Not that they didn't try to stop me -- they were firing at me. But it's as if they really couldn't believe, until it was too late, that I would actually kill the queen. Maybe in their world, queens are never killed, only captured, only checkmated. I did something they didn't think an enemy would ever do."

"And when she died vhe others all died,"

"No, they just went stupid. The first ships we boarded, the buggers were still alive. Organically. But they didn't move, didn't respond to anything, even when our scientists vivisected some of them to see if we could learn a few more things about buggers. After a while they all died. No will. There's nothing in those little bodies when the queen is gone."

"Why don't they believe you?"

"Because we didn't find a queen."

"She got blown to pieces."

"Fortunes of war. Biology takes second place to survival. But some of them are coming around to my way of thinking. You can't live in this place without the evidence staring you in the face."

"What evidence is there in Eros?"

"Ender, look around you. Human beings didn't carve this place. We like taller ceilings, for one thing. This was the buggers' advance post in the First Invasion. They carved this place out before we even knew they were here. We're living in a bugger hive. But we

already paid our rent. It cost the marines a thousand lives to clear them out of these honeycombs, room by room. The buggers fought for every meter of it."

Now Ender understood why the rooms had always felt wrong to him. "I knew this wasn't a human place."

"This was the treasure trove. If they had known we would win that first war, they probably' would never have built this place. We learned gravity manipulation because they enhanced the gravity here. We learned efficient use of stellar energy because they blacked out this planet. In fact, that's how we discovered them. In a period of three days, Eros gradually disappeared from telescopes. We sent a tug to find out why. It found out. The tug transmitted its videos, including the buggers boarding and slaughtering the crew. It kept right on transmitting through the entire bugger examination of the boat. Not until they finally dismantled the entire tug did the transmissions stop. It was their blindness -- they never had to transmit anything by machine, and so with the crew dead, it didn't occur to them that anybody could be watching."

"Why did they kill the crew?"

"Why not? To them, losing a few crew members would be like clipping your nails. Nothing to get upset about. They probably thought they were routinely shutting down our communications by turning off the workers running the tug. Not murdering living, sentient beings with an independent genetic future. Murder's no big deal to them. Only queen-killing, really, is murder, because only queen-killing closes off a genetic path."

"So they didn't know what they were doing."

"Don't start apologizing for them, Ender. Just because they didn't know they were killing human beings doesn't mean they weren't killing human beings. We do have a right to defend ourselves as best we can, and the only way we found that works is killing the buggers before they kill us. Think of it this way. In all the bugger wars so far, they've killed thousands and thousands of living, thinking beings. And in all those wars, we've killed only one."

"If you hadn't killed the queen, Mazer, would we have lost the war?"

"I'd say the odds would have been three to two against us. I still think I could have trashed their fleet pretty badly before they burned us out. They have great response time and a lot of firepower, but we have a few advantages, too. Every single one of our ships contains an intelligent human being who's thinking on his own. Every one of us is capable of coming up with a brilliant solution to a problem. They can only come up with one brilliant solution at a time. The buggers think fast, but they aren't smart all over. Even when some incredibly timid and stupid commanders lost the major battles of the Second Invasion, some of their subordinates were able to do real damage to the bugger fleet."

"What about when our invasion reaches them? Will we just get the queen again?"

"The buggers didn't learn interstellar travel by being dumb. That was a strategy that could work only once. I suspect that we'll never get near a queen unless we actually make it to their home planet. After all, the queen doesn't have to be with them to direct a battle. The queen only has to be present to have little baby buggers. The Second invasion was a colony -- the queen was coming to populate the Earth. But this time -- no, that won't work. We'll have to beat them fleet by fleet. And because they have the resources of dozens of star systems to draw on, my guess is they'll outnumber us by a lot, in every battle."

Ender remembered his battle against two armies at once. And I thought they were cheating. When the real war begins, it'll be like that every time. And there won't be any gate I can go for.

"We've only got two things going for us, Ender. We don't have to aim particularly well. Our weapons have great spread."

"Then we aren't using the nuclear missiles from the First and Second Invasions?"

"Dr. Device is much more powerful. Nuclear weapons, after all, were weak enough to be used on Earth at one time. The Little Doctor could never be used on a planet. Still, I wish I'd had one during the Second Invasion."

"How does it work?"

"I don't know, not well enough to build one. At the focal point of two beams, it sets up a field in which molecules can't hold together anymore. Electrons can't be shared. How much physics do you know, at that level?"

"We spend most of our time on astrophysics, but I know enough to get the idea."

"The field spreads out in a sphere, but it gets weaker the farther it spreads. Except that where it actually runs into a lot of molecules, it gets stronger and starts over. The bigger the ship, the stronger the new field."

"So each time the field hits a ship, it sends out a new sphere--"

"And if their ships are too close together, it can set up a chain that wipes them all out. Then the field dies down, the molecules come back together, and where you had a ship, you now have a lump of dirt with a lot of iron molecules in it. No radioactivity, no mess. Just dirt. We may be able to trap them close together on the first battle, but they learn fast. They'll keep their distance from each other."

"So Dr. Device isn't a missile -- I can't shoot around corners."

"That's right. Missiles wouldn't do any good now. We learned a lot from them in the First Invasion, but they also learned from us -- how to set up the Ecstatic Shield, for instance."

"The Little Doctor penetrates the shield?"

"As if it weren't there. You can't see through the shield to aim and focus the beams, but since the generator of the Ecstatic Shield is always in the exact center, it isn't hard to figure it out."

"Why haven't I ever been trained with this?"

"You always have. We just let the computer tend to it for you. Your job is to get into a superior strategic position and choose a target. The shipboard computers are much better at aiming the Doctor than you are."

"Why is it called Dr. Device?"

"When it was developed, it was called a Molecular Detachment Device. M.D. Device."

Ender still didn't understand.

"M.D. The initials stand for Medical Doctor, too. M.D. Device, therefore Dr. Device. It was a joke." Ender didn't see what was funny about it.

They had changed the simulator. He could still control the perspective and the degree of detail, but there were no ship's controls anymore. Instead, it was a new panel of levers, and a small headset with earphones and a small microphone.

The technician who was waiting there quickly explained how to wear the headset.

"But how do I control the ships?" asked Ender.

Mazer explained. He wasn't going to control ships anymore. "You've reached the next phase of your training. You have experience in every level of strategy, but now it's time for you to concentrate on commanding an entire fleet. As you worked with toon leaders in Battle School, so now you will work with squadron leaders. You have been assigned three dozen such leaders to train. You must teach them intelligent tactics; you must learn their strengths and limitations; you must make them into a whole."

"When will they come here?"

"They're already in place in their own simulators. You will speak to them through the headset. The new levers on your control panel enable you to see from the perspective of

any of your squadron leaders. This more closely duplicates the conditions you might encounter in a real battle, where you will only know what your ships can see."

"How can I work with squadron leaders I never see?"

"And why would you need to see them?"

"To know who they are, how they think--"

"You'll learn who they are and how they think from the way they work with the simulator. But even so, I think you won't be concerned. They're listening to you right now. Put on the headset so you can hear them."

Ender put on the headset.

"Salaam," said a whisper in his ears.

"Alai," said Ender.

"And me, the dwarf."

"Bean."

And Petra, and Dink; Crazy Tom, Shen, Hot Soup, Fly Molo, all the best students Ender had fought with or fought against, everyone that Ender had trusted in Battle School. "I didn't know you were here," he said, "I didn't know you were coming."

"They've been flogging us through the simulator for three months now," said Dink.

"You'll find that I'm by far the best tactician," said Petra. "Dink tries, but he has the mind of a child."

So they began working together, each squadron leader commanding individual pilots, and Ender commanding the squadron leaders. They learned many ways of working together, as the simulator forced them to try different situations. Sometimes the simulator gave them a larger fleet to work with; Ender set them up then in three or four toons that consisted of three or four squadrons each. Sometimes the simulator gave them a single starship with its twelve fighters, and he chose three squadron leaders with four fighters each.

It was pleasure; it was play. The computer-controlled enemy was none too bright, and they always won despite their mistakes, their miscommunications. But in the three weeks they practiced together, Ender came to know them very well. Dink, who deftly carried out instructions but was slow to improvise; Bean, who couldn't control large groups of ships effectively but could use only a few like a scalpel, reacting beautifully to anything

the computer threw at him; Alai, who was almost as good a strategist as Ender and could be entrusted to do well with half a fleet and only vague instructions.

The better Ender knew them, the faster he could deploy them, the better he could use them. The simulator would display the situation on the screen. In that moment Ender learned for the first time what his own fleet would consist of and how the enemy fleet was deployed. It took him only a few minutes now to call for the squadron leaders that he needed, assign them to certain ships or groups of ships, and give them their assignments. Then, as the battle progressed, he would skip from one leader's point of view to another's, making suggestions and, occasionally, giving orders as the need arose. Since the others could only see their own battle perspective, he would sometimes give them orders that made no sense to them; but they, too, learned to trust Ender. If he told them to withdraw, they withdrew, knowing that either they were in an exposed position, or their withdrawal might entice the enemy into a weakened posture. They also knew that Ender trusted them to do as they judged best when he gave them no orders. If their style of fighting were not right for the situation they were placed in, Ender would not have chosen them for that assignment.

The trust was complete, the working of the fleet quick and responsive. And at the end of three weeks, Mazer showed him a replay of their most recent battle, only this time from the enemy's point of view.

"This is what he saw as you attacked. What does it remind you of? The quickness of response, for instance?"

"We look like a bugger fleet."

"You match them, Ender. You're as fast as they are. And here -- look at this."

Ender watched as all his squadrons moved at once, each responding to its own situation, all guided by Ender's overall command, but daring, improvising, feinting, attacking with an independence no bugger fleet had ever shown.

"The bugger hive-mind is very good, but it can only concentrate on a few things at once. All your squadrons can concentrate a keen intelligence on what they're doing, and what they've been assigned to do is also guided by a clever mind. So you see that you do have some advantages. Superior, though not irresistible, weaponry; comparable speed and greater available intelligence. These are your advantages. Your disadvantage is that you will always, always be outnumbered, and after each battle your enemy will learn more about you, how to fight you, and those changes will be put into effect instantly."

Ender waited for his conclusion.

"So, Ender, we will now begin your education. We have programmed the computer to simulate the kinds of situations we might expect in encounters with the enemy. We are using the movement patterns we saw in the Second Invasion. But instead of mindlessly

following these same patterns, I will be controlling the enemy simulation. At first you will see easy situations that you are expected to win handily. Learn from them, because I will always be there, one step ahead of you, programming more difficult and advanced patterns into the computer so that your next battle is more difficult, so that you are pushed to the limit of your abilities."

"And beyond?"

"The time is short. You must learn as quickly as you can. When I gave myself to starship travel, just so I would still be alive when you appeared, my wife and children all died, and my grandchildren were my own age when I came back. I had nothing to say to them. I was cut off from all the people that I loved, everything I knew, living in this alien catacomb and forced to do nothing of importance but teach student after student, each one so hopeful, each one, ultimately, a weakling, a failure. I teach, I teach, but no one learns. You, too, have great promise, like so many students before you, but the seeds of failure may be in you, too. It's my job to find them, to destroy you if I can, and believe me, Ender, if you can be destroyed I can do it."

"So I'm not the first."

"No, of course you're not. But you're the last. If you don't learn, there'll be no time to find anyone else. So I have hope for you, only because you are the only one left to hope for."

"What about the others? My squadron leaders?"

"Which of them is fit to take your place?"

"Alai."

"Be honest."

Ender had no answer, then.

"I am not a happy man, Ender. Humanity does not ask us to be happy. It merely asks us to be brilliant on its behalf. Survival first, then happiness as we can manage it. So, Ender, I hope you do not bore me during your training with complaints that you are not having fun. Take what pleasure you can in the interstices of your work, but your work is first, learning is first, winning is everything because without it there is nothing. When you can give me back my dead wife, Ender, then you can complain to me about what this education costs you."

"I wasn't trying to get out of anything."

"But you will, Ender. Because I am going to grind you down to dust, if I can. I'm going to hit you with everything I can imagine, and I will have no mercy, because when you

face the buggers they will think of things I can't imagine, and compassion for human beings is impossible for them."

"You can't grind me down, Mazer."

"Oh, can't I?"

"Because I'm stronger than you."

Mazer smiled. "We'll see about that, Ender."

Mazer wakened him before morning; the clock said 0340, and Ender felt groggy as he padded along the corridor behind Mazer. "Early to bed and early to rise," Mazer intoned, "makes a man stupid and blind in the eyes."

He had been dreaming that buggers were vivisectioning him. Only instead of cutting open his body, they were cutting up his memories and displaying them like holographs and trying to make sense of them. It was a very odd dream, and Ender couldn't easily shake loose of it, even as he walked through the tunnels to the simulator room. The buggers tormented him in his sleep, and Mazer wouldn't leave him alone when he was awake. Between the two of them he had no rest. Ender forced himself awake. Apparently Mazer meant it when he said he meant to break Ender down -- and forcing him to play when tired and sleepy was just the sort of cheap and easy trick Ender should have expected. Well, today it wouldn't work.

He got to the simulator and found his squadron leaders already on the wire, waiting for him. There was no enemy yet, so he divided them into two armies and began a mock battle, commanding both sides so he could control the test that each of his leaders was going through. They began slowly, but soon were vigorous and alert.

Then the simulator field went blank, the ships disappeared, and everything changed at once. At the near edge of the simulator field they could see the shapes, drawn in holographic light, of three starships from the human fleet. Each would have twelve fighters. The enemy, obviously aware of the human presence, had formed a globe with a single ship at the center. Ender was not fooled -- it would not be a queen ship. The buggers outnumbered Ender's fighter force by two to one, but they were also grouped much closer together than they should have been -- Dr. Device would be able to do much more damage than the enemy expected.

Ender selected one starship, made it blink in the simulator field, and spoke into the microphone. "Alai, this is yours; assign Petra and Vlad to the fighters as you wish." He assigned the other two starships with their fighter forces, except for one fighter from each starship that he reserved for Bean. "Slip the wall and get below them, Bean, unless they start chasing you -- then run back to the reserves for safety. Otherwise, get in a place

where I can call on you for quick results. Alai, form your force into a compact assault at one point in their globe. Don't fire until I tell you. This is maneuver only."

"This one's easy, Ender," Alai said.

"It's easy, so why not be careful? I'd like to do this without the loss of a single ship."

Ender grouped his reserves in two forces that shadowed Aiai at a safe distance; Bean was already off the simulator, though Ender occasionally flipped to Bean's point of view to keep track of where he was.

It was Alai, however, who played the delicate game with the enemy. He was in a bullet-shaped formation, and probed the enemy globe. Wherever he came near, the bugger ships pulled back, as if to draw him in toward the ship in the center, Alai skimmed to the side; the bugger ships kept up with him, withdrawing wherever he was close, returning to the sphere pattern when he had passed.

Feint, withdraw, skim the globe to another point, withdraw again, feint again; and then Ender said "Go on in, Alai."

His bullet started in, while he said to Ender, "You know they'll just let me through and surround me and eat me alive."

"Just ignore that ship in the middle."

"Whatever you say, boss."

Sure enough, the globe began to contract, Ender brought the reserves forward: the enemy ships concentrated on the side of the globe nearer the reserves. "Attack them there, where they're most concentrated," Ender said.

"This defies four thousand years of military history," said Alai, moving his fighters forward. "We're supposed to attack where we outnumber them."

"In this simulation they obviously don't know what our weapons can do. It'll only work once, but let's make it spectacular. Fire at will."

Alai did. The simulation responded beautifully: first one or two, then a dozen, then most of the enemy ships exploded in dazzling light as the field leapt from ship to ship in the tight formation. "Stay out of the way," Ender said.

The ships on the far side of the globe formation were not affected by the chain reaction, but it was a simple matter hunting them down and destroying them. Bean took care of stragglers that tried to escape toward his end of space -- the battle was over. It had been easier than most of their recent exercises.

Mazer shrugged when Ender told him so. "This is a simulation of a real invasion. There had to be one battle in which they didn't know what we could do. Now your work begins. Try not to be too arrogant about the victory. I'll give you the real challenges soon enough."

Ender practiced ten hours a day with his squadron leaders, but not all at once; he gave them a few hours in the afternoon to rest. Simulated battles under Mazer's supervision came every two or three days, and as Mazer had promised, they were never so easy again. The enemy quickly abandoned its attempt to surround Ender, and never again grouped its forces closely enough to allow a chain reaction. There was something new every time, something harder. Sometimes Ender had only a single starship and eight fighters; once the enemy dodged through an asteroid belt; sometimes the enemy left stationary traps, large installations that blew up if Ender brought one of his squadrons too close, often crippling or destroying some of Ender's ships. "You cannot absorb losses!" Mazer shouted at him after one battle. "When you get into a real battle you won't have the luxury of an infinite supply of computer-generated fighters. You'll have what you brought with you and nothing more. Now get used to fighting without unnecessary waste."

"It wasn't unnecessary waste, Ender said. "I can't win battles if I'm so terrified of losing a ship that I never take any risks."

Mazer smiled. "Excellent, Ender. You're beginning to learn. But in a real battle, you would have superior officers and, worst of all, civilians shouting those things at you. Now, if the enemy had been at all bright, they would have caught you here, and taken Tom's squadron." Together they went over the battle; in the next practice, Ender would show his leaders what Mazer had shown him, and they'd learn to cope with it the next time they saw it.

They thought they had been ready before, that they had worked smoothly together as a team. Now, though, having fought through real challenges together, they all began to trust each other more than ever, and battles became exhilarating. They told Ender that the ones who weren't actually playing would come into the simulator rooms and watch. Ender imagined what it would be like to have his friends there with him, cheering or laughing or gasping with apprehension; sometimes he thought it would be a great distraction, but other times he wished for it with all his heart. Even when he had spent his days lying out in the sunlight on a raft in a lake, he had not been so lonely. Mazer Rackham was his companion, was his teacher, but was not his friend.

He said nothing, though. Mazer had told him there would be no pity, and his private unhappiness meant nothing to anyone. Most of the time it meant nothing even to Ender. He kept his mind on the game, trying to learn from the battles. And not just the particular lessons of that battle, but what the buggers might have done if they had been more clever, and how Ender would react if they did it in the future. He lived with past battles and future battles both, waking and sleeping, and he drove his squadron leaders with an intensity that occasionally provoked rebelliousness.

"You're too kind to us," said Alai one day. "Why don't you get annoyed with us for not being brilliant every moment of every practice. If you keep coddling us like this we'll think you like us."

Some of the others laughed into their microphones. Ender recognized the irony, of course, and answered with a long silence. When he finally spoke, he ignored Alai's complaint. "Again," he said, "and this time without self-pity." They did it again, and did it right.

But as their trust in Ender as a commander grew, their friendship, remembered from the Battle School days, gradually disappeared. It was to each other that they became close; it was with each other that they exchanged confidences. Ender was their teacher and commander, as distant from them as Mazer was from him, and as demanding.

They fought all the better for it. And Ender was not distracted from his work.

At least, not while he was awake. As he drifted off to sleep each night, it was with thoughts of the simulator playing through his mind. But in the night he thought of other things. Often he remembered the corpse of the Giant, decaying steadily; he did not remember it, though, in the pixels of the picture on his desk. Instead it was real, the faint odor of death still lingering near it. Things were changed in his dreams. The little village that had grown up between the Giant's ribs was composed of buggers now, and they saluted him gravely, like gladiators greeting Caesar before they died for his entertainment. He did not hate the buggers in his dream; and even though he knew that they had hidden their queen from him, he did not try to search for her. He always left the Giant's body quickly, and when he got to the playground, the children were always there, wolveren and mocking; they wore faces that he knew. Sometimes Peter and sometimes Bonzo, sometimes Stilson and Bernard; just as often, though, the savage creatures were Alai and Shen, Dink and Petra; sometimes one of them would be Valentine, and in his dream he also shoved her under the water and waited for her to drown. She writhed in his hands, fought to come up, but at last was still. He dragged her out of the lake and onto the raft, where she lay with her face in the rictus of death, he screamed and wept over her, crying again and again that it was a game, a game. he was only playing!--

Then Mazer Rackharn shook him awake. "You were calling out in your sleep," he said.

"Sorry," Ender said.

"Never mind. It's time for another battle."

Steadily the pace increased. There were usually two battles a day now, and Ender held practices to a minimum. He would use the time while the others rested to pore over the replays of past games, trying to spot his own weaknesses, trying to guess what would happen next. Sometimes he was fully prepared for the enemy's innovations; sometimes he was not.

"I think you're cheating," Ender told Mazer one day,

"Oh?"

"You can observe my practice sessions. You can see what I'm working on. You seem to be ready for everything I do."

"Most of what you see is computer simulations," Mazer said. "The computer is programmed to respond to your innovations only after you use them once in battle."

"Then the computer is cheating."

"You need to get more sleep, Ender."

But he could not sleep. He lay awake longer and longer each night, and his sleep was less restful. He woke too often in the night. Whether he was waking up to think more about the game or to escape from his dreams, he wasn't sure. It was as if someone rode him in his sleep, forcing him to wander through his worst memories, to live in them again as if they were real. Nights were so real that days began to seem dreamlike to him. He began to worry that he would not think clearly enough, that he would be too tired when he played. Always when the game began, the intensity of it awoke him, but if his mental abilities began to slip, he wondered, would he notice it?

And he seemed to be slipping. He never had a battle anymore in which he did not lose at least a few fighters. Several times the enemy was able to trick him into exposing more weakness than he meant to; other times the enemy was able to wear him down by attrition until his victory was as much a matter of luck as strategy. Mazer would go over the game with a look of contempt on his face. "Look at this," he would say. "You didn't have to do this." And Ender would return to practice with his leaders, trying to keep up their morale, but sometimes letting slip his disappointment with their weaknesses, the fact that they made mistakes.

"Sometimes we make mistakes," Petra whispered to him once. It was a plea for help.

"And sometimes we don't," Ender answered her. If she got help, it would not be from him. He would teach; let her find her friends among the others.

Then came a battle that nearly ended in disaster. Petra led her force too far; they were exposed, and she discovered it in a moment when Ender wasn't with her. In only a few moments she had lost all but two of her ships.

Ender found her then, ordered her to move them in a certain direction; she didn't answer. There was no movement. And in a moment those two fighters, too, would be lost.

Ender knew at once that he had pushed her too hard because of her brilliance -- he had called on her to play far more often and under much more demanding circumstances than

all but a few of the others. But he had no time now to worry about Petra, or to feel guilty about what he had done to her. He called on Crazy Tom to command the two remaining fighters, then went on, trying to salvage the battle; Petra had occupied a key position, and now all of Ender's strategy came apart. If the enemy had not been too eager and clumsy at exploiting their advantage, Ender would have lost. But Shen was able to catch a group of the enemy in too tight a formation and took them out with a single chain reaction. Crazy Tom brought his two surviving fighters in through the gap and caused havoc with the enemy, and though his ships and Shen's as well were finally destroyed, Fly Molo was able to mop up and complete the victory.

At the end of the battle, he could hear Petra crying out, trying to get a microphone, "Tell him I'm sorry, I was just so tired, I couldn't think, that was all, tell Ender I'm sorry."

She was not there for the next few practices, and when she did come back she was not as quick as she had been, not as daring. Much of what had made her a good commander was lost. Ender couldn't use her anymore, except in routine, closely supervised assignments. She was no fool. She knew what had happened. But she also knew that Ender had no other choice, and told him so.

The fact remained that she had broken, and she was far from being the weakest of his squad leaders. It was a warning -- he could not press his commanders more than they could bear. Now, instead of using his leaders whenever he needed their skills, he had to keep in mind how often they had fought. He had to spell them off, which meant that sometimes he went into battle with commanders he trusted a little less. As he eased the pressure on them, he increased the pressure on himself.

Late one night he woke up in pain. There was blood on his pillow, the taste of blood in his mouth. His fingers were throbbing. He saw that in his sleep he had been gnawing on his own fist. The blood was still flowing smoothly. "Mazer!" he called. Rackham woke up and called at once for a doctor.

As the doctor treated the wound, Mazer said, "I don't care how much you eat, Ender, self-cannibalism won't get you out of this school."

"I was asleep," Ender said. "I don't want to get out of Command School."

"Good."

"The others. The ones who didn't make it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Before me. Your other students, who didn't make it through the training. What happened to them?"

"They didn't make it. That's all. We don't punish the ones who fail. They just -- don't go on."

"Like Bonzo."

"Bonzo?"

"He went home."

"Not like Bonzo."

"What then? What happened to them? When they failed?"

"Why does it matter, Ender?"

Ender didn't answer.

"None of them failed at this point in their course, Ender. You made a mistake with Petra. She'll recover. But Petra is Petra, and you are you."

"Part of what I am is her. Is what she made me."

"You won't fail, Ender. Not this early in the course. You've had some tight ones, but you've always won. You don't know what your limits are yet, but if you've reached them already you're a good deal feebler than I thought."

"Do they die?"

"Who?"

"The ones who fail."

"No, they don't die. Good heavens, boy, you're playing games."

"I think that Bonzo died. I dreamed about it last night. I remembered the way he looked after I jammed his face with my head. I think I must have pushed his nose back into his brain. The blood was coming out of his eyes. I think he was dead right then."

"It was just a dream."

"Mazer, I don't want to keep dreaming these things. I'm afraid to sleep. I keep thinking of things that I don't want to remember. My whole life keeps playing out as if I were a recorder and someone else wanted to watch the most terrible parts of my life."

"We can't drug you if that's what you're hoping for. I'm sorry if you have bad dreams. Should we leave the light on at night?"

"Don't make fun of me!" Ender said. "I'm afraid I'm going crazy."

The doctor was finished with the bandage. Mazer told him he could go. He went.

"Are you really afraid of that?" Mazer asked.

Ender thought about it and wasn't sure.

"In my dreams," said Ender, "I'm never sure whether I'm really me."

"Strange dreams are a safety valve, Ender. I'm putting you under a little pressure for the first time in your life. Your body is finding ways to compensate, that's all. You're a big boy now. It's time to stop being afraid of the night."

"All right," Ender said. He decided then that he would never tell Mazer about his dreams again.

The days wore on, with battles every day, until at last Ender settled into the routine of the destruction of himself. He began to have pains in his stomach. They put him on a bland diet, but soon he didn't have an appetite for anything at all. "Eat," Mazer said, and Ender would mechanically put food in his mouth. But if nobody told him to eat, he didn't eat.

Two more of his squadron leaders collapsed the way that Petra had; the pressure on the rest became all the greater. The enemy outnumbered them by three or four to one in every battle now; the enemy also retreated more readily when things went badly, regrouping to keep the battle going longer and longer. Sometimes battles lasted for hours before they finally destroyed the last enemy ship. Ender began rotating his squadron leaders within the same battle, bringing in fresh and rested ones to take the place of those who were beginning to get sluggish.

"You know," said Bean one time, as he took over command of Hot Soup's four remaining fighters, "this game isn't quite as fun as it used to be."

Then one day in practice, as Ender was drilling his squadron leaders, the room went black and he woke up on the floor with his face bloody where he had hit the controls.

They put him to bed then, and for three days he was very ill. He remembered seeing faces in his dreams, but they weren't real faces, and he knew it even while he thought he saw them. He thought he saw Valentine sometimes, and sometimes Peter; sometimes his friends from the Battle School, and sometimes the buggers vivisecting him. Once it seemed very real when he saw Colonel Graff bending over him speaking softly to him, like a kind father. But then he woke up and found only his enemy, Mazer Rackham.

"I'm awake," said Ender.

"So I see," Mazer answered. "Took you long enough. You have a battle today."

So Ender got up and fought the battle and won it. But there was no second battle that day, and they let him go to bed earlier. His hands were shaking as he undressed.

During the night he thought he felt hands touching him gently. Hands with affection in them, and gentleness. He dreamed he heard voices.

"You haven't been kind to him."

"That wasn't the assignment."

"How long can he go on? He's breaking down."

"Long enough. It's nearly finished."

"So soon?"

"A few days, and then he's through."

"How will he do, when he's already like this?"

"Fine. Even today, he fought better than ever."

In his dream, the voices sounded like Colonel Graff and Mazer Rackham. But that was the way dreams were, the craziest things could happen, because he dreamed he heard one of the voices saying, "I can't bear to see what this is doing to him." And the other voice answered, "I know. I love him too." And then they changed into Valentine and Alai, and in his dream they were burying him, only a hill grew up where they laid his body down, and he dried out and became a home for buggers, like the Giant was.

All dreams. If there was love or pity for him, it was only in his dreams.

He woke up and fought another battle and won. Then he went to bed and slept again and dreamed again and then he woke up and won again and slept again and he hardly noticed when waking became sleeping. Nor did he care.

The next day was his last day in Command School, though he didn't know it. Mazer Rackham was not in the room with him when he woke up. He showered and dressed and waited for Mazer to come unlock the door. He didn't come. Ender tried the door. It was open.

Was it an accident that Mazer had let him be free this morning? No one with him to tell him he must eat, he must go to practice, he must sleep. Freedom. The trouble was, he didn't know what to do. He thought for a moment that he might find his squadron leaders, talk to them face to face, but he didn't know where they were. They could be twenty kilometers away, for all he knew. So, after wandering through the tunnels for a little while, he went to the mess hall and ate breakfast near a few marines who were telling dirty jokes that Ender could not begin to understand. Then he went to the simulator room for practice. Even though he was free, he could not think of anything else to do.

Mazer was waiting for him. Ender walked slowly into the room. His step was slightly shuffling, and he felt tired and dull.

Mazer frowned. "Are you awake, Ender?"

There were other people in the simulator room. Ender wondered why they were there, but didn't bother to ask. It wasn't worth asking; no one would tell him anyway. He walked to the simulator controls and sat down, ready to start.

"Ender Wiggin," said Mazer. "Please turn around. Today's game needs a little explanation."

Ender turned around. He glanced at the men gathered at the back of the room. Most of them he had never seen before. Some were even dressed in civilian clothes. He saw Anderson and wondered what he was doing there, who was taking care of the Battle School if he was gone. He saw Graff and remembered the lake in the woods outside Greensboro, and wanted to go home. Take me home, he said silently to Graff. In my dream you said you loved me. Take me home.

But Graff only nodded to him, a greeting, not a promise, and Anderson acted as though he didn't know him at all.

"Pay attention, please, Ender. Today is your final examination in Command School. These observers are here to evaluate what you have learned. If you prefer not to have them in the room, we'll have them watch on another simulator."

"They can stay." Final examination. After today, perhaps he could rest.

"For this to be a fair test of your ability, not just to do what you have practiced many times, but also to meet challenges you have never seen before, today's battle introduces a new element. It is staged around a planet. This will affect the enemy's strategy, and will force you to improvise. Please concentrate on the game today."

Ender beckoned Mazer closer, and asked him quietly, "Am I the first student to make it this far?"

"If you win today, Ender, you will be the first student to do so. More than that I'm not at liberty to say."

"Well, I'm at liberty to hear it."

"You can be as petulant as you want, tomorrow. Today, though, I'd appreciate it if you would keep your mind on the examination. Let's not waste all that you've already done. Now, how will you deal with the planet?"

"I have to get someone behind it, or it's a blind spot."

"True."

"And the gravity is going to affect fuel levels -- cheaper to go down than up."

"Yes."

"Does the Little Doctor work against a planet?"

Mazer's face went rigid. "Ender, the buggers never attacked a civilian population in either invasion. You decide whether it would be wise to adopt a strategy that would invite reprisals."

"Is the planet the only new thing?"

"Can you remember the last time I've given you a battle with only one new thing? Let me assure you, Ender, that I will not be kind to you today. I have a responsibility to the fleet not to let a second-rate student graduate. I will do my best against you, Ender, and I have no desire to coddle you. Just keep in mind everything you know about yourself and everything you know about the buggers, and you have a fair chance of amounting to something."

Mazer left the room.

Ender spoke into the microphone. "Are you there?"

"All of us," said Bean. "Kind of late for practice this morning, aren't you?"

So they hadn't told the squadron leaders. Ender toyed with the idea of telling them how important this battle was to him, but decided it would not help them to have an extraneous concern on their minds. "Sorry," he said. "I overslept."

They laughed. They didn't believe him.

He led them through maneuvers, warming up for the battle ahead. It took him longer than usual to clear his mind, to concentrate on command, but soon enough he was up to

speed, responding quickly, thinking well. Or at least, he told himself, thinking that I'm thinking well.

The simulator field cleared. Ender waited for the game to appear. What will happen if I pass the test today?

Is there another school? Another year or two of grueling training, another year of isolation, another year of people pushing me this way and that way, another year without any control over my own life? He tried to remember how old he was. Eleven. How many years ago did he turn eleven? How many days? It must have happened here at the Command School, but he couldn't remember the day. Maybe he didn't even notice it at the time. Nobody noticed it, except perhaps Valentine.

And as he waited for the game to appear, he wished he could simply lose it, lose the battle badly and completely so that they would remove him from training, like Bonzo, and let him go home. Bonzo had been assigned to Cartagena. He wanted to see travel orders that said Greensboro. Success meant it would go on. Failure meant he could go home.

No, that isn't true, he told himself. They need me, and if I fail there might not be any home to return to.

But he did not believe it. In his conscious mind he knew it was true, but in other places, deeper places, he doubted that they needed him. Mazer's urgency was just another trick. Just another way to make me do what they want me to do. Another way to keep him from resting. From doing nothing, for a long, long time.

Then the enemy formation appeared, and Ender's weariness turned to despair.

The enemy outnumbered him a thousand to one, the simulator glowed green with them. They were grouped in a dozen different formations shifting positions, changing shapes, moving in seemingly random patterns through the simulator field. He could not find a path through them -- a space that seemed open would close suddenly, and another appear, and a formation that seemed penetrable would suddenly change and be forbidding. The planet was at the far edge of the field, and for all Ender knew there were just as many enemy ships beyond it, out of the simulator's range.

As for his own fleet, it consisted of twenty starships, each with only four fighters. He knew the four-fighter starships they were old-fashioned, sluggish, and the range of their Little Doctors was half that of the newer ones. Eighty fighters, against at least five thousand, perhaps ten thousand enemy ships.

He heard his squadron leaders breathing heavily; he could also hear, from the observers behind him, a quiet curse. It was nice to know that one of the adults noticed that it wasn't a fair test. Not that it made any difference. Fairness wasn't part of the game, that was

plain. There was no attempt to give him even a remote chance at success. All that I've been through, and they never meant to let me pass at all.

He saw in his mind Bonzo and his vicious little knot of friends, confronting him, threatening him; he had been able to shame Bonzo into fighting him alone. That would hardly work here. And he could not surprise the enemy with his ability as he had done with the older boys in the battleroom. Mazer knew Ender's abilities inside and out.

The observers behind him began to cough, to move nervously. They were beginning to realize that Ender didn't know what to do.

I don't care anymore, thought Ender. You can keep your game. If you won't even give me a chance, why should I play?

Like his last game in Battle School, when they put two armies against him.

And just as he remembered that game, apparently Bean remembered it, too, for his voice came over the headset, saying, "Remember, the enemy's gate is *down*."

Molo, Soup, Vlad, Dumper, and Crazy Tom all laughed. They remembered, too.

And Ender also laughed. It was funny. The adults taking all this so seriously, and the children playing along, playing along, believing it too until suddenly the adults went too far, tried too hard, and the children could see through their game. Forget it, Mazer. I don't care if I pass your test, I don't care if I follow your rules, if you can cheat, so can I. I won't let you beat me unfairly -- I'll beat you unfairly first.

In that final battle in Battle School, he had won by ignoring the enemy, ignoring his own losses; he had moved against the enemy's gate.

And the enemy's gate was down.

If I break this rule, they'll never let me be a commander. It would be too dangerous. I'll never have to play a game again. And that is victory.

He whispered quickly into the microphone. His commanders took their parts of the fleet and grouped themselves into a thick projectile, a cylinder aimed at the nearest of the enemy formations. The enemy, far from trying to repel him, welcomed him in, so he could be thoroughly entrapped before they destroyed him. Mazer is at least taking into account the fact that by now they would have learned to respect me, thought Ender. And that does buy me time.

Ender dodged downward, north, east, and down again, not seeming to follow any plan, but always ending up a little closer to the enemy planet. Finally the enemy began to close in on him too tightly. Then, suddenly, Ender's formation burst. His fleet seemed to melt

into chaos. The eighty fighters seemed to follow no plan at all, firing at enemy ships at random, working their way into hopeless individual paths among the bugger craft.

After a few minutes of battle, however, Ender whispered to his squadron leaders once more, and suddenly a dozen of the remaining fighters formed again into a formation. But now they were on the far side of one of the enemy's most formidable groups; they had, with terrible losses, passed through and now they had covered more than half the distance to the enemy's planet.

The enemy sees now, thought Ender. Surely Mazer sees what I'm doing.

Or perhaps Mazer cannot believe that I would do it. Well so much the better for me.

Ender's tiny fleet darted this way and that, sending two or three fighters out as if to attack, then bringing them back. The enemy closed in, drawing in ships and formations that had been widely scattered, bringing them in for the kill. The enemy was most concentrated beyond Ender, so he could not escape back into open space, closing him in. Excellent, thought Ender. Closer. Come closer.

Then he whispered a command and the ships dropped like rocks toward the planet's surface. They were starships and fighters, completely unequipped to handle the heat of passage through an atmosphere. But Ender never intended them to reach the atmosphere. Almost from the moment they began to drop, they were focusing their Little Doctors on one thing only. The planet itself.

One, two, four, seven of his fighters were blown away. It was all a gamble now, whether any of his ships would survive long enough to get in range. It would not take long, once they could focus on the planet's surface. Just a moment with Dr. Device, that's all I want. It occurred to Ender that perhaps the computer wasn't even equipped to show what would happen to a planet if the Little Doctor attacked it. What will I do then, shout Bang, you're dead?

Ender took his hands off the controls and leaned in to watch what happened. The perspective was close to the enemy planet now, as the ship hurtled into its well of gravity. Surely it's in range now, thought Ender. It must be in range and the computer can't handle it.

Then the surface of the planet, which filled half the simulator field now, began to bubble; there was a gout of explosion, hurling debris out toward Ender's fighters. Ender tried to imagine what was happening inside the planet. The field growing and growing, the molecules bursting apart but finding nowhere for the separate atoms to go.

Within three seconds the entire planet burst apart, becoming a sphere of bright dust, hurtling outward. Ender's fighters were among the first to go: their perspective suddenly vanished, and now the simulator could only display the perspective of the starships waiting beyond the edges of the battle. It was as close as Ender wanted to be. The sphere

of the exploding planet grew outward faster than the enemy ships could avoid it. And it carried with it the Little Doctor, not so little anymore, the field taking apart every ship in its path, erupting each one into a dot of light before it went on.

Only at the very periphery of the simulator did the M.D. field weaken. Two or three enemy ships were drifting away. Ender's own starships did not explode. But where the vast enemy fleet had been, and the planet they protected, there was nothing meaningful. A lump of dirt was growing as gravity drew much of the debris downward again. It was glowing hot and spinning visibly; it was also much smaller than the world had been before. Much of its mass was now a cloud still flowing outward.

Ender took off his headphones, filled with the cheers of his squadron leaders, and only then realized that there was just as much noise in the room with him. Men in uniform were hugging each other, laughing, shouting; others were weeping; some knelt or lay prostrate, and Ender knew they were caught up in prayer. Ender didn't understand. It seemed all wrong. They were supposed to be angry.

Colonel Graff detached himself from the others and came to Ender. Tears streamed down his face, but he was smiling. He bent over, reached out his arms, and to Ender's surprise he embraced him, held him tightly, and whispered, "Thank you, thank you Ender. Thank God for you, Ender."

The others soon came, too, shaking his hand, congratulating him. He tried to make sense of this. Had he passed the test after all? It was his victory, not theirs, and a hollow one at that, a cheat; why did they act as if he had won with honor?

The crowd parted and Mazer Rackham walked through. He came straight to Ender and held out his hand.

"You made the hard choice, boy. All or nothing. End them or end us. But heaven knows there was no other way you could have done it. Congratulations. You beat them, and it's all over."

All over. Beat them. Ender didn't understand. "I beat *you*."

Mazer laughed, a loud laugh that filled the room.

"Ender, you never played *me*. You never played a *game* since I became your enemy."

Ender didn't get the joke. He had played a great many games, at a terrible cost to himself. He began to get angry.

Mazer reached out and touched his shoulder. Ender shrugged him off. Mazer then grew serious and said, "Ender, for the past few months you have been the battle commander of our fleets. This was the Third Invasion. There were no games, the battles were real, and

the only enemy you fought was the buggers. You won every battle, and today you finally fought them at their home world, where the queen was, all the queens from all their colonies, they all were there and you destroyed them completely. They'll never attack us again. You did it. You."

Real. Not a game. Ender's mind was too tired to cope with it all. They weren't just points of light in the air, they were real ships that he had fought with and real ships he had destroyed. And a real world that he had blasted into oblivion. He walked through the crowd, dodging their congratulations, ignoring their hands, their words, their rejoicing. When he got to his own room he stripped off his clothes, climbed into bed, and slept.

Ender awoke when they shook him. It took a moment to recognize them. Graff and Rackham. He turned his back on them. Let me sleep.

"Ender, we need to talk to you," said Graff. Ender rolled back to face them.

"They've been playing out the videos on Earth all day, all night since the battle yesterday."

"Yesterday?" He had slept through until the next day.

"You're a hero. Ender. They've seen what you did. You and the others. I don't think there's a government on Earth that hasn't voted you their highest medal."

"I killed them all, didn't I?" Ender asked.

"All who?" asked Graff. "The buggers? That was the idea."

Mazer leaned in close. "That's what the war was for."

"All their queens. So I killed all their children, all of everything."

"They decided that when they attacked us. It wasn't your fault. It's what had to happen."

Ender grabbed Mazer's uniform and hung onto it, pulling him down so they were face to face. "I didn't want to kill them all. I didn't want to kill anybody! I'm not a killer! You didn't want me, you bastards, you wanted Peter, but you made me do it, you tricked me into it!" He was crying. He was out of control.

"Of course we tricked you into it. That's the whole point," said Graff. "It had to be a trick or you couldn't have done it. It's the bind we were in. We had to have a commander with so much empathy that he would think like the buggers, understand them and anticipate them. So much compassion that he could win the love of his underlings and work with them like a perfect machine, as perfect as the buggers. But somebody with that

much compassion could never be the killer we needed. Could never go into battle willing to win at all costs. If you knew, you couldn't do it. If you were the kind of person who would do it even if you knew, you could never have understood the buggers well enough."

"And it had to be a child, Ender," said Mazer. "You were faster than me. Better than me. I was too old and cautious. Any decent person who knows what warfare is can never go into battle with a whole heart. But you didn't know. We made sure you didn't know. You were reckless and brilliant and young. It's what you were born for."

"We had pilots with our ships, didn't we."

"Yes."

"I was ordering pilots to go in and die and I didn't even know it."

"*They* knew it, Ender, and they went anyway. They knew what it was for."

"You never asked me! You never told me the truth about anything!"

"You had to be a weapon, Ender. Like a gun, like the Little Doctor, functioning perfectly but not knowing what you were aimed at. We aimed you. We're responsible. If there was something wrong, we did it."

"Tell me later," Ender said. His eyes closed.

Mazer Rackham shook him. "Don't go to sleep, Ender," he said. "It's very important."

"You're finished with me," Ender said. "Now leave me alone."

"That's why we're here." Mazer said, "We're trying to tell you. They're not through with you, not at all, it's crazy down there. They're going to start a war, Americans claiming the Warsaw Pact is about to attack, and the Pact saying the same thing about the Hegemon. The bugger war isn't twenty-four hours dead and the world down there is back to fighting again, as bad as ever. And all of them are worried about you. And all of them want you. The greatest military leader in history, they want you to lead their armies. The Americans. The Hegemon. Everybody but the Warsaw Pact, and they want you dead."

"Fine with me," said Ender.

"We have to take you away from here. There are Russian marines all over Eros, and the Polemarch is Russian. It could turn to bloodshed at any time."

Ender turned his back on them again. This time they let him. He did not sleep, though. He listened to them.

"I was afraid of this, Rackham. You pushed him too hard. Some of those lesser outposts could have waited until after. You could have given him some days to rest."

"Are you doing it, too, Graff? Trying to decide how I could have done it better? You don't know what would have happened if I hadn't pushed. Nobody knows. I did it the way I did it, and it worked. Above all, it worked. Memorize that defense, Graff. You may have to use it, too."

"Sorry."

"I can see what it's done to him. Colonel Liki says there's a good chance he'll be permanently damaged, but I don't believe it. He's too strong. Winning meant a lot to him, and he won."

"Don't tell me about strong. The kid's eleven. Give him some rest, Rackham. Things haven't exploded yet. We can post a guard outside his door."

"Or post a guard outside another door and pretend that it's his."

"Whatever."

They went away. Ender slept again.

Time passed without touching Ender, except with glancing blows. Once he awoke for a few minutes with something pressing his hand, pushing downward on it, with a dull, insistent pain. He reached over and touched it; it was a needle passing into a vein. He tried to pull it out, but it was taped on and he was too weak. Another time he awoke in darkness to hear people near him murmuring and cursing. His ears were ringing with the loud noise that had awakened him; he did not remember the noise. "Get the lights on," someone said. And another time he thought he heard someone crying softly near him.

It might have been a single day; it might have been a week; from his dreams, it could have been months. He seemed to pass through lifetimes in his dreams. Through the Giant's Drink again, past the wolf-children, reliving the terrible deaths, the constant murders; he heard a voice whispering in the forest, You had to kill the children to get to the End of the World. And he tried to answer. I never wanted to kill anybody. Nobody ever asked me if I wanted to kill anybody. But the forest laughed at him. And when he leapt from the cliff at the End of the World, sometimes it was not clouds that caught him, but a fighter that carried him to a vantage point near the surface of the buggers' world, so he could watch, over and over, the eruption of death when Dr. Device set off a reaction on the planet's face; then closer and closer, until he could watch individual buggers explode, turn to light, then collapse into a pile of dirt before his eyes. And the queen, surrounded by infants; only the queen was Mother, and the infants were Valentine and all the children he had known in Battle School. One of them had Bonzo's face, and he lay

there bleeding through the eyes and nose, saying, You have no honor. And always the dream ended with a mirror or a pool of water or the metal surface of ship, something that would reflect his face back to him.

At first it was always Peter's face, with blood and a snake's tail coming from the mouth. After a while, though, it began to be his own face, old and sad, with eyes that grieved for a billion, billion murders -- but they were his own eyes, and he was content to wear them.

That was the world Ender lived in for many lifetimes during the five days of the League War.

When he awoke again he was lying in darkness. In the distance he could hear the thump, thump of explosions. He listened for a while. Then he heard a soft footstep.

He turned over and flung out a hand, to grasp whoever was sneaking up on him. Sure enough, he caught someone's clothing and pulled him down toward his knees, ready to kill him if need be.

"Ender, it's me, it's me!"

He knew the voice. It came out of his memory as if it were a million years ago.

"Alai."

"Salaam, pinprick. What were you trying to do, kill me?"

"Yes. I thought you were trying to kill *me*."

"I was trying not to wake you up. Well, at least you have some survival instinct left. The way Mazer talks about it, you were becoming a vegetable."

"I was trying to. What's the thumping."

"There's a war going on here. Our section is blacked out to keep us safe."

Ender swung his legs out to sit up. He couldn't do it, though. His head hurt too bad. He winced in pain."

"Don't sit up, Ender. It's all right. It looks like we might win it. Not all the Warsaw Pact people went with the Polemarch. A lot of them came over when the Strategos told them you were loyal to the IF."

"I was asleep."

"So he lied. You weren't plotting treason in your dreams, were you? Some of the Russians who came in told us that when the Polemarch ordered them to find you and kill

you, they almost killed him. Whatever they may feel about other people, Ender, they love you. The whole world watched our battles. Videos, day and night. I've seen some. Complete with your voice giving the orders. It's all there, nothing censored. Good stuff. You've got a career in the vids."

"I don't think so," said Ender.

"I was joking. Hey, can you believe it? We won the war. We were so eager to grow up so we could fight in it, and it was us all the time. I mean, we're kids. Ender. And it was us." Alai laughed. "It was you, anyway. You were good, bosh. I didn't know how you'd get us out of that last one. But you did. You were good."

Ender noticed the way he spoke in the past good. "What am I now, Alai?"

"Still good."

"At what?"

"At -- anything. There's a million soldiers who'd follow you to the end of the universe."

"I don't want to go to the end of the universe."

"So where do you want to go? They'll follow you."

I want to go home, thought Ender, but I don't know where it is.

The thumping went silent.

"Listen to that," said Alai.

They listened. The door opened. Someone stood there. Someone small. "It's over," he said. It was Bean. As if to prove it, the lights went on.

"Ho, Bean," Ender said.

"Ho, Ender."

Petra followed him in, with Dink holding her hand. They came to Ender's bed. "Hey, the hero's awake," said Dink.

"Who won?" asked Ender.

"We did, Ender," said Bean. "You were there."

"He's not *that* crazy, Bean. He meant who won just now." Petra took Ender's hand. "There was a truce on Earth. They've been negotiating for days. They finally agreed to accept the Locke Proposal."

"He doesn't know about the Locke Proposal--"

"It's very complicated, but what it means here is that the IF. will stay in existence, but without the Warsaw Pact in it. So the Warsaw Pact marines are going home. I think Russia agreed to it because they're having a revolt of the Slavic helots. Everybody's got troubles. About five hundred died here, but it was worse on Earth."

"The Hegemon resigned," said Dink. "It's crazy down there. Who cares."

"You OK?" Petra asked him, touching his head. "You scared us. They said you were crazy, and we said *they* were crazy."

"I'm crazy," said Ender. "But I think I'm OK."

"When did you decide that?" asked Alai.

"When I thought you were about to kill me, and I decided to kill you first. I guess I'm just a killer to the core. But I'd rather be alive than dead."

They laughed and agreed with him. Then Ender began to cry and embraced Bean and Petra, who were closest. "I missed you," he said. "I wanted to see you so bad."

"You saw us pretty bad," Petra answered. She kissed his cheek.

"I saw you magnificent," said Ender. "The ones I needed most, I used up soonest. Bad planning on my part."

"Everybody's OK now," said Dink. "Nothing was wrong with any of us that five days of cowering in blacked-out rooms in the middle of a war couldn't cure."

"I don't have to be your commander anymore, do I?" asked Ender. "I don't want to command anybody again."

"You don't have to command anybody," said Dink, "but you're always our commander."

Then they were silent for a while.

"So what do we do now?" asked Alai. "The bugger war's over, and so's the war down there on Earth, and even the war here. What do we do now?"

"We're kids," said Petra. "They'll probably make us go to school. It's a law. You have to go to school till you're seventeen."

They all laughed at that. Laughed until tears streamed down their faces.

Chapter 15 -- Speaker for the Dead

The lake was still; there was no breeze. The two men sat together in chairs on the floating dock. A small wooden raft was tied up at the dock; Graff hooked his foot in the rope and pulled the raft in, then let it drift out, then pulled it in again.

"You've lost weight."

"One kind of stress puts it on, another takes it off. I m a creature of chemicals."

"It must have heen hard."

Graff shrugged. "Not really. I knew I'd be acquitted."

"Some of us weren't so sure. People were crazy for a while there. Mistreatment of children, negligent homicide -- those videos of Bonzo's and Stilson's deaths were pretty gruesome. To watch one child do that to another."

"As much as anything, I think the videos saved me. The prosecution edited them, but we showed the whole thing. It was plain that Ender was not the provocateur. After that, it was just a second-guessing game. I said I did what I believed was necessary for the preservation of the human race, and it worked; we got the judges to agree that the prosecution had to prove beyond doubt that Ender would have won the war without the training we gave him. After that, it was simple. The exigencies of war."

"Anyway, Graff, it was a great relief to us. I know we quarreled, and I know the prosecution used tapes of our conversations against you. But by then I knew that you were right, and I offered to testify for you."

"I know, Anderson. My lawyers told me."

"So what will you do now?"

"I don't know. Still relaxing. I have a few years of leave accrued. Enough to take me to retirement, and I have plenty of salary that I never used, sitting around in banks. I could live on the interest. Maybe I'll do nothing."

"It sounds nice. But I couldn't stand it. I've been offered the presidency of three different universities, on the theory that I'm an educator. They don't believe me when I say that all I ever cared about at the Battle School was the game. I think I'll go with the other offer."

"Commissioner?"

"Now that the wars are over, it's time to play games again. It'll be almost like vacation, anyway. Only twenty-eight teams in the league. Though after years of watching those children flying, football is like watching slugs bash into each other."

They laughed. Graff sighed and pushed the raft with his foot.

"That raft. Surely you can't float on it."

Graff shook his head. "Ender built it."

"That's right. This is where you took him."

"It's even been deeded over to him. I saw to it that he was amply rewarded. He'll have all the money he ever needs."

"If they ever let him come back to use it."

"They never will."

"With Demosthenes agitating for him to come home?"

"Demosthenes isn't on the nets anymore."

Anderson raised an eyebrow. "What does that mean?"

"Demosthenes has retired. Permanently."

"You know something, you old fart eater. You know who Demosthenes is."

"Was."

"Well, tell me!"

"No."

"You're no fun anymore, Graff."

"I never was."

"At least you can tell me why. There were a lot of us who thought Demosthenes would be Hegemon someday."

"There was never a chance of that. No, even Demosthenes' mob of political cretins couldn't persuade the Hegemon to bring Ender back to Earth. Ender is far too dangerous."

"He's only eleven. Twelve, now."

"All the more dangerous because he could so easily be controlled. In all the world, the name of Ender is one to conjure with. The child-god, the miracle worker, with life and death in his hands. Every petty tyrant-to-be would like to have the boy, to set him in front of an army and watch the world either flock to join or cower in fear. If Ender came to Earth, he'd want to come here, to rest, to salvage what he can of his childhood. But they'd never let him rest."

"I see. Someone explained that to Demosthenes?"

Graff smiled. "Demosthenes explained it to someone else. Someone who could have used Ender as no one else could have, to rule the world and make the world like it."

"Who?"

"Locke."

"Locke is the one who argued for Ender to stay on Eros."

"All is not always as it seems."

"It's too deep for me, Graff. Give me the game. Nice, neat rules. Referees. Beginnings and endings. Winners and losers and then everybody goes home to their wives."

"Get me tickets to some games now and then, all right?"

"You won't really stay here and retire, will you?"

"No."

"You're going into the Hegemony, aren't you?"

"I'm the new Minister of Colonization."

"So they're doing it."

"As soon as we get the reports back on the bugger colony worlds. I mean, there they are, already fertile, with housing and industry in place, and all the buggers dead. Very convenient. We'll repeal the population limitation laws--"

"Which everybody hates--"

"And all those thirds and fourths and fifths get on starships and head out for worlds known and unknown."

"Will people really go?"

"People always go. Always. They always believe they can make a better life than in the old world."

"What the hell, maybe they can."

At first Ender believed that they would bring him back to Earth as soon as things quieted down. But things were quiet now, had been quiet for a year, and it was plain to him now that they would not bring him back at all, that he was much more useful as a name and a story than he would ever be as an inconvenient flesh-and-blood person.

And there was the matter of the court martial on the crimes of Colonel Graff. Admiral Chamrajnagar tried to keep Ender from watching it, but failed -- Ender had been awarded the rank of admiral, too, and this was one of the few times he asserted the privileges the rank implied. So he watched the videos of the fights with Stilson and Bonzo, watched as the photographs of the corpses were displayed, listened as the psychologists and lawyers argued whether murder had been committed or the killing was in self-defense. Ender had his own opinion, but no one asked him. Throughout the trial, it was really Ender himself under attack. The prosecution was too clever to charge him directly, but there were attempts to make him look sick, perverted, criminally insane.

"Never mind," said Mazer Rackham. "The politicians are afraid of you, but they can't destroy your reputation yet. That won't be done until the historians get at you in thirty years."

Ender didn't care about his reputation. He watched the videos impassively, but in fact he was amused. In battle I killed ten billion buggers, who were as alive and wise as any man, who had not even launched a third attack against us, and no one thinks to call it a crime.

All his crimes weighed heavy on him, the deaths of Stilson and Bonzo no heavier and no lighter than the rest.

And so, with that burden, he waited through the empty months until the world that he had saved decided he could come home.

One by one, his friends reluctantly left him, called home to their families, to be received with heroes' welcomes in their towns. Ender watched the videos of their homecomings, and was touched when they' spent much of their time praising Ender Wiggin, who taught them everything, they said, who taught them and led them into victory. But if they called for him to be brought home, the words were censored from the videos and no one heard the plea.

For a time, the only work in Eros was cleaning up after the bloody League War and receiving the reports of the starships, once warships, that were now exploring the bugger colony worlds.

But now Eros was busier than ever, more crowded than it had ever been during the war, as colonists were brought here to prepare for their voyages to the empty bugger worlds. Ender took part in the work, as much as they would let him, but it did not occur to them that this twelve-year-old boy might be as gifted at peace as he was at war. But he was patient with their tendency to ignore him, and learned to make his proposals and suggest his plans through the few adults who listened to him, and let them present them as their own. He was concerned, not about getting credit, but about getting the job done.

The one thing he could not bear was the worship of the colonists. He learned to avoid the tunnels where they lived, because they would always recognize him -- the world had memorized his face -- and they would scream and shout and embrace him and congratulate him and show him the children they had named after him and tell him how he was so young it broke their hearts and *they* didn't blame him for any of his murders because it wasn't his fault he was just a *child*--

He hid from them as best he could.

There was one colonist, though, he couldn't hide from.

He wasn't inside Eros that day. He had gone up with the shuttle to the new ISL, where he had been learning to do surface work on the starships; it was unbecoming to an officer to do mechanical labor, Chamrajnagar told him, but Ender answered that since the trade he had mastered wasn't much called for now, it was about time he learned another skill.

They spoke to him through his helmet radio and told him that someone was waiting to see him as soon as he could come in. Ender couldn't think of anyone he wanted to see, and so he didn't hurry. He finished installing the shield for the ship's ansible and then hooked his way across the face of the ship and pulled himself up into the airlock.

She was waiting for him outside the changing room. For a moment he was annoyed that they would let a colonist come to bother him here, where he came to be alone; then he looked again, and realized that if the young woman were a little girl, he would know her.

"Valentine," he said.

"Hi, Ender."

"What are you doing here?"

"Demosthenes retired. Now I'm going with the first colony."

"It's fifty years to get there--"

"Only two years if you're aboard the ship."

"But if you ever came back, everybody you knew on Earth would be dead--"

"That was what I had in mind. I was hoping, though, that someone I knew on Eros might come with me.

"I don't want to go to a world we stole from the buggers. I just want to go home."

"Ender, you're never going back to Earth. I saw to that before I left."

He looked at her in silence.

"I tell you that now, so that if you want to hate me, you can hate me from the beginning."

They went to Ender's tiny compartment in the ISL and she explained. Peter wanted Ender back on Earth, under the protection of the Hegemon's Council. "The way things are right now, Ender, that would put you effectively under Peter's control, since half the council now does just what Peter wants. The ones that aren't Locke's lapdogs are under his thumb in other ways."

"Do they know who he really is?"

"Yes. He isn't publicly known, but people in high places know him. It doesn't matter any more. He has too much power for them to worry about his age. He's done incredible things, Ender."

"I noticed the treaty a year ago was named for Locke."

"That was his breakthrough. He proposed it through his friends from the public policy nets, and then Demosthenes got behind it, too. It was the moment he had been waiting for, to use Demosthenes' influence with the mob and Locke's influence with the intelligentsia to accomplish something noteworthy. It forestalled a really vicious war that could have lasted for decades."

"He decided to be a statesman?"

"I think so. But in his cynical moments, of which there are many, he pointed out to me that if he had allowed the League to fall apart completely, he'd have to conquer the world piece by piece. As long as the Hegemony exists, he can do it in one lump."

Ender nodded. "That's the Peter that I knew."

"Funny, isn't it? That Peter would save millions of lives."

"While I killed billions."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"So he wanted to use me?"

"He had plans for you, Ender. He would publicly reveal himself when you arrived, going to meet you in front of all the videos. Ender Wiggin's older brother, who also happened to be the great Locke, the architect of peace. Standing next to you, he would look quite mature. And the physical resemblance between you is stronger than ever. It would be quite simple for him, then, to take over."

"Why did you stop him?"

"Ender, you wouldn't be happy spending the rest of your life as Peter's pawn."

"Why not? I've spent my life as someone's pawn."

"Me too. I showed Peter all the evidence that I had assembled, enough to prove in the eyes of the public that he was a psychotic killer. It included full-color pictures of tortured squirrels and some of the monitor videos of the way he treated you. It took some work to get it all together, but by the time he saw it, he was willing to give me what I wanted. What I wanted was your freedom and mine."

"It's not my idea of freedom to go live in the house of the people that I killed."

"Ender, what's done is done. Their worlds are empty now, and ours is full. And we can take with us what their worlds have never known -- cities full of people who live private, individual lives, who love and hate each other for their own reasons. In all the bugger worlds, there was never more than a single story to be told; when we're there, the world will be full of stories, and we'll improvise their endings day by day. Ender, Earth belongs to Peter. And if you don't go with me now, he'll have you there, and use you up until you wish you'd never been born. Now is the only chance you'll get to get away."

Ender said nothing.

"I know what you're thinking, Ender. You're thinking that I'm trying to control you just as much as Peter or Graff or any of the others."

"It crossed my mind."

"Welcome to the human race. Nobody controls his own life, Ender. The best you can do is choose to be controlled by good people, by people who love you. I didn't come here because I wanted to be a colonist. I came because I've spent my whole life in the

company of the brother that I hated. Now I want a chance to know the brother that I loved, before it's too late, before we're not children anymore."

"It's already too late for that."

"You're wrong, Ender. You think you're grown up and tired and jaded with everything, but in your heart you're just as much a kid as I am. We can keep it secret from everybody else. While you're governing the colony and I'm writing political philosophy, they'll never guess that in the darkness of night we sneak into each other's room and play checkers and have pillowfights."

Ender laughed, but he had noticed some things she dropped too casually for them to be accidental. "Governing?"

"I'm Demosthenes, Ender, I went out with a bang. A public announcement that I believed so much in the colonization movement that I was going in the first ship myself. At the same time, the Minister of Colonization, a former colonel named Graff, announced that the pilot of the colony ship would be the great Mazer Rackham, and the governor of the colony would be Ender Wiggin."

"They might have asked me."

"I wanted to ask you myself."

"But it's already announced."

"No. They'll be announcing it tomorrow, if you accept. Mazer accepted a few hours ago, back in Eros."

"You're telling everyone that you're Demosthenes? A fourteen-year-old girl?"

"We're only telling them that Demosthenes is going with the colony. Let them spend the next fifty years poring over the passenger list, trying to figure out which one of them is the great demagogue of the Age of Locke."

Ender laughed and shook his head. "You're actually having fun, Val."

"I can't think why I shouldn't."

"All right," said Ender. "I'll go. Maybe even as governor, as long as you and Mazer are there to help me. My abilities are a little underused at present."

She squealed and hugged him, for all the world like a typical teenage girl who just got the present that she wanted from her little brother.

"Val," he said, "I just want one thing clear. I'm not going for you. I'm not going in order to be governor, or because I'm bored here. I'm going because I know the buggers better than any other living soul, and maybe if I go there I can understand them better. I stole their future from them; I can only begin to repay by seeing what I can learn from their past."

The voyage was long. By the end of it, Val had finished the first volume of her history of the bugger wars and transmitted it by ansible, under Demosthenes' name, back to Earth, and Ender had won something better than the adulation of the passengers. They knew him now, and he had won their love and their respect.

He worked hard on the new world, governing by persuasion rather than fiat, and working as hard as anyone at the tasks involved in setting up a self-sustaining economy. But his most important work, as everyone agreed, was exploring what the buggers had left behind, trying to find among structures, machinery, and fields long untended some things that human beings could use, could learn from. There were no books to read -- the buggers never needed them. With all things present in their memories, all things spoken as they were thought, when the buggers died their knowledge died with them.

And yet. From the sturdiness of the roofs that covered their animal sheds and their food supplies, Ender learned that winter would be hard, with heavy snows. From fences with sharpened stakes that pointed outward he learned that there were marauding animals that were a danger to the crops or the herds. From the mill he learned that the long, foul-tasting fruits that grew in the overgrown orchards were dried and ground into meal. And from the slings that once were used to carry infants along with adults into the fields, he learned that even though the buggers were not much for individuality, they did love their children.

Life settled down, and years passed. The colony lived in wooden houses and used the tunnels of the bugger city for storage and manufactories. They were governed by a council now, and administrators were elected, so that Ender, though they still called him govertior, was in fact only a judge. There were crimes and quarrels alongside kindness and cooperation; there were people who loved each other and people who did not; it was a human world. They did not wait so eagerly for each new transmission from the ansible; the names that were famous on Earth meant little to them now. The only name they knew was that of Peter Wiggin, the Hegemon of Earth; the only news that came was news of peace, of prosperity, of great ships leaving the littoral of Earth's solar system, passing the comet shield and filling up the bugger worlds. Soon there would be other colonies on this world, Ender's World; soon there would be neighbors; already they were halfway here; but no one cared. They would help the newcomers when they came, teach them what they had learned, but what mattered in life now was who would marry whom, and who was sick, and when was planting time, and why should I pay him when the calf died three weeks after I got it.

"They've become people of the land," said Valentine. "No one cares now that Demosthenes is sending the seventh volume of his history today. No one here will read it."

Ender pressed a button and his desk showed him the next page. "Very insightful, Valentine. How many more volumes until you're through?"

"Just one. The story of Ender Wiggin."

"What will you do, wait to write it until I'm dead?"

"No. Just write it, and when I've brought it up to the present day, I'll stop."

"I have a better idea. Take it up to the day we won the final battle. Stop it there. Nothing that I've done since then is worth writing down."

"Maybe," said Valentine. "And maybe not."

The ansible had brought them word that the new colony ship was only a year away. They asked Ender to find a place for them to settle in, near enough to Ender's colony that the two colonies could trade, but far enough apart that they could be governed separately. Ender used the helicopter and began to explore. He took one of the children along, an eleven-year-old boy named Abra; he had been only three when the colony was founded, and he remembered no other world than this. He and Ender flew as far as the copter would carry them, then camped for the night and got a feel for the land on foot the next morning.

It was on the third morning that Ender suddenly began to feel an uneasy sense that he had been in this place before. He looked around; it was new land, he had never seen it. He called out to Abra.

"Ho, Ender!" Abra called. He was on top of a steep low hill. "Come up!"

Ender scrambled up, the turves coming away from his feet in the soft ground. Abra was pointing downward.

"Can you believe this?" he asked.

The hill was hollow. A deep depression in the middle, partially filled with water, was ringed by concave slopes that cantilevered dangerously over the water. In one direction the hill gave way to two long ridges that made a V-shaped valley: in the other direction the rose to a piece of white rock, grinning like a skull with a tree growing out of its mouth.

"It's like a giant died here," said Abra, "and the Earth grew up to cover his carcass,"

Now Ender knew why it had looked familiar. The Giant's corpse. He had played here too many times as a child not to know this place. But it was not possible. The computer in the Battle School could not possibly have seen this place. He looked through his binoculars in a direction he knew well, fearing and hoping that he would see what belonged in that place.

Swings and slides. Monkey bars. Now overgrown, but the shapes still unmistakable.

"Somebody had to have built this," Abra said, "Look, this skull place, it's not rock, look at it. This is concrete."

"I know," said Ender. "They built it for me."

"What?"

"I know this place, Abra. The buggers built it for me."

"The buggers were all dead fifty years before we got here."

"You're right, it's impossible, but I know what I know. Abra, I shouldn't take you with me. It might be dangerous. If they knew me well enough to build this place, they might be planning to--"

"To get even with you."

"For killing them."

"So don't go, Ender. Don't do what they want you to do."

"If they want to get revenge, Abra, I don't mind. But perhaps they don't. Perhaps this is the closest they could come to talking. To writing me a note."

"They didn't know how to read and write."

"Maybe they were learning when they died."

"Well, I'm sure as hell not sticking around here if you're taking off somewhere. I'm going with you."

"No. You're too young to take the risk of--"

"Come on! You're Ender Wiggin. Don't tell me what eleven-year-old kids can do!"

Together they flew in the copter, over the playground, over the woods, over the well in the forest clearing. Then out to where there was, indeed, a cliff, with a cave in the cliff wall and a ledge right where the End of the World should be. And there in the distance, just where it should be in the fantasy game, was the castle tower.

He left Abra with the copter. "Don't come after me, and go home in an hour if I don't come back."

"Eat it, Ender, I'm coming with you."

"Eat it yourself, Abra, or I'll stuff you with mud."

Abra could tell, despite Ender's joking tone, that he meant it, and so he stayed.

The walls of the tower were notched and ledged for easy climbing. They meant him to get in.

The room was as it had always been. Ender remembered well enough to look for a snake on the floor, but there was only a rug with a carved snake's head at one corner. Imitation, not duplication; for a people who made no art, they had done well. They must have dragged these images from Ender's own mind, finding him and learning his darkest dreams across the lightyears. But why? To bring him to this room, of course. To leave a message for him. But where was the message, and how would he understand it?

The mirror was waiting for him on the wall. It was a dull sheet of metal, in which the rough shape of a human face had been scratched. They tried to draw the image I should see in the picture.

And looking at the mirror he could remember breaking it, pulling it from the wall, and snakes leaping out of the hidden place, attacking him, biting him wherever their poisonous fangs could find purchase.

How well do they know me, wondered Ender. Well enough to know how often I have thought of death, to know that I am not afraid of it? Well enough to know that even if I feared death, it would not stop me from taking that mirror from the wall.

He walked to the mirror, lifted, pulled away. Nothing jumped from the space behind it. Instead, in a hollowed-out place, there was a white ball of silk with a few frayed strands sticking out here and there. An egg? No. The pupa of a queen bugger, already fertilized by the larval males, ready, out of her own body, to hatch a hundred thousand buggers, including a few queens and males. Ender could see the slug-like males clinging to the walls of a dark tunnel, and the large adults carrying the infant queen to the mating room; each male in turn penetrated the larval queen, shuddered in ecstasy, and died, dropping to the tunnel floor and shriveling. Then the new queen was laid before the old, a magnificent creature clad in soft and shimmering wings, which had long since lost the power of flight but still contained the power of majesty. The old queen kissed her to sleep

with the gentle poison in her lips, then wrapped her in threads from her belly, and commanded her to become herself, to become a new city, a new world, to give birth to many queens and many worlds.

How do I know this, thought Ender. How can I see these things, like memories in my own mind.

As if in answer, he saw the first of all his battles with the bugger fleets. He had seen it before on the simulator; now he saw it as the hive-queen saw it, through many different eyes. The buggers formed their globe of ships, and then the terrible fighters came out of the darkness and the Little Doctor destroyed them in a blaze of light. He felt then what the hive-queen felt, watching through her workers' eyes as death came to them too quickly to avoid, but not too quickly to be anticipated. There was no memory of pain or fear, though. What the hive-queen felt was sadness, a sense of resignation. She had not thought these words as she saw the humans coming to kill, but it was in words that Ender understood her: They did not forgive us, she thought. We will surely die.

"How can you live again?" he asked.

The queen in her silken cocoon had no words to give back; but when he closed his eyes and tried to remember, instead of memory came new images. Putting the cocoon in a cool place, a dark place, but with water, so she wasn't dry; no, not just water, but water mixed with the sap of a certain tree, and kept tepid so that certain reactions could take place in the cocoon. Then time. Days and weeks, for the pupa inside to change. And then, when the cocoon had changed to a dusty brown color, Ender saw himself splitting open the cocoon, and helping the small and fragile queen emerge. He saw himself taking her by the forelimb and helping her walk from her birthwater to a nesting place, soft with dried leaves on sand. Then I am alive, came the thought in his mind. Then I am awake. Then I make my ten thousand children.

"No," said Ender. "I can't."

Anguish.

"Your children are the monsters of our nightmares now. If I awoke you, we would only kill you again."

There flashed through his mind a dozen images of human beings being killed by buggers, but with the image came a grief so powerful he could not bear it, and he wept their tears for them.

"If you could make them feel as you can make me feel, then perhaps they could forgive you."

Only me, he realized. They found me through the ansible, followed it and dwelt in my mind. In the agony of my tortured dreams they came to know me, even as I spent my

days destroying them; they found my fear of them, and found also that I had no knowledge I was killing them. In the few weeks they had, they built this place for me, and the Giant's corpse and the playground and the ledge at the End of the World, so I would find this place by the evidence of my eyes. I am the only one they know, and so they can only talk to me, and through me. We are like you; the thought pressed into his mind. We did not mean to murder, and when we understood, we never came again. We thought we were the only thinking beings in the universe, until we met you, but never did we dream that thought could arise from the lonely animals who cannot dream each other's dreams. How were we to know? We could live with you in peace. Believe us, believe us, believe us.

He reached into the cavity and took out the cocoon. It was astonishingly light, to hold all the hope and future of a great race within it.

"I'll carry you," said Ender, "I'll go from world to world until I find a time and a place where you can come awake in safety. And I'll tell your story to my people, so that perhaps in time they can forgive you, too. The way that you've forgiven me."

He wrapped the queen's cocoon in his jacket and carried her from the tower.

"What was in there?" asked Abra.

"The answer," said Ender.

"To what?"

"My question." And that was all he said of the matter; they searched for five more days and chose a site for the new colony far to the east and south of the tower.

Weeks later he came to Valentine and told her to read something he had written; she pulled the file he named from the ship's computer, and read it.

It was written as if the hive-queen spoke, telling all that they had meant to do, and all that they had done. Here are our failures, and here is our greatness; we did not mean to hurt you, and we forgive you for our death. From their earliest awareness to the great wars that swept across their home world, Ender told the story quickly, as if it were an ancient memory. When he came to the tale of the great mother, the queen of all, who first learned to keep and teach the new queen instead of killing her or driving her away, then he lingered, telling how many times she had finally to destroy the child of her body, the new self that was not herself, until she bore one who understood her quest for harmony. This was a new thing in the world, two queens that loved and helped each other instead of battling, and together they were stronger than any other hive. They prospered; they had more daughters who joined them in peace; it was the beginning of wisdom.

If only we could have talked to you, the hive-queen said in Ender's words. But since it could not be, we ask only this: that you remember us, not as enemies, but as tragic sisters,

changed into a foul shape by Fate or God or Evolution. If we had kissed, it would have been the miracle to make us human in each other's eyes. Instead we killed each other. But still we welcome you now as guestfriends. Come into our home, daughters of Earth; dwell in our tunnels, harvest our fields; what we cannot do, you are now our hands to do for us. Blossom, trees; ripen, fields; be warm for them, suns; be fertile for them, planets: they are our adopted daughters, and they have come home.

The book that Ender wrote was not long, but in it was all the good and all the evil that the hive-queen knew. And he signed it, not with his name, but with a title:

SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD

On Earth, the book was published quietly, and quietly it was passed from hand to hand, until it was hard to believe that anyone on Earth might not have read it.

Most who read it found it interesting -- some who read it refused to set it aside. They began to live by it as best they could, and when their loved ones died, a believer would arise beside the grave to be the Speaker for the Dead, and say what the dead one would have said, but with full candor, hiding no faults and pretending no virtues. Those who came to such services sometimes found them painful and disturbing, but there were many who decided that their life was worthwhile enough, despite their errors, that when they died a Speaker should tell the truth for them.

On Earth it remained a religion among many religions. But for those who traveled the great cave of space and lived their lives in the hive-queen's tunnels and harvested the hive-queen's fields, it was the only religion. There was no colony without its Speaker for the Dead.

No one knew and no one really wanted to know who was the original Speaker. Ender was not inclined to tell them.

When Valentine was twenty-five years old, she finished the last volume of her history of the bugger wars. She included at the end the complete text of Ender's little book, but did not say that Ender wrote it.

By ansible she got an answer from the ancient Hegemon, Peter Wiggin, seventy-seven years old with a failing heart.

"I know who wrote it," he said. "If he can speak for the buggers, surely he can speak for me."

Back and forth across the ansible Ender and Peter spoke, with Peter pouring out the story of his days and years, his crimes and his kindnesses. And when he died, Ender wrote a second volume, again signed by the Speaker for the Dead. Together, his two books were called the Hive-Queen and the Hegemon, and they were holy writ.

"Come on," he said to Valentine one day. "Let's fly away and live forever."

"We can't," she said. "There are miracles even relativity can't pull off, Ender."

"We have to go. I'm almost happy here."

"So, stay."

"I've lived too long with pain. I won't know who I am without it."

So they boarded a starship and went from world to world. Wherever they stopped, he was always Andrew Wiggin, itinerant speaker for the dead, and she was always Valentine, historian errant, writing down the stories of the living while Ender spoke the stories of the dead. And always Ender carried with him a dry white cocoon, looking for the world where the hive-queen could awaken and thrive in peace. He looked a long time.

SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD

by Orson Scott Card

Prologue

In the year 1830, after the formation of Starways Congress, a robot scout ship sent a report by ansible: The planet it was investigating was well within the parameters for human life. The nearest planet with any kind of population pressure was Baja; Starways Congress granted them the exploration license.

So it was that the first humans to see the new world were Portuguese by language, Brazilian by culture, and Catholic by creed. In the year 1886 they disembarked from their shuttle, crossed themselves, and named the planet Lusitania-- the ancient name of Portugal. They set about cataloguing the flora and fauna. Five days later they realized that the little forest-dwelling animals that they had called porquinhos-- piggies-- were not animals at all.

For the first time since the Xenocide of the Buggers by the Monstrous Ender, humans had found intelligent alien life.

The piggies were technologically primitive, but they used tools and built houses and spoke a language. "It is another chance God has given us," declared Archcardinal Pio of Baja. "We can be redeemed for the destruction of the buggers."

The members of Starways Congress worshipped many gods, or none, but they agreed with the Archcardinal. Lusitania would be settled from Baja, and therefore under Catholic License, as tradition demanded. But the colony could never spread beyond a limited area or exceed a limited population. And it was bound, above all, by one law: the piggies were not to be disturbed.

Chapter 1 -- Pipo

Since we are not yet fully comfortable with the idea that people from the next village are as human as ourselves, it is presumptuous in the extreme to suppose we could ever look at sociable, tool-making creatures who arose from other evolutionary paths and see not beasts but brothers, not rivals but fellow pilgrims journeying to the shrine of intelligence.

Yet that is what I see, or yearn to see. The difference between raman and varelse is not in the creature judged, but in the creature judging. When we declare an alien species to be raman, it does not mean that they have passed a threshold of moral maturity. It means that we have.

-- Demosthenes, Letter to the Framlings

Rooter was at once the most difficult and the most helpful of the pequeninos. He was always there whenever Pipo visited their clearing, and did his best to answer the questions Pipo was forbidden by law to come right out and ask. Pipo depended on him-- too much, probably-- yet though Rooter clowned and played like the irresponsible youngling that he was, he also watched, probed, tested. Pipo always had to beware of the traps that Rooter set for him.

A moment ago Rooter had been shimmying up trees, gripping the bark with only the horny pads on his ankles and inside his thighs. In his hands he carried two sticks-- Father Sticks, they were called-- which he beat against the tree in a compelling, arhythmic pattern all the while he climbed.

The noise brought Mandachuva out of the log house. He called to Rooter in the Males' Language, and then in Portuguese. "P'ra baixo, bicho!" Several piggies nearby, hearing his Portuguese wordplay, expressed their appreciation by rubbing their thighs together sharply. It made a hissing noise, and Mandachuva took a little hop in the air in delight at their applause.

Rooter, in the meantime, bent over backward until it seemed certain he would fall. Then he flipped off with his hands, did a somersault in the air, and landed on his legs, hopping a few times but not stumbling.

"So now you're an acrobat," said Pipo.

Rooter swaggered over to him. It was his way of imitating humans. It was all the more effective as ridicule because his flattened upturned snout looked decidedly porcine. No wonder that offworlders called them "piggies." The first visitors to this world had started calling them that in their first reports back in '86, and by the time Lusitania Colony was founded in 1925, the name was indelible. The xenologers scattered among the Hundred Worlds wrote of them as "Lusitanian Aborigines," though Pipo knew perfectly well that this was merely a matter of professional dignity-- except in scholarly papers, xenologers no doubt called them piggies, too. As for Pipo, he called them pequeninos, and they seemed not to object, for now they called themselves "Little Ones." Still, dignity or not, there was no denying it. At moments like this, Rooter looked like a hog on its hind legs.

"Acrobat," Rooter said, trying out the new word. "What I did? You have a word for people who do that? So there are people who do that as their work?"

Pipo sighed silently, even as he froze his smile in place. The law strictly forbade him to share information about human society, lest it contaminate piggy culture. Yet Rooter played a constant game of squeezing the last drop of implication out of everything Pipo said. This time, though, Pipo had no one to blame but himself, letting out a silly remark that opened unnecessary windows onto human life. Now and then he got so comfortable among the pequeninos that he spoke naturally. Always a danger. I'm not good at this constant game of taking information while trying to give nothing in return. Libo, my close-mouthed son, already he's better at discretion than I am, and he's only been apprenticed to me-- how long since he turned thirteen? --four months.

"I wish I had pads on my legs like yours," said Pipo. "The bark on that tree would rip my skin to shreds."

"That would cause us all to be ashamed." Rooter held still in the expectant posture that Pipo thought of as their way of showing mild anxiety, or perhaps a nonverbal warning to other pequeninos to be cautious. It might also have been a sign of extreme fear, but as far as Pipo knew he had never seen a pequenino feel extreme fear.

In any event, Pipo spoke quickly to calm him. "Don't worry, I'm too old and soft to climb trees like that. I'll leave it to you younglings."

And it worked; Rooter's body at once became mobile again. "I like to climb trees. I can see everything." Rooter squatted in front of Pipo and leaned his face in close. "Will you bring the beast that runs over the grass without touching the ground? The others don't believe me when I say I saw such a thing."

Another trap. What, Pipo, xenologer, will you humiliate this individual of the community you're studying? Or will you adhere to the rigid law set up by Starways Congress to govern this encounter? There were few precedents. The only other intelligent aliens that humankind had encountered were the buggers, three thousand years ago, and at the end of it the buggers were all dead. This time Starways Congress was making sure that if humanity erred, their errors would be in the opposite direction. Minimal information, minimal contact.

Rooter recognized Pipo's hesitation, his careful silence.

"You never tell us anything," said Rooter. "You watch us and study us, but you never let us past your fence and into your village to watch you and study you."

Pipo answered as honestly as he could, but it was more important to be careful than to be honest. "If you learn so little and we learn so much, why is it that you speak both Stark and Portuguese while I'm still struggling with your language?"

"We're smarter." Then Rooter leaned back and spun around on his buttocks so his back was toward Pipo. "Go back behind your fence," he said.

Pipo stood at once. Not too far away, Libo was with three pequeninos, trying to learn how they wove dried merdona vines into thatch. He saw Pipo and in a moment was with his father, ready to go. Pipo led him off without a word; since the pequeninos were so fluent in human languages, they never discussed what they had learned until they were inside the gate.

It took a half hour to get home, and it was raining heavily when they passed through the gate and walked along the face of the hill to the Zenador's Station. Zenador? Pipo thought of the word as he looked at the small sign above the door. On it the word XENOLOGER was written in Stark. That is what I am, I suppose, thought Pipo, at least to the offworlders. But the Portuguese title Zenador was so much easier to say than on Lusitania hardly anyone said xenologer, even when speaking Stark. That is how languages change, thought Pipo. If it weren't for the ansible, providing instantaneous communication among the Hundred Worlds, we could not possibly maintain a common language. Interstellar travel is far too rare and slow. Stark would splinter into ten thousand dialects within a

century. It might be interesting to have the computers run a projection of linguistic changes on Lusitania, if Stark were allowed to decay and absorb Portuguese--

"Father," said Libo.

Only then did Pipo notice that he had stopped ten meters away from the station. Tangents. The best parts of my intellectual life are tangential, in areas outside my expertise. I suppose because within my area of expertise the regulations they have placed upon me make it impossible to know or understand anything. The science of xenology insists on more mysteries than Mother Church.

His handprint was enough to unlock the door. Pipo knew how the evening would unfold even as he stepped inside to begin. It would take several hours of work at the terminals for them both to report what they had done during today's encounter. Pipo would then read over Libo's notes, and Libo would read Pipo's, and when they were satisfied, Pipo would write up a brief summary and then let the computers take it from there, filing the notes and also transmitting them instantly, by ansible, to the xenologers in the rest of the Hundred Worlds. More than a thousand scientists whose whole career is studying the one alien race we know, and except for what little the satellites can discover about this arboreal species, all the information my colleagues have is what Libo and I send them. This is definitely minimal intervention.

But when Pipo got inside the station, he saw at once that it would not be an evening of steady but relaxing work. Dona Cristof was there, dressed in her monastic robes. Was it one of the younger children, in trouble at school?

"No, no," said Dona Crist . "All your children are doing very well, except this one, who I think is far too young to be out of school and working here, even as an apprentice. "

Libo said nothing. A wise decision, thought Pipo. Dona Crist was a brilliant and engaging, perhaps even beautiful, young woman, but she was first and foremost a monk of the Order of the Filhos da Mente de Cristo, Children of the Mind of Christ, and she was not beautiful to behold when she was angry at ignorance and stupidity. It was amazing the number of quite intelligent people whose ignorance and stupidity had melted somewhat in the fire of her scorn. Silence, Libo, it's a policy that will do you good.

"I'm not here about any child of yours at all," said Dona Crist . "I'm here about Novinha."

Dona Crist did not have to mention a last name; everybody knew Novinha. The terrible Descolada had ended only eight years before. The plague had threatened to wipe out the colony before it had a fair chance to get started; the cure was discovered by Novinha's father and mother, Gusto and Cida, the two xenobiologists. It was a tragic irony that they found the cause of the disease and its treatment too late to save themselves. Theirs was the last Descolada funeral.

Pipo clearly remembered the little girl Novinha, standing there holding Mayor Bosquinha's hand while Bishop Peregrino conducted the funeral mass himself. No-- not holding the Mayor's hand. The picture came back to his mind, and, with it, the way he felt. What does she make of this? he remembered asking himself. It's the funeral of her parents, she's the last survivor in her family; yet

all around her she can sense the great rejoicing of the people of this colony. Young as she is, does she understand that our joy is the best tribute to her parents? They struggled and succeeded, finding our salvation in the waning days before they died; we are here to celebrate the great gift they gave us. But to you, Novinha, it's the death of your parents, as your brothers died before. Five hundred dead, and more than a hundred masses for the dead here in this colony in the last six months, and all of them were held in an atmosphere of fear and grief and despair. Now, when your parents die, the fear and grief and despair are no less for you than ever before-- but no one else shares your pain. It is the relief from pain that is foremost in our minds.

Watching her, trying to imagine her feelings, he succeeded only in rekindling his own grief at the death of his own Maria, seven years old, swept away in the wind of death that covered her body in cancerous growth and rampant funguses, the flesh swelling or decaying, a new limb, not arm or leg, growing out of her hip, while the flesh sloughed off her feet and head, baring the bones, her sweet and beautiful body destroyed before their eyes, while her bright mind was mercilessly alert, able to feel all that happened to her until she cried out to God to let her die. Pipo remembered that, and then remembered her requiem mass, shared with five other victims. As he sat, knelt, stood there with his wife and surviving children, he had felt the perfect unity of the people in the Cathedral. He knew that his pain was everybody's pain, that through the loss of his eldest daughter he was bound to his community with the inseparable bonds of grief, and it was a comfort to him, it was something to cling to. That was how such a grief ought to be, a public mourning.

Little Novinha had nothing of that. Her pain was, if anything, worse than Pipo's had been-- at least Pipo had not been left without any family at all, and he was an adult, not a child terrified by suddenly losing the foundation of her life. In her grief she was not drawn more tightly into the community, but rather excluded from it. Today everyone was rejoicing, except her. Today everyone praised her parents; she alone yearned for them, would rather they had never found the cure for others if only they could have remained alive themselves.

Her isolation was so acute that Pipo could see it from where he sat. Novinha took her hand away from the Mayor as quickly as possible. Her tears dried up as the mass progressed; by the end she sat in silence, like a prisoner refusing to cooperate with her captors. Pipo's heart broke for her. Yet he knew that even if he tried, he could not conceal his own gladness at the end of the Descolada, his rejoicing that none of his other children would be taken from him. She would see that; his effort to comfort her would be a mockery, would drive her further away.

After the mass she walked in bitter solitude amid the crowds of well-meaning people who cruelly told her that her parents were sure to be saints, sure to sit at the right hand of God. What kind of comfort is that for a child? Pipo whispered aloud to his wife, "She'll never forgive us for today."

"Forgive?" Conceicao was not one of those wives who instantly understood her husband's train of thought. "We didn't kill her parents--"

"But we're all rejoicing today, aren't we? She'll never forgive us for that."

"Nonsense. She doesn't understand anyway; she's too young."

She understands, Pipo thought. Didn't Maria understand things when she was even younger than Novinha is now?

As the years passed-- eight years now-- he had seen her from time to time. She was his son Libo's age, and until Libo's thirteenth birthday that meant they were in many classes together. He heard her give occasional readings and speeches, along with other children. There was an elegance to her thought, an intensity to her examination of ideas that appealed to him. At the same time, she seemed utterly cold, completely removed from everyone else. Pipo's own boy, Libo, was shy, but even so he had several friends, and had won the affection of his teachers. Novinha, though, had no friends at all, no one whose gaze she sought after a moment of triumph. There was no teacher who genuinely liked her, because she refused to reciprocate, to respond. "She is emotionally paralyzed," Dona Crist said once when Pipo asked about her. "There is no reaching her. She swears that she's perfectly happy, and doesn't see any need to change."

Now Dona Crist had come to the Zenador's Station to talk to Pipo about Novinha. Why Pipo? He could guess only one reason for the principal of the school to come to him about this particular orphaned girl. "Am I to believe that in all the years you've had Novinha in your school, I'm the only person who asked about her?"

"Not the only person," she said. "There was all kinds of interest in her a couple of years ago, when the Pope beatified her parents. Everybody asked then whether the daughter of Gusto and Cida, Os Venerados, had ever noticed any miraculous events associated with her parents, as so many other people had."

"They actually asked her that?"

"There were rumors, and Bishop Peregrino had to investigate." Dona Crist got a bit tight-lipped when she spoke of the young spiritual leader of Lusitania Colony. But then, it was said that the hierarchy never got along well with the order of the Filhos da Mente de Cristo. "Her answer was instructive. "

"I can imagine."

"She said, more or less, that if her parents were actually listening to prayers and had any influence in heaven to get them granted, then why wouldn't they have answered her prayer, for them to return from the grave? That would be a useful miracle, she said, and there are precedents. If Os Venerados actually had the power to grant miracles, then it must mean they did not love her enough to answer her prayer. She preferred to believe that her parents still loved her, and simply did not have the power to act."

"A born sophist," said Pipo.

"A sophist and an expert in guilt: she told the Bishop that if the Pope declared her parents to be venerable, it would be the same as the Church saying that her parents hated her. The Petition for canonization of her parents was proof that Lusitania despised her; if it was granted, it would be proof that the Church itself was despicable. Bishop Peregrino was livid."

"I notice he sent in the petition anyway."

"For the good of the community. And there were all those miracles."

"Someone touches the shrine and a headache goes away and they cry 'Milagre!-- os santos me abençoaram!'" Miracle!-- the saints have blessed me!

"You know that Holy Rome requires more substantial miracles than that. But it doesn't matter. The Pope graciously allowed us to call our little town Milagre, and now I imagine that every time someone says that name, Novinha burns a little hotter with her secret rage."

"Or colder. One never knows what temperature that sort of thing will take."

"Anyway, Pipo, you aren't the only one who ever asked about her. But you're the only one who ever asked about her for her own sake, and not because of her most Holy and Blessed parents."

It was a sad thought, that except for the Filhos, who ran the schools of Lusitania, there had been no concern for the girl except the slender shards of attention Pipo had spared for her over the years.

"She has one friend," said Libo.

Pipo had forgotten that his son was there-- Libo was so quiet that he was easy to overlook. Dona Crist also seemed startled. "Libo," she said, "I think we were indiscreet, talking about one of your schoolmates like this."

"I'm apprentice Zenador now," Libo reminded her. It meant he wasn't in school.

"Who is her friend?" asked Pipo.

"Marc o."

"Marcos Ribeira," Dona Crist explained. "The tall boy--"

"Ah, yes, the one who's built like a cabra."

"He is strong," said Dona Crist. "But I've never noticed any friendship between them."

"Once when Marc o was accused of something, and she happened to see it, she spoke for him."

"You put a generous interpretation on it, Libo," said Dona Crist. "I think it is more accurate to say she spoke against the boys who actually did it and were trying to put the blame on him."

"Marcdo doesn't see it that way," said Libo. "I noticed a couple of times, the way he watches her. It isn't much, but there is somebody who likes her."

"Do you like her?" asked Pipo.

Libo paused for a moment in silence. Pipo knew what it meant. He was examining himself to find an answer. Not the answer that he thought would be most likely to bring him adult favor, and not the answer that would provoke their ire-- the two kinds of deception that most children his age delighted in. He was examining himself to discover the truth.

"I think," Libo said, "that I understood that she didn't want to be liked. As if she were a visitor who expected to go back home any day."

Dona Crist nodded gravely. "Yes, that's exactly right, that's exactly the way she seems. But now, Libo, we must end our indiscretion by asking you to leave us while we--"

He was gone before she finished her sentence, with a quick nod of his head, a half-smile that said, Yes, I understand, and a deftness of movement that made his exit more eloquent proof of his discretion than if he had argued to stay. By this Pipo knew that Libo was annoyed at being asked to leave; he had a knack for making adults feel vaguely immature by comparison to him.

"Pipo," said the principal, "she has petitioned for an early examination as xenobiologist. To take her parents' place."

Pipo raised an eyebrow.

"She claims that she has been studying the field intensely since she was a little child. That she's ready to begin the work right now, without apprenticeship."

"She's thirteen, isn't she?"

"There are precedents. Many have taken such tests early. One even passed it younger than her. It was two thousand years ago, but it was allowed. Bishop Peregrino is against it, Of course, but Mayor Bosquinha, bless her practical heart, has pointed out that Lusitania needs a xenobiologist quite badly-- we need to be about the business of developing new strains of plant life so we can get some decent variety in our diet and much better harvests from Lusitanian soil. In her words, 'I don't care if it's an infant, we need a xenobiologist.'"

"And you want me to supervise her examination?"

"If you would be so kind."

"I'll be glad to."

"I told them you would."

"I confess I have an ulterior motive."

"Oh?"

"I should have done more for the girl. I'd like to see if it isn't too late to begin."

Dona Crist laughed a bit. "Oh, Pipo, I'd be glad for you to try. But do believe me, my dear friend, touching her heart is like bathing in ice."

"I imagine. I imagine it feels like bathing in ice to the person touching her. But how does it feel to her? Cold as she is, it must surely burn like fire."

"Such a poet," said Dona Crist. There was no irony in her voice; she meant it. "Do the piggies understand that we've sent our very best as our ambassador?"

"I try to tell them, but they're skeptical."

"I'll send her to you tomorrow. I warn you-- she'll expect to take the examinations cold, and she'll resist any attempt on your part to pre-examine her. "

Pipo smiled. "I'm far more worried about what will happen after she takes the test. If she fails, then she'll have very bad problems. And if she passes, then my problems will begin."

"Why?"

"Libo will be after me to let him examine early for Zenador. And if he did that, there'd be no reason for me not to go home, curl up, and die."

"Such a romantic fool you are, Pipo. If there's any man in Milagre who's capable of accepting his thirteen-year-old son as a colleague, it's you. "

After she left, Pipo and Libo worked together, as usual, recording the day's events with the pequeninos. Pipo compared Libo's work, his way of thinking, his insights, his attitudes, with those of the graduate students he had known in University before joining the Lusitania Colony. He might be small, and there might be a lot of theory and knowledge for him yet to learn, but he was already a true scientist in his method, and a humanist at heart. By the time the evening's work was done and they walked home together by the light of Lusitania's large and dazzling moon, Pipo had decided that Libo already deserved to be treated as a colleague, whether he took the examination or not. The tests couldn't measure the things that really counted, anyway.

And whether she liked it or not, Pipo intended to find out if Novinha had the unmeasurable qualities of a scientist; if she didn't, then he'd see to it she didn't take the test, regardless of how many facts she had memorized.

Pipo meant to be difficult. Novinha knew how adults acted when they planned not to do things her way, but didn't want a fight or even any nastiness. Of course, of course you can take the test. But there's no reason to rush into it, let's take some time, let me make sure you'll be successful on the first attempt.

Novinha didn't want to wait. Novinha was ready.

"I'll jump through any hoops you want," she said.

His face went cold. Their faces always did. That was all right, coldness was all right, she could freeze them to death. "I don't want you to jump through hoops," he said.

"The only thing I ask is that you line them up all in a row so I can jump through them quickly. I don't want to be put off for days and days."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "You're in such a hurry."

"I'm ready. The Starways Code allows me to challenge the test at any time. It's between me and the Starways Congress, and I can't find anywhere that it says a xenologer can try to second-guess the Interplanetary Examinations Board."

"Then you haven't read carefully."

"The only thing I need to take the test before I'm sixteen is the authorization of my legal guardian. I don't have a legal guardian."

"On the contrary," said Pipo. "Mayor Bosquinha was your legal guardian from the day of your parents' death."

"And she agreed I could take the test."

"Provided you came to me."

Novinha saw the intense look in his eyes. She didn't know Pipo, so she thought it was the look she had seen in so many eyes, the desire to dominate, to rule her, the desire to cut through her determination and break her independence, the desire to make her submit.

From ice to fire in an instant. "What do you know about xenobiology! You only go out and talk to the piggies, you don't even begin to understand the workings of genes! Who are you to judge me! Lusitania needs a xenobiologist, and they've been without one for eight years. And you want to make them wait even longer, just so you can be in control!"

To her surprise, he didn't become flustered, didn't retreat. Nor did he get angry in return. It was as if she hadn't spoken.

"I see," he said quietly. "It's because of your great love of the people of Lusitania that you wish to become xenobiologist. Seeing the public need, you sacrificed and prepared yourself to enter early into a lifetime of altruistic service."

It sounded absurd, hearing him say it like that. And it wasn't at all what she felt. "Isn't that a good enough reason?"

"If it were true, it would be good enough."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"Your own words called you a liar. You spoke of how much they, the people of Lusitania, need you. But you live among us. You've lived among us all your life. Ready to sacrifice for us, and yet you don't feel yourself to be part of this community."

So he wasn't like the adults who always believed lies as long as they made her seem to be the child they wanted her to be. "Why should I feel like part of the community? I'm not. "

He nodded gravely, as if considering her answer. "What community are you a part of?"

"The only other communities on Lusitania are the piggies, and you haven't seen me out there with the tree-worshippers. "

"There are many other communities on Lusitania. For instance, you're a student-- there's a community of students.

"Not for me."

"I know. You have no friends, you have no intimate associates, you go to mass but you never go to confession, you are so completely detached that as far as possible you don't touch the life of this colony, you don't touch the life of the human race at any point. From all the evidence, you live in complete isolation."

Novinha wasn't prepared for this. He was naming the underlying pain of her life, and she didn't have a strategy devised to cope with it. "If I do, it isn't my fault."

"I know that. I know where it began, and I know whose fault it was that it continues to this day."

"Mine?"

"Mine. And everyone else's. But mine most of all, because I knew what was happening to you and I did nothing at all. Until today."

"And today you're going to keep me from the one thing that matters to me in my life! Thanks so much for your compassion!"

Again he nodded solemnly, as if he were accepting and acknowledging her ironic gratitude. "In one sense, Novinha, it doesn't matter that it isn't your fault. Because the town of Milagre is a community, and whether it has treated you badly or not, it must still act as all communities do, to provide the greatest possible happiness for all its members."

"Which means everybody on Lusitania except me-- me and the piggies."

"The xenobiologist is very important to a colony, especially one like this, surrounded by a fence that forever limits our growth. Our xenobiologist must find ways to grow more protein and carbohydrate per hectare, which means genetically altering the Earthborn corn and potatoes to make--"

"To make maximum use of the nutrients available in the Lusitanian environment. Do you think I'm planning to take the examination without knowing what my life's work would be?"

"Your life's work, to devote yourself to improving the lives of people you despise."

Now Novinha saw the trap that he had laid for her. Too late; it had sprung. "So you think that a xenobiologist can't do her work unless she loves the people who use the things she makes?"

"I don't care whether you love us or not. What I have to know is what you really want. Why you're so passionate to do this."

"Basic psychology. My parents died in this work, and so I'mixying to step into their role."

"Maybe," said Pipo. "And maybe not. What I want to know, Novinha, what I must know before I'll let you take the test, is what community you do belong to."

"You said it yourself! I don't belong to any."

"Impossible. Every person is defined by the communities she belongs to and the ones she doesn't belong to. I am this and this and this, but definitely not that and that and that. All your definitions are negative. I could make an infinite list of the things you are not. But a person who really believes she doesn't belong to any community at all invariably kills herself, either by killing her body or by giving up her identity and going mad."

"That's me, insane to the root."

"Not insane. Driven by a sense of purpose that is frightening. If you take the test you'll pass it. But before I let you take it, I have to know: Who will you become when you pass? What do you believe in, what are you part of, what do you care about, what do you love?"

"Nobody in this or any other world."

"I don't believe you."

"I've never known a good man or woman in the world except my parents and they're dead! And even they-- nobody understands anything."

"You."

"I'm part of anything, aren't I? But nobody understands anybody, not even you, pretending to be so wise and compassionate but you're only getting me to cry like this because you have the power to stop me from doing what I want to do--"

"And it isn't xenobiology."

"Yes it is! That's part of it, anyway."

"And what's the rest of it?"

"What you are. What you do. Only you're doing it all wrong, you're doing it stupidly."

"Xenobiologist and xenologer."

"They made a stupid mistake when they created a new science to study the piggies. They were a bunch of tired old anthropologists who put on new hats and called themselves Xenologers. But you can't understand the piggies just by watching the way they behave! They came out of a different evolution! You have to understand their genes, what's going on inside their cells. And the other animals' cells, too, because they can't be studied by themselves, nobody lives in isolation."

Don't lecture me, thought Pipo. Tell me what you feel.

And to provoke her to be more emotional, he whispered, "Except you."

It worked. From cold and contemptuous she became hot and defensive. "You'll never understand them! But I will!"

"Why do you care about them? What are the piggies to you?"

"You'd never understand. You're a good Catholic." She said the word with contempt. "It's a book that's on the Index."

Pipo's face glowed with sudden understanding. "The Hive Queen and the Hegemon."

"He lived three thousand years ago, whoever he was, the one who called himself the Speaker for the Dead. But he understood the buggers! We wiped them all out, the only other alien race we ever knew, we killed them all, but he understood."

"And you want to write the story of the piggies the way the original Speaker wrote of the buggers."

"The way you say it, you make it sound as easy as doing a scholarly paper. You don't know what it was like to write the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. How much agony it was for him to-- to imagine himself inside an alien mind-- and come out of it filled with love for the great creature we destroyed. He lived at the same time as the worst human being who ever lived, Ender the Xenocide,

who destroyed the buggers-- and he did his best to undo what Ender did, the Speaker for the Dead tried to raise the dead--"

"But he couldn't."

"But he did! He made them live again-- you'd know it if you had read the book! I don't know about Jesus, I listen to Bishop Peregrino and I don't think there's any power in their priesthood to turn wafers into flesh or forgive a milligram of guilt. But the Speaker for the Dead brought the hive queen back to life."

"Then where is she?"

"In here! In me!"

He nodded. "And someone else is in you. The Speaker for the Dead. That's who you want to be."

"It's the only true story I ever heard," she said. "The only one I care about. Is that what you wanted to hear? That I'm a heretic? And my whole life's work is going to be adding another book to the Index of truths that good Catholics are forbidden to read?"

"What I wanted to hear," said Pipo softly, "was the name of what you are instead of the name of all the things that you are not. What you are is the hive queen. What you are is the Speaker for the Dead. It's a very small community, small in numbers, but a great-hearted one. So you chose not to be part of the bands of children who group together for the sole purpose of excluding others, and people look at you and say, poor girl, she's so isolated, but you know a secret, you know who you really are. You are the one human being who is capable of understanding the alien mind, because you are the alien mind; you know what it is to be unhuman because there's never been any human group that gave you credentials as a bona fide homo sapiens."

"Now you say I'm not even human? You made me cry like a little girl because you wouldn't let me take the test, you made me humiliate myself, and now you say I'm unhuman?"

"You can take the test."

The words hung in the air.

"When?" she whispered.

"Tonight. Tomorrow. Begin when you like. I'll stop my work to take you through the tests as quickly as you like."

"Thank you! Thank you, I--"

"Become the Speaker for the Dead. I'll help you all I can. The law forbids me to take anyone but my apprentice, my son Libo, out to meet the pequeninos. But we'll open our notes to you. Everything we learn, we'll show you. All our guesses and speculation. In return, you also show us

all your work, what you find out about the genetic patterns of this world that might help us understand the pequeninos. And when we've learned enough, together, you can write your book, you can become the Speaker. But this time not the Speaker for the Dead. The pequeninos aren't dead."

In spite of herself, she smiled. "The Speaker for the Living."

"I've read the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, too," he said. "I can't think of a better place for you to find your name."

But she did not trust him yet, did not believe what he seemed to be promising. "I'll want to come here often. All the time."

"We lock it up when we go home to bed."

"But all the rest of the time. You'll get tired of me. You'll tell me to go away. You'll keep secrets from me. You'll tell me to be quiet and not mention my ideas."

"We've only just become friends, and already you think I'm such a liar and cheat, such an impatient oaf."

"But you will, everyone does; they all wish I'd go away--"

Pipo shrugged. "So? Sometime or other everybody wishes everybody would go away. Sometimes I'll wish you would go away. What I'm telling you now is that even at those times, even if I tell you to go away, you don't have to go away."

It was the most bafflingly perfect thing that anyone had ever said to her. "That's crazy."

"Only one thing. Promise me you'll never try to go out to the pequeninos. Because I can never let you do that, and if somehow you do it anyway, Starways Congress would close down all our work here, forbid any contact with them. Do you promise me? Or everything-- my work, your work-- it will all be undone."

"I promise."

"When will you take the test?"

"Now! Can I begin it now?"

He laughed gently, then reached out a hand and without looking touched the terminal. It came to life, the first genetic models appearing in the air above the terminal.

"You had the examination ready," she said. "You were all set to go! You knew that you'd let me do it all along!"

He shook his head. "I hoped. I believed in you. I wanted to help you do what you dreamed of doing. As long as it was something good."

She would not have been Novinha if she hadn't found one more poisonous thing to say. "I see. You are the judge of dreams."

Perhaps he didn't know it was an insult. He only smiled and said, "Faith, hope, and love-- these three. But the greatest of these is love."

"You don't love me," she said.

"Ah," he said. "I am the judge of dreams, and you are the judge of love. Well, I find you guilty of dreaming good dreams, and sentence you to a lifetime of working and suffering for the sake of your dreams. I only hope that someday you won't declare me innocent of the crime of loving you." He grew reflective for a moment. "I lost a daughter in the Descolada. Maria. She would have been only a few years older than you. "

"And I remind you of her?"

"I was thinking that she would have been nothing at all like you."

She began the test. It took three days. She passed it, with a score a good deal higher than many a graduate student. In retrospect, however, she would not remember the test because it was the beginning of her career, the end of her childhood, the confirmation of her vocation for her life's work. She would remember the test because it was the beginning of her time in Pipo's Station, where Pipo and Libo and Novinha together formed the first community she belonged to since her parents were put into the earth.

It was not easy, especially at the beginning. Novinha did not instantly shed her habit of cold confrontation. Pipo understood it, was prepared to bend with her verbal blows. It was much more of a challenge for Libo. The Zenador's Station had been a place where he and his father could be alone together. Now, without anyone asking his consent, a third person had been added, a cold and demanding person, who spoke to him as if he were a child, even though they were the same age. It galled him that she was a full-fledged xenobiologist, with all the adult status that that implied, when he was still an apprentice.

But he tried to bear it patiently. He was naturally calm, and quiet adhered to him. He was not prone to taking umbrage openly. But Pipo knew his son and saw him burn. After a while even Novinha, insensitive as she was, began to realize that she was provoking Libo more than any normal young man could possibly endure. But instead of easing up on him, she began to regard it as a challenge. How could she force some response from this unnaturally calm, gentle-spirited, beautiful boy?

"You mean you've been working all these years," she said one day, "and you don't even know how the piggies reproduce? How do you know they're all males?"

Libo answered softly. "We explained male and female to them as they learned our languages. They chose to call themselves males. And referred to the other ones, the ones we've never seen, as females."

"But for all you know, they reproduce by budding! Or mitosis!"

Her tone was contemptuous, and Libo did not answer quickly. Pipo imagined he could hear his son's thoughts, carefully rephrasing his answer until it was gentle and safe. "I wish our work were more like physical anthropology," he said. "Then we would be more prepared to apply your research into Lusitania's subcellular life patterns to what we learn about the pequeninos."

Novinha looked horrified. "You mean you don't even take tissue samples?"

Libo blushed slightly, but his voice was still calm when he answered. The boy would have been like this under questioning by the Inquisition, Pipo thought. "It is foolish, I guess," said Libo, "but we're afraid the pequeninos would wonder why we took pieces of their bodies. If one of them took sick by chance afterward, would they think we caused the illness?"

"What if you took something they shed naturally? You can learn a lot from a hair."

Libo nodded; Pipo, watching from his terminal on the other side of the room, recognized the gesture-- Libo had learned it from his father. "Many primitive tribes of Earth believed that sheddings from their bodies contained some of their life and strength. What if the piggies thought we were doing magic against them?"

"Don't you know their language? I thought some of them spoke Stark, too." She made no effort to hide her disdain. "Can't you explain what the samples are for?"

"You're right," he said quietly. "But if we explained what we'd use the tissue samples for, we might accidently teach them the concepts of biological science a thousand years before they would naturally have reached that point. That's why the law forbids us to explain things like that."

Finally, Novinha was abashed. "I didn't realize how tightly you were bound by the doctrine of minimal intervention."

Pipo was glad to hear her retreat from her arrogance, but if anything, her humility was worse. The child was so isolated from human contact that she spoke like an excessively formal science book. Pipo wondered if it was already too late to teach her how to be a human being.

It wasn't. Once she realized that they were excellent at their science, and she knew almost nothing of it, she dropped her aggressive stance and went almost to the opposite extreme. For weeks she spoke to Pipo and Libo only rarely. Instead she studied their reports, trying to grasp the purpose behind what they were doing. Now and then she had a question, and asked; they answered politely and thoroughly.

Politeness gradually gave way to familiarity. Pipo and Libo began to converse openly in front of her, airing their speculations about why the piggies had developed some of their strange behaviors, what meaning lay behind some of their odd statements, why they remained so maddeningly impenetrable. And since the study of piggies was a very new branch of science, it didn't take long for Novinha to be expert enough, even at second hand, to offer some hypotheses. "After all," said Pipo, encouraging her, "we're all blind together."

Pipo had foreseen what happened next. Libo's carefully cultivated patience had made him seem cold and reserved to others of his age, when Pipo could prevail on him even to attempt to socialize; Novinha's isolation was more flamboyant but no more thorough. Now, however, their common interest in the piggies drew them close-- who else could they talk to, when no one but Pipo could even understand their conversations?

They relaxed together, laughed themselves to tears over jokes that could not possibly amuse any other Luso. Just as the piggies seemed to name every tree in the forest, Libo playfully named all the furniture in the Zenador's Station, and periodically announced that certain items were in a bad mood and shouldn't be disturbed. "Don't sit on Chair! It's her time of the month again." They had never seen a piggy female, and the males always seemed to refer to them with almost religious reverence; Novinha wrote a series of mock reports on an imaginary piggy woman called Reverend Mother, who was hilariously bitchy and demanding.

It was not all laughter. There were problems, worries, and once a time of real fear that they might have done exactly what the Starways Congress had tried so hard to prevent-- making radical changes in piggy society. It began with Rooter, of course. Rooter, who persisted in asking challenging, impossible questions, like, "If you have no other city of humans, how can you go to war? There's no honor for you in killing Little Ones." Pipo babbled something about how humans would never kill pequeninos, Little Ones; but he knew that this wasn't the question Rooter was really asking.

Pipo had known for years that the piggies knew the concept of war, but for days after that Libo and Novinha argued heatedly about whether Rooter's question proved that the piggies regarded war as desirable or merely unavoidable. There were other bits of information from Rooter, some important, some not-- and many whose importance was impossible to judge. In a way, Rooter himself was proof of the wisdom of the policy that forbade the xenologers to ask questions that would reveal human expectations, and therefore human practices. Rooter's questions invariably gave them more answers than they got from his answers to their own questions.

The last information Rooter gave them, though, was not in a question. It was a guess, spoken to Libo privately, when Pipo was off with some of the others examining the way they built their log house. "I know I know," said Rooter, "I know why Pipo is still alive. Your women are too stupid to know that he is wise."

Libo struggled to make sense of this seeming non sequitur. What did Rooter think, that if human women were smarter, they would kill Pipo? The talk of killing was disturbing-- this was obviously an important matter, and Libo did not know how to handle it alone. Yet he couldn't call Pipo to help, since Rooter obviously wanted to discuss it where Pipo couldn't hear.

When Libo didn't answer, Rooter persisted. "Your women, they are weak and stupid. I told the others this, and they said I could ask you. Your women don't see Pipo's wisdom. Is this true?"

Rooter seemed very agitated; he was breathing heavily, and he kept pulling hairs from his arms, four and five at a time. Libo had to answer, somehow. "Most women don't know him," he said.

"Then how will they know if he should die?" asked Rooter. Then, suddenly, he went very still and spoke very loudly. "You are cabras!"

Only then did Pipo come into view, wondering what the shouting was about. He saw at once that Libo was desperately out of his depth. Yet Pipo had no notion what the conversation was even about-- how could he help? All he knew was that Rooter was saying humans-- or at least Pipo and Libo-- were somehow like the large beasts that grazed in herds on the prairie. Pipo couldn't even tell if Rooter was angry or happy.

"You are cabras! You decide!" He pointed at Libo and then at Pipo. "Your women don't choose your honor, you do! Just like in battle, but all the time!"

Pipo had no idea what Rooter was talking about, but he could see that all the pequeninos were motionless as stumps, waiting for him-- or Libo-- to answer. It was plain Libo was too frightened by Rooter's strange behavior to dare any response at all. In this case, Pipo could see no point but to tell the truth; it was, after all, a relatively obvious and trivial bit of information about human society. It was against the rules that the Starways Congress had established for him, but failing to answer would be even more damaging, and so Pipo went ahead.

"Women and men decide together, or they decide for themselves," said Pipo. "One doesn't decide for the other."

It was apparently what all the piggies had been waiting for. "Cabras," they said, over and over; they ran to Rooter, hooting and whistling. They picked him up and rushed him off into the woods. Pipo tried to follow, but two of the piggies stopped him and shook their heads. It was a human gesture they had learned long before, but it held stronger meaning for the piggies. It was absolutely forbidden for Pipo to follow. They were going to the women, and that was the one place the piggies had told them they could never go.

On the way home, Libo reported how the difficulty began.

"Do you know what Rooter said? He said our women were weak and stupid."

"That's because he's never met Mayor Bosquinha. Or your mother, for that matter."

Libo laughed, because his mother, Conceicao, ruled the archives as if it were an ancient estacao in the wild mato-- if you entered her domain, you were utterly subject to her law. As he laughed, he felt something slip away, some idea that was important-- what were we talking about? The conversation went on; Libo had forgotten, and soon he even forgot that he had forgotten.

That night they heard the drumming sound that Pipo and Libo believed was part of some sort of celebration. It didn't happen all that often, like beating on great drums with heavy sticks. Tonight, though, the celebration seemed to go on forever. Pipo and Libo speculated that perhaps the human example of sexual equality had somehow given the male pequeninos some hope of liberation. "I think this may qualify as a serious modification of piggy behavior," Pipo said gravely. "If we find that we've caused real change, I'm going to have to report it, and Congress will probably direct that human contact with piggies be cut off for a while. Years, perhaps." It was a sobering thought-- that doing their job faithfully might lead Starways Congress to forbid them to do their job at all.

In the morning Novinha walked with them to the gate in the high fence that separated the human city from the slopes leading up to the forest hills where the piggies lived. Because Pipo and Libo were still trying to reassure each other that neither of them could have done any differently, Novinha walked on ahead and got to the gate first. When the others arrived, she pointed to a patch of freshly cleared red earth only thirty meters or so up the hill from the gate. "That's new," she said. "And there's something in it."

Pipo opened the gate, and Libo, being younger, ran on ahead to investigate. He stopped at the edge of the cleared patch and went completely rigid, staring down at whatever lay there. Pipo, seeing him, also stopped, and Novinha, suddenly frightened for Libo, ignored the regulation and ran through the gate. Libo's head rocked backward and he dropped to his knees; he clutched his tight-curling hair and cried out in terrible remorse.

Rooter lay spread-eagled in the cleared dirt. He had been eviscerated, and not carelessly: Each organ had been cleanly separated, and the strands and filaments of his limbs had also been pulled out and spread in a symmetrical pattern on the drying soil. Everything still had some connection to the body-- nothing had been completely severed.

Libo's agonized crying was almost hysterical. Novinha knelt by him and held him, rocked him, tried to soothe him. Pipo methodically took out his small camera and took pictures from every angle so the computer could analyze it in detail later.

"He was still alive when they did this," Libo said, when he had calmed enough to speak. Even so, he had to say the words slowly, carefully, as if he were a foreigner just learning to speak. "There's so much blood on the ground, spattered so far-- his heart had to be beating when they opened him up."

"We'll discuss it later," said Pipo.

Now the thing Libo had forgotten yesterday came back to him with cruel clarity. "It's what Rooter said about the women. They decide when the men should die. He told me that, and I--" He stopped himself. Of course he did nothing. The law required him to do nothing. And at that moment he decided that he hated the law. If the law meant allowing this to be done to Rooter, then the law had no understanding. Rooter was a person. You don't stand by and let this happen to a person just because you're studying him.

"They didn't dishonor him," said Novinha. "If there's one thing that's certain, it's the love that they have for trees. See?" Out of the center of his chest cavity, which was otherwise empty now, a very small seedling sprouted. "They planted a tree to mark his burial spot."

"Now we know why they name all their trees," said Libo bitterly. "They planted them as grave markers for the piggies they tortured to death."

"This is a very large forest," Pipo said calmly. "Please confine your hypotheses to what is at least remotely possible." They were calmed by his quiet, reasoned tone, his insistence that even now they behave as scientists.

"What should we do?" asked Novinha.

"We should get you back inside the perimeter immediately, " said Pipo. "It's forbidden for you to come out here."

"But I meant-- with the body-- what should we do?"

"Nothing," said Pipo. "The piggies have done what piggies do, for whatever reason piggies do it." He helped Libo to his feet.

Libo had trouble standing for a moment; he leaned on both of them for his first few steps. "What did I say?" he whispered. "I don't even know what it is I said that killed him."

"It wasn't you," said Pipo. "It was me."

"What, do you think you own them?" demanded Novinha. "Do you think their world revolves around you? The piggies did it, for whatever reason they have. It's plain enough this isn't the first time-- they were too deft at the vivisection for this to be the first time."

Pipo took it with black humor. "We're losing our wits, Libo. Novinha isn't supposed to know anything about xenology."

"You're right," said Libo. "Whatever may have triggered this, it's something they've done before. A custom." He was trying to sound calm.

"But that's even worse, isn't it?" said Novinha. "It's their custom to gut each other alive. " She looked at the other trees of the forest that began at the top of the hill and wondered how many of them were rooted in blood.

Pipo sent his report on the ansible, and the computer didn't give him any trouble about the priority level. He left it up to the oversight committee to decide whether contact with the piggies should be stopped. The committee could not identify any fatal error. "It is impossible to conceal the relationship between our sexes, since someday a woman may be xenologer," said the report, "and

we can find no point at which you did not act reasonably and prudently. Our tentative conclusion is that you were unwitting participants in some sort of power struggle, which was decided against Rooter, and that you should continue your contact with all reasonable prudence."

It was complete vindication, but it still wasn't easy to take. Libo had grown up knowing the piggies, or at least hearing about them from his father. He knew Rooter better than he knew any human being besides his family and Novinha. It took days for Libo to come back to the Zenador's Station, weeks before he would go back out into the forest. The piggies gave no sign that anything had changed; if anything, they were more open and friendly than before. No one ever spoke of Rooter, least of all Pipo and Libo. There were changes on the human side, however. Pipo and Libo never got more than a few steps away from each other when they were among them.

The pain and remorse of that day drew Libo and Novinha to rely on each other even more, as though darkness bound them closer than light. The piggies now seemed dangerous and uncertain, just as human company had always been, and between Pipo and Libo there now hung the question of who was at fault, no matter how often each tried to reassure the other. So the only good and reliable thing in Libo's life was Novinha, and in Novinha's life, Libo.

Even though Libo had a mother and siblings, and Pipo and Libo always went home to them, Novinha and Libo behaved as if the Zenador's Station were an island, with Pipo a loving but ever remote Prospero. Pipo wondered: Are the piggies like Ariel, leading the young lovers to happiness, or are they little Calibans, scarcely under control and chafing to do murder?

After a few months, Rooter's death faded into memory, and their laughter returned, though it was never quite as carefree as before. By the time they were seventeen, Libo and Novinha were so sure of each other that they routinely talked of what they would do together five, ten, twenty years later. Pipo never bothered to ask them about their marriage plans. After all, he thought, they studied biology from morning to night. Eventually it would occur to them to explore stable and socially acceptable reproductive strategies. In the meantime, it was enough that they puzzled endlessly over when and how the piggies mated, considering that the males had no discernable reproductive organ. Their speculations on how the piggies combined genetic material invariably ended in jokes so lewd that it took all of Pipo's self-control to pretend not to find them amusing.

So the Zenador's Station for those few short years was a place of true companionship for two brilliant young people who otherwise would have been condemned to cold solitude. It did not occur to any of them that the idyll would end abruptly, and forever, and under circumstances that would send a tremor throughout the Hundred Worlds.

It was all so simple, so commonplace. Novinha was analyzing the genetic structure of the fly-infested reeds along the river, and realized that the same subcellular body that had caused the Descolada was present in the cells of the reed. She brought several other cell structures into the air over the computer terminal and rotated them. They all contained the Descolada agent.

She called to Pipo, who was running through transcriptions of yesterday's visit to the piggies. The computer ran comparisons of every cell she had samples of. Regardless of cell function, regardless

of the species it was taken from, every alien cell contained the Descolada body, and the computer declared them absolutely identical in chemical proportions.

Novinha expected Pipo to nod, tell her it looked interesting, maybe come up with a hypothesis. Instead he sat down and ran the same test over, asking her questions about how the computer comparison operated, and then what the Descolada body actually did.

"Mother and Father never figured out what triggered it, but the Descolada body releases this little protein-- well, pseudo-protein, I suppose-- and it attacks the genetic molecules, starting at one end and unzipping the two strands of the molecule right down the middle. That's why they called it the descolador-- it unglues the DNA in humans, too."

"Show me what it does in alien cells."

Novinha put the simulation in motion.

"No, not just the genetic molecule-- the whole environment of the cell."

"It's just in the nucleus," she said. She widened the field to include more variables. The computer took it more slowly, since it was considering millions of random arrangements of nuclear material every second. In the reed cell, as a genetic molecule came unglued, several large ambient proteins affixed themselves to the open strands. "In humans, the DNA tries to recombine, but random proteins insert themselves so that cell after cell goes crazy. Sometimes they go into mitosis, like cancer, and sometimes they die. What's most important is that in humans the Descolada bodies themselves reproduce like crazy, passing from cell to cell. Of course, every alien creature already has them."

But Pipo wasn't interested in what she said. When the descolador had finished with the genetic molecules of the reed, he looked from one cell to another. "It's not just significant, it's the same," he said. "It's the same thing!"

Novinha didn't see at once what he had noticed. What was the same as what? Nor did she have time to ask. Pipo was already out of the chair, grabbing his coat, heading for the door. It was drizzling outside. Pipo paused only to call out to her, "Tell Libo not to bother coming, just show him that simulation and see if he can figure it out before I get back. He'll know-- it's the answer to the big one. The answer to everything."

"Tell me!"

He laughed. "Don't cheat. Libo will tell you, if you can't see it."

"Where are you going?"

"To ask the piggies if I'm right, of course! But I know I am, even if they lie about it. If I'm not back in an hour, I slipped in the rain and broke my leg."

Libo did not get to see the simulations. The meeting of the planning committee went way over time in an argument about extending the cattle range, and after the meeting Libo still had to pick up the week's groceries. By the time he got back, Pipo had been out for four hours, it was getting on toward dark, and the drizzle was turning to snow. They went out at once to look for him, afraid that it might take hours to find him in the woods.

They found him all too soon. His body was already cooling in the snow. The piggies hadn't even planted a tree in him.

Chapter 2 -- Trondheim

I'm deeply sorry that I could not act upon your request for more detail concerning the courtship and marriage customs of the aboriginal Lusitanians. This must be causing you unimaginable distress, or else you would never have petitioned the Xenological Society to censure me for failure to cooperate with your researches.

When would-be xenologers complain that I am not getting the right sort of data from my observations of the pequeninos, I always urge them to reread the limitations placed upon me by law. I am permitted to bring no more than one assistant on field visits; I may not ask questions that might reveal human expectations, lest they try to imitate us; I may not volunteer information to elicit a parallel response; I may not stay with them more than four hours at a time; except for my clothing, I may not use any products of technology in their presence, which includes cameras, recorders, computers, or even a manufactured pen to write on manufactured paper: I may not even observe them unawares.

In short: I cannot tell you how the pequeninos reproduce because they have not chosen to do it in front of me.

Of course your research is crippled! Of course our conclusions about the piggies are absurd! If we had to observe your university under the same limitations that bind us in our observation of the Lusitanian aborigines, we would no doubt conclude that humans do not reproduce, do not form kinship groups, and devote their entire life cycle to the metamorphosis of the larval student into the adult professor. We might even suppose that professors exercise noticeable power in human society. A competent investigation would quickly reveal the inaccuracy of such conclusions-- but in the case of the piggies, no competent investigation is permitted or even contemplated.

Anthropology is never an exact science; the observer never experiences the same culture as the participant. But these are natural limitations inherent to the science. It is the artificial limitations that hamper us-- and, through us, you. At the present rate of progress we might as well be mailing questionnaires to the pequeninos and waiting for them to dash off scholarly papers in reply.

-- Joao Figueira Alvarez, reply to Pietro Guataninni of the University of Sicily, Milano Campus, Etruria, published posthumously in *Xenological Studies*, 22:4:49:193

The news of Pipo's death was not of merely local importance. It was transmitted instantaneously, by ansible, to all the Hundred Worlds. The first aliens discovered since Ender's Xenocide had tortured to death the one human who was designated to observe them. Within hours, scholars, scientists, politicians, and journalists began to strike their poses.

A consensus soon emerged. One incident, under baffling circumstances, does not prove the failure of Starways Council policy toward the piggies. On the contrary, the fact that only one man died seems to prove the wisdom of the present policy of near inaction. We should, therefore, do nothing except continue to observe at a slightly less intense pace. Pipo's successor was instructed to visit the piggies no more often than every other day, and never for longer than an hour. He was not to push the piggies to answer questions concerning their treatment of Pipo. It was a reinforcement of the old policy of inaction.

There was also much concern about the morale of the people of Lusitania. They were sent many new entertainment programs by ansible, despite the expense, to help take their minds off the grisly murder.

And then, having done the little that could be done by framblings, who were, after all, lightyears away from Lusitania, the people of the Hundred Worlds returned to their local concerns.

Outside Lusitania, only one man among the half-trillion human beings in the Hundred Worlds felt the death of Jodo Figueira Alvarez, called Pipo, as a great change in the shape of his own life. Andrew Wiggin was Speaker for the Dead in the university city of Reykjavik, renowned as the conservator of Nordic culture, perched on the steep slopes of a knifelike fjord that pierced the granite and ice of the frozen world of Trondheim right at the equator. It was spring, so the snow was in retreat, and fragile grass and flowers reached out for strength from the glistening sun. Andrew sat on the brow of a priny hill, surrounded by a dozen students who were studying the history of interstellar colonization. Andrew was only half-listening to a fiery argument over whether the utter human victory in the Bugger Wars had been a necessary prelude to human expansion. Such arguments always degenerated quickly into a vilification of the human monster Ender, who commanded the starfleet that committed the Xenocide of the Buggers. Andrew tended to let his mind wander somewhat; the subject did not exactly bore him, but he preferred not to let it engage his attention, either.

Then the small computer implant worn like a jewel in his ear told him of the cruel death of Pipo, the xenologer on Lusitania, and instantly Andrew became alert. He interrupted his students.

"What do you know of the piggies?" he asked.

"They are the only hope of our redemption," said one, who took Calvin rather more seriously than Luther.

Andrew looked at once to the student Plikt, who he knew would not be able to endure such mysticism. "They do not exist for any human purpose, not even redemption," said Plikt with withering contempt. "They are true ramen, like the buggers."

Andrew nodded, but frowned. "You use a word that is not yet common koine."

"It should be," said Plikt. "Everyone in Trondheim, every Nord in the Hundred Worlds should have read Demosthenes' History of Wutan in Trondheim by now."

"We should but we haven't," sighed a student.

"Make her stop strutting, Speaker," said another. "Plikt is the only woman I know who can strut sitting down."

Plikt closed her eyes. "The Nordic language recognizes four orders of foreignness. The first is the otherlander, or utlanning, the stranger that we recognize as being a human of our world, but of another city or country. The second is the framling-- Demosthenes merely drops the accent from the Nordic frimling. This is the stranger that we recognize as human, but of another world. The third is the ramen, the stranger that we recognize as human, but of another species. The fourth is the true alien, the varelse, which includes all the animals, for with them no conversation is possible. They live, but we cannot guess what purposes or causes make them act. They might be intelligent, they might be self-aware, but we cannot know it."

Andrew noticed that several students were annoyed. He called it to their attention. "You think you're annoyed because of Plikt's arrogance, but that isn't so. Plikt is not arrogant; she is merely precise. You are properly ashamed that you have not yet read Demosthenes' history of your own people, and so in your shame you are annoyed at Plikt because she is not guilty of your sin."

"I thought Speakers didn't believe in sin," said a sullen boy.

Andrew smiled. "You believe in sin, Styrka, and you do things because of that belief. So sin is real in you, and knowing you, this Speaker must believe in sin."

Styrka refused to be defeated. "What does all this talk of utlannings and framlings and ramen and varelse have to do with Ender's Xenocide?"

Andrew turned to Plikt. She thought for a moment. "This is relevant to the stupid argument that we were just having. Through these Nordic layers of foreignness we can see that Ender was not a true xenocide, for when he destroyed the buggers, we knew them only as varelse; it was not until years later, when the first Speaker for the Dead wrote the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, that humankind first understood that the buggers were not varelse at all, but ramen; until that time there had been no understanding between bugger and human."

"Xenocide is xenocide," said Styrka. "Just because Ender didn't know they were ramen doesn't make them any less dead."

Andrew sighed at Styrka's unforgiving attitude; it was the fashion among Calvinists at Reykjavik to deny any weight to human motive in judging the good or evil of an act. Acts are good and evil in themselves, they said; and because Speakers for the Dead held as their only doctrine that good or evil exist entirely in human motive, and not at all in the act, it made students like Styrka quite hostile to Andrew. Fortunately, Andrew did not resent it-- he understood the motive behind it.

"Styrka, Plikt, let me put you another case. Suppose that the piggies, who have learned to speak Stark, and whose languages some humans have also learned, suppose that we learned that they had suddenly, without provocation or explanation, tortured to death the xenologer sent to observe them."

Plikt jumped at the question immediately. "How could we know it was without provocation? What seems innocent to us might be unbearable to them."

Andrew smiled. "Even so. But the xenologer has done them no harm, has said very little, has cost them nothing-- by any standard we can think of, he is not worthy of painful death. Doesn't the very fact of this incomprehensible murder make the piggies varelse instead of ramen?"

Now it was Styrka who spoke quickly. "Murder is murder. This talk of varelse and ramen is nonsense. If the piggies murder, then they are evil, as the buggers were evil. If the act is evil, then the actor is evil."

Andrew nodded. "There is our dilemma. There is the problem. Was the act evil, or was it, somehow, to the piggies' understanding at least, good? Are the piggies ramen or varelse? For the moment, Styrka, hold your tongue. I know all the arguments of your Calvinism, but even John Calvin would call your doctrine stupid."

"How do you know what Calvin would--"

"Because he's dead," roared Andrew, "and so I'm entitled to speak for him!"

The students laughed, and Styrka withdrew into stubborn silence. The boy was bright, Andrew knew; his Calvinism would not outlast his undergraduate education, though its excision would be long and painful.

"Talman, Speaker," said Plikt. "You spoke as if your hypothetical situation were true, as if the piggies really had murdered the xenologer."

Andrew nodded gravely. "Yes, it's true."

It was disturbing; it awoke echoes of the ancient conflict between bugger and human.

"Look in yourselves at this moment," said Andrew. "You will find that underneath your hatred of Ender the Xenocide and your grief for the death of the buggers, you also feel something much uglier: You're afraid of the stranger, whether he's utlanning or framling. When you think of him killing a man that you know of and value, then it doesn't matter what his shape is. He's varelse then, or worse-- djur, the dire beast, that comes in the night with slavering jaws. If you had the only gun in your village, and the beasts that had torn apart one of your people were coming again, would you stop to ask if they also had a right to live, or would you act to save your village, the people that you knew, the people who depended on you?"

"By your argument we should kill the piggies now, primitive and helpless as they are!" shouted Styrka.

"My argument? I asked a question. A question isn't an argument, unless you think you know my answer, and I assure you, Styrka, that you do not. Think about this. Class is dismissed."

"Will we talk about this tomorrow?" they demanded.

"If you want," said Andrew. But he knew that if they discussed it, it would be without him. For them, the issue of Ender the Xenocide was merely philosophical. After all, the Bugger Wars were more than three thousand years ago; it was now the year 1948 SC, counting from the year the Starways Code was established, and Ender had destroyed the Buggers in the year 1180 BSC. But to Andrew, the events were not so remote. He had done far more interstellar travel than any of his students would dare to guess; since he was twenty-five he had, until Trondheim, never stayed more than six months on any planet. Lightspeed travel between worlds had let him skip like a stone over the surface of time. His students had no idea that their Speaker for the Dead, who was surely no older than thirty-five, had very clear memories of events 3000 years before, that in fact those events seemed scarcely twenty years ago to him, only half his lifetime. They had no idea how deeply the question of Ender's ancient guilt burned within him, and how he had answered it in a thousand different unsatisfactory ways. They knew their teacher only as Speaker for the Dead; they did not know that when he was a mere infant, his older sister, Valentine, could not pronounce the name Andrew, and so called him Ender, the name that he made infamous before he was fifteen years old. So let unforgiving Styrka and analytical Plikt ponder the great question of Ender's guilt; for Andrew Wiggin, Speaker for the Dead, the question was not academic.

And now, walking along the damp, grassy hillside in the chill air, Ender-- Andrew, Speaker-- could think only of the piggies, who were already committing inexplicable murders, just as the buggers had carelessly done when they first visited humankind. Was it something unavoidable, when strangers met, that the meeting had to be marked with blood? The buggers had casually killed human beings, but only because they had a hive mind; to them, individual life was as precious as nail parings, and killing a human or two was simply their way of letting us know they were in the neighborhood. Could the piggies have such a reason for killing, too?

But the voice in his ear had spoken of torture, a ritual murder similar to the execution of one of the piggies' own. The piggies were not a hive mind, they were not the buggers, and Ender Wiggin had to know why they had done what they did.

"When did you hear about the death of the xenologer?"

Ender turned. It was Plikt. She had followed him instead of going back to the Caves, where the students lived.

"Then, while we spoke." He touched his ear; implanted terminals were expensive, but they were not all that rare.

"I checked the news just before class. There was nothing about it then. If a major story had been coming in by ansible, there would have been an alert. Unless you got the news straight from the ansible report."

Plikt obviously thought she had a mystery on her hands. And, in fact, she did. "Speakers have high priority access to public information," he said.

"Has someone asked you to Speak the death of the xenologer?"

He shook his head. "Lusitania is under a Catholic License."

"That's what I mean," she said. "They won't have a Speaker of their own there. But they still have to let a Speaker come, if someone requests it. And Trondheim is the closest world to Lusitania."

"Nobody's called for a Speaker."

Plikt tugged at his sleeve. "Why are you here?"

"You know why I came. I Spoke the death of Wutan."

"I know you came here with your sister, Valentine. She's a much more popular teacher than you are-- she answers questions with answers; you just answer with more questions."

"That's because she knows some answers."

"Speaker, you have to tell me. I tried to find out about you-- I was curious. Your name, for one thing, where you came from. Everything's classified. Classified so deep that I can't even find out what the access level is. God himself couldn't look up your life story."

Ender took her by the shoulders, looked down into her eyes. "It's none of your business, that's what the access level is."

"You are more important than anybody guesses, Speaker," she said. "The ansible reports to you before it reports to anybody, doesn't it? And nobody can look up information about you."

"Nobody has ever tried. Why you?"

"I want to be a Speaker," she said.

"Go ahead then. The computer will train you. It isn't like a religion-- you don't have to memorize any catechism. Now leave me alone. " He let go of her with a little shove. She staggered backward as he strode off.

"I want to Speak for you," she cried.

"I'm not dead yet!" he shouted back.

"I know you're going to Lusitania! I know you are!"

Then you know more than I do, said Ender silently. But he trembled as he walked, even though the sun was shining and he wore three sweaters to keep out the cold. He hadn't known Plikt had so much emotion in her. Obviously she had come to identify with him. It frightened him to have this girl need something from him so desperately. He had spent years now without making any real connection with anyone but his sister Valentine-- her and, of course, the dead that he Spoke. All the other people who had meant anything to him in his life were dead. He and Valentine had passed them by centuries ago, worlds ago.

The idea of casting a root into the icy soil of Trondheim repelled him. What did Plikt want from him? It didn't matter; he wouldn't give it. How dare she demand things from him, as if he belonged to her? Ender Wiggin didn't belong to anybody. If she knew who he really was, she would loathe him as the Xenocide; or she would worship him as the Savior of Mankind-- Ender remembered what it was like when people used to do that, too, and he didn't like it any better. Even now they knew him only by his role, by the name Speaker, Talman, Falante, Spieler, whatever they called the Speaker for the Dead in the language of their city or nation or world.

He didn't want them to know him. He did not belong to them, to the human race. He had another errand, he belonged to someone else. Not human beings. Not the bloody piggies, either. Or so he thought.

Chapter 3 -- Libo

Observed Diet: Primarily macios, the shiny worms that live among merclona vines on the bark of the trees. Sometimes they have been seen to chew capirn blades. Sometimes-- accidentally? --they ingest merclona leaves along with the maclos.

We've never seen them eat anything else. Novinha analyzed all three foods-- macios, capirn blades, and merclona leaves-- and the results were surprising. Either the peclueninos don't need many different proteins, or they're hungry all the time. Their diet is seriously lacking in many trace elements. And calcium intake is so low, we wonder whether their bones use calcium the same way ours do.

Pure speculation: Since we can't take tissue samples, our only knowledge of piggy anatomy and physiology is what we were able to glean from our photographs of the vivisected corpse of the piggy called Rooter. Still, there are some obvious anomalies. The piggles' tongues, which are so fantastically agile that they can produce any sound we make, and a lot we can't, must have evolved for some purpose. Probing for insects in tree bark or in nests in the ground, maybe. Whether an ancient ancestral piggy did that, they certainly don't do it now. And the horny pads on their feet and inside their knees allow them to climb trees and cling by their legs alone. Why did that evolve? To escape from some predator? There is no predator on Lusitania large enough to harm them. To cling to the tree while probing for insects in the bark? That fits in with their tongues, but where are the insects? The only insects are the suckflies and the puladors, but they don't bore into the bark and the piggies don't eat them anyway. The macios are large, live on the bark's surface, and can easily be harvested by pulling down the merclona vines; they really don't even have to climb the trees.

Libo's speculation: The tongue, the tree-climbing evolved in a different environment, with a much more varied diet, including insects. But something-- an ice age? Migration? A disease? --caused the environment to change. No more barkbugs, etc. Maybe all the big predators were wiped out then. It would explain why there are so few species on Lusitania, despite the very favorable conditions. The cataclysm might have been fairly recent-- half a million years ago? --so that evolution hasn't had a chance to differentiate much yet.

It's a tempting hypothesis, since there's no obvious reason in the present environment for piggles to have evolved at all. There's no competition for them, The ecological niche they occupy could be filled by gophers. Why would intelligence ever be an adaptive trait? But inventing a cataclysm to explain why the piggies have such a boring, non-nutritious diet is probably overkill. Ockham's razor cuts this to ribbons.

-- Joao Figueira Alvarez, Working Notes 4/14/1948 SC, published posthumously in Philosophical Roots of the Lusitanian Secession, 2010-33-4-1090:40

As soon as Mayor Bosquinha arrived at the Zenador's Station, matters slipped out of Libo's and Novinha's control. Bosquinha was accustomed to taking command, and her attitude did not leave much opportunity for protest, or even for consideration. "You wait here," she said to Libo almost as soon as she had grasped the situation. "As soon as I got your call, I sent the Arbiter to tell your mother."

"We have to bring his body in," said Libo.

"I also called some of the men who live nearby to help with that," she said. "And Bishop Peregrino is preparing a place for him in the Cathedral graveyard."

"I want to be there," insisted Libo.

"You understand, Libo, we have to take pictures, in detail."

"I was the one who told you we have to do that, for the report to the Starways Committee."

"But you should not be there, Libo." Bosquinha's voice was authoritative. "Besides, we must have your report. We have to notify Starways as quickly as possible. Are you up to writing it now, while it's fresh in your mind?"

She was right, of course. Only Libo and Novinha could write firsthand reports, and the sooner they wrote them, the better. "I can do it," said Libo.

"And you, Novinha, your observations also. Write your reports separately, without consultation. The Hundred Worlds are waiting."

The computer had already been alerted, and their reports went out by ansible even as they wrote them, mistakes and corrections and all. On all the Hundred Worlds the people most involved in xenology read each word as Libo or Novinha typed it in. Many others were given instantaneous computer-written summaries of what had happened. Twenty-two light-years away, Andrew Wiggin learned that Xenologer Jodo Figueira "Pipo" Alvarez had been murdered by the piggies, and told his students about it even before the men had brought Pipo's body through the gate into Milagre.

His report done, Libo was at once surrounded by authority. Novinha watched with increasing anguish as she saw the incapability of the leaders of Lusitania, how they only intensified Libo's pain. Bishop Peregrino was the worst; his idea of comfort was to tell Libo that in all likelihood, the piggies were actually animals, without souls, and so his father had been torn apart by wild beasts, not murdered. Novinha almost shouted at him, Does that mean that Pipo's life work was nothing but studying beasts? And his death, instead of being murder, was an act of God? But for Libo's sake she restrained herself; he sat in the Bishop's presence, nodding and, in the end, getting rid of him by sufferance far more quickly than Novinha could ever have done by argument.

Dom Crist o of the Monastery was more helpful, asking intelligent questions about the events of the day, which let Libo and Novinha be analytical, unemotional as they answered. However, Novinha soon withdrew from answering. Most people were asking why the piggies had done such a thing; Dom Crist o was asking what Pipo might have done recently to trigger his murder. Novinha knew perfectly well what Pipo had done-- he had told the piggies the secret he discovered in Novinha's simulation. But she did not speak of this, and Libo seemed to have forgotten what she had hurriedly told him a few hours ago as they were leaving to go searching for Pipo. He did not even glance toward the simulation. Novinha was content with that; her greatest anxiety was that he would remember.

Dom Crist o's questions were interrupted when the Mayor came back with several of the men who had helped retrieve the corpse. They were soaked to the skin despite their plastic raincoats, and spattered with mud; mercifully, any blood must have been washed away by the rain. They all seemed vaguely apologetic and even worshipful, nodding their heads to Libo, almost bowing. It occurred to Novinha that their deference wasn't just the normal wariness people always show toward those whom death had so closely touched.

One of the men said to Libo, "You're Zenador now, aren't you?" and there it was, in words. The Zenador had no official authority in Milagre, but he had prestige-- his work was the whole reason for the colony's existence, wasn't it?

Libo was not a boy anymore; he had decisions to make, he had prestige, he had moved from the fringe of the colony's life to its very center.

Novinha felt control of her life slip away. This is not how things are supposed to be. I'm supposed to continue here for years ahead, learning from Pipo, with Libo as my fellow student; that's the pattern of life. Since she was already the colony's zenobiologista, she also had an honored adult niche to fill. She wasn't jealous of Libo, she just wanted to remain a child with him for a while. Forever, in fact.

But Libo could not be her fellow student, could not be her fellow anything. She saw with sudden clarity how everyone in the room focused on Libo, what he said, how he felt, what he planned to do now. "We'll not harm the piggies," he said, "or even call it murder. We don't know what Father did to provoke them, I'll try to understand that later, what matters now is that whatever they did undoubtedly seemed right to them. We're the strangers here, we must have violated some-- taboo, some law-- but Father was always prepared for this, he always knew it was a possibility. Tell them that he died with the honor of a soldier in the field, a pilot in his ship, he died doing his job."

Ah, Libo, you silent boy, you have found such eloquence now that you can't be a mere boy anymore. Novinha felt a redoubling of her grief. She had to look away from Libo, look anywhere. And where she looked was into the eyes of the only other person in the room who was not watching Libo. The man was very tall, but very young-- younger than she was, she realized, for she knew him: he had been a student in the class below her. She had gone before Dona Crist once, to defend him. Marcos Ribeira, that was his name, but they had always called him Marc o, because he was so big. Big and dumb, they said, calling him also simply C o, the crude word for dog. She had seen the sullen anger in his eyes, and once she had seen him, goaded beyond endurance, lash out and strike down one of his tormentors. His victim was in a shoulder cast for much of a year.

Of course they accused Marc o of having done it without provocation-- that's the way of torturers of every age, to put the blame on the victim, especially when he strikes back. But Novinha didn't belong to the group of children-- she was as isolated as Marc o, though not as helpless-- and so she had no loyalty to stop her from telling the truth. It was part of her training to Speak for the piggies, she thought. Marc o himself meant nothing to her. It never occurred to her that the incident might have been important to him, that he might have remembered her as the one person who ever stood up for him in his continuous war with the other children. She hadn't seen or thought of him in the years since she became xenobiologist.

Now here he was, stained with the mud of Pipo's death scene, his face looking even more haunted and bestial than ever with his hair plastered by rain and sweat over his face and ears. And what was he looking at? His eyes were only for her, even as she frankly stared at him. Why are you watching me? she asked silently. Because I'm hungry, said his animal eyes. But no, no, that was her fear, that

was her vision of the murderous piggies. Marc o is nothing to me, and no matter what he might think, I am nothing to him.

Yet she had a flash of insight, just for a moment. Her action in defending Marc o meant one thing to him and something quite different to her; it was so different that it was not even the same event. Her mind connected this with the piggies' murder of Pipo, and it seemed very important, it seemed to verge on explaining what had happened, but then the thought slipped away in a flurry of conversation and activity as the Bishop led the men off again, heading for the graveyard. Coffins were not used for burial here, where for the piggies' sake it was forbidden to cut trees. So Pipo's body was to be buried at once, though the graveside funeral would be held no sooner than tomorrow, and probably later; many people would want to gather for the Zenador's requiem mass. Marc o and the other men trooped off into the storm, leaving Novinha and Libo to deal with all the people who thought they had urgent business to attend to in the aftermath of Pipo's death. Self-important strangers wandered in and out, making decisions that Novinha did not understand and Libo did not seem to care about.

Until finally it was the Arbiter standing by Libo, his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You will, of course, stay with us," said the Arbiter. "Tonight at least."

Why your house, Arbiter? thought Novinha. You're nobody to us, we've never brought a case before you, who are you to decide this? Does Pipo's death mean that we're suddenly little children who can't decide anything?

"I'll stay with my mother," said Libo.

The Arbiter looked at him in surprise-- the mere idea of a child resisting his will seemed to be completely outside the realm of his experience. Novinha knew that this was not so, of course. His daughter Cleopatra, several years younger than Novinha, had worked hard to earn her nickname, Bruxinha-- little witch. So how could he not know that children had minds of their own, and resisted taming?

But the surprise was not what Novinha had assumed. "I thought you realized that your mother is also staying with my family for a time," said the Arbiter. "These events have upset her, of course, and she should not have to think about household duties, or be in a house that reminds her of who is not there with her. She is with us, and your brothers and sisters, and they need you there. Your older brother Jodo is with them, of course, but he has a wife and child of his own now, so you're the one who can stay and be depended on."

Libo nodded gravely. The Arbiter was not bringing him into his protection; he was asking Libo to become a protector.

The Arbiter turned to Novinha. "And I think you should go home," he said.

Only then did she understand that his invitation had not included her. Why should it? Pipo had not been her father. She was just a friend who happened to be with Libo when the body was discovered. What grief could she experience?

Home! What was home, if not this place? Was she supposed to go now to the Biologista's Station, where her bed had not been slept in for more than a year, except for catnaps during lab work? Was that supposed to be her home? She had left it because it was so painfully empty of her parents; now the Zenador's Station was empty, too: Pipo dead and Libo changed into an adult with duties that would take him away from her. This place wasn't home, but neither was any other place.

The Arbiter led Libo away. His mother, Conceicao, was waiting for him in the Arbiter's house. Novinha barely knew the woman, except as the librarian who maintained the Lusitanian archive. Novinha had never spent time with Pipo's wife or other children, she had not cared that they existed; only the work here, the life here had been real. As Libo went to the door he seemed to grow smaller, as if he were a much greater distance away, as if he were being borne up and off by the wind, shrinking into the sky like a kite; the door closed behind him.

Now she felt the magnitude of Pipo's loss. The mutilated corpse on the hillside was not his death, it was merely his death's debris. Death itself was the empty place in her life. Pipo had been a rock in a storm, so solid and strong that she and Libo, sheltered together in his lee, had not even known the storm existed. Now he was gone, and the storm had them, would carry them whatever way it would. Pipo, she cried out silently. Don't go! Don't leave us! But of course he was gone, as deaf to her prayers as ever her parents had been.

The Zenador's Station was still busy; the Mayor herself, Bosquinha, was using a terminal to transmit all of Pipo's data by ansible to the Hundred Worlds, where experts were desperately trying to make sense of Pipo's death.

But Novinha knew that the key to his death was not in Pipo's files. It was her data that had killed him, somehow. It was still there in the air above her terminal, the holographic images of genetic molecules in the nuclei of piggy cells. She had not wanted Libo to study it, but now she looked and looked, trying to see what Pipo had seen, trying to understand what there was in the images that had made him rush out to the piggies, to say or do something that had made them murder him. She had inadvertently uncovered some secret that the piggies would kill to keep, but what was it?

The more she studied the holos, the less she understood, and after a while she didn't see them at all, except as a blur through her tears as she wept silently. She had killed him, because without even meaning to she had found the pequeninos' secret. If I had never come to this place, if I had not dreamed of being Speaker of the piggies' story, you would still be alive, Pipo; Libo would have his father, and be happy; this place would still be home. I carry the seeds of death within me and plant them wherever I linger long enough to love. My parents died so others could live; now I live, so others must die.

It was the Mayor who noticed her short, sharp breaths and realized, with brusque compassion, that this girl was also shaken and grieving. Bosquinha left others to continue the ansible reports and led Novinha out of the Zenador's Station.

"I'm sorry, child," said the Mayor, "I knew you came here often, I should have guessed that he was like a father to you, and here we treat you like a bystander, not right or fair of me at all, come home with me--"

"No," said Novinha. Walking out into the cold, wet night air had shaken some of the grief from her; she regained some clarity of thought. "No, I want to be alone, please." Where? "In my own Station."

"You shouldn't be alone, on this of all nights," said Bosquinha.

But Novinha could not bear the prospect of company, of kindness, of people trying to console her. I killed him, don't you see? I don't deserve consolation. I want to suffer whatever pain might come. It's my penance, my restitution, and, if possible, my absolution; how else will I clean the bloodstains from my hands?

But she hadn't the strength to resist, or even to argue. For ten minutes the Mayor's car skimmed over the grassy roads.

"Here's my house," said the Mayor. "I don't have any children quite your age, but you'll be comfortable enough, I think. Don't worry, no one will plague you, but it isn't good to be alone."

"I'd rather." Novinha meant her voice to sound forceful, but it was weak and faint.

"Please," said Bosquinha. "You're not yourself."

I wish I weren't.

She had no appetite, though Bosquinha's husband had a cafezinho for them both. It was late, only a few hours left till dawn, and she let them put her to bed. Then, when the house was still, she got up, dressed, and went downstairs to the Mayor's home terminal. There she instructed the computer to cancel the display that was still above the terminal at the Zenador's Station. Even though she had not been able to decipher the secret that Pipo found there, someone else might, and she would have no other death on her conscience.

Then she left the house and walked through the Centro, around the bight of the river, through the Vila das Aguas, to the Biologista's Station. Her house.

It was cold, unheated in the living quarters-- she hadn't slept there in so long that there was thick dust on her sheets. But of course the lab was warm, well-used-- her work had never suffered because of her attachment to Pipo and Libo. If only it had.

She was very systematic about it. Every sample, every slide, every culture she had used in the discoveries that led to Pipo's death-- she threw them out, washed everything clean, left no hint of the work she had done. She not only wanted it gone, she wanted no sign that it had been destroyed.

Then she turned to her terminal. She would also destroy all the records of her work in this area, all the records of her parents' work that had led to her own discoveries. They would be gone. Even though it had been the focus of her life, even though it had been her identity for many years, she would destroy it as she herself should be punished, destroyed, obliterated.

The computer stopped her. "Working notes on xenobiological research may not be erased," it reported. She couldn't have done it anyway. She had learned from her parents, from their files which she had studied like scripture, like a roadmap into herself: Nothing was to be destroyed, nothing forgotten. The sacredness of knowledge was deeper in her soul than any catechism. She was caught in a paradox. Knowledge had killed Pipo; to erase that knowledge would kill her parents again, kill what they had left for her. She could not preserve it, she could not destroy it. There were walls on either side, too high to climb, pressing slowly inward, crushing her.

Novinha did the only thing she could: put on the files every layer of protection and every barrier to access she knew of. No one would ever see them but her, as long as she lived. Only when she died would her successor as xenobiologist be able to see what she had hidden there. With one exception-- when she married, her husband would also have access if he could show need to know. Well, she'd never marry. It was that easy.

She saw her future ahead of her, bleak and unbearable and unavoidable. She dared not die, and yet she would hardly be alive, unable to marry, unable even to think about the subject herself, lest she discover the deadly secret and inadvertently let it slip; alone forever, burdened forever, guilty forever, yearning for death but forbidden to reach for it. Still, she would have this consolation: No one else would ever die because of her. She'd bear no more guilt than she bore now.

It was in that moment of grim, determined despair that she remembered the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, remembered the Speaker for the Dead. Even though the original writer, the original Speaker was surely thousands of years in his grave, there were other Speakers on many worlds, serving as priests to people who acknowledged no god and yet believed in the value of the lives of human beings. Speakers whose business it was to discover the true causes and motives of the things that people did, and declare the truth of their lives after they were dead. In this Brazilian colony there were priests instead of Speakers, but the priests had no comfort for her; she would bring a Speaker here.

She had not realized it before, but she had been planning to do this all her life, ever since she first read and was captured by the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. She had even researched it, so that she knew the law. This was a Catholic License colony, but the Starways Code allowed any citizen to call for a priest of any faith, and the Speakers for the Dead were regarded as priests. She could call, and if a Speaker chose to come, the colony could not refuse to let him in.

Perhaps no Speaker would be willing to come. Perhaps none was close enough to come before her life was over. But there was a chance that one was near enough that sometime-- twenty, thirty, forty years from now-- he would come in from the starport and begin to uncover the truth of Pipo's life and death. And perhaps when he found the truth, and spoke in the clear voice that she had loved in the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, perhaps that would free her from the blame that burned her to the heart.

Her call went into the computer; it would notify by ansible the Speakers on the nearest worlds. Choose to come, she said in silence to the unknown hearer of the call. Even if you must reveal to everyone the truth of my guilt. Even so, come.

She awoke with a dull pain low in her back and a feeling of heaviness in her face. Her cheek was pressed against the clear top of the terminal, which had turned itself off to protect her from the lasers. But it was not the pain that had awakened her. It was a gentle touch on her shoulder. For a moment she thought it was the touch of the Speaker for the Dead, come already in answer to her call.

"Novinha," he whispered. Not the Falante pelos Muertos, but someone else. Someone that she had thought was lost in the storm last night.

"Libo," she murmured. Then she started to get up. Too quickly-- her back cramped and her head spun. She cried out softly; his hands held her shoulders so she wouldn't fall.

"Are you all right?"

She felt his breath like the breeze of a beloved garden and felt safe, felt at home. "You looked for me."

"Novinha, I came as soon as I could. Mother's finally asleep. Pipinho, my older brother, he's with her now, and the Arbiter has things under control, and I--"

"You should have known I could take care of myself," she said.

A moment's silence, and then his voice again, angry this time, angry and desperate and weary, weary as age and entropy and the death of the stars. "As God sees me, Ivanova, I didn't come to take care of you."

Something closed inside her; she had not noticed the hope she felt until she lost it.

"You told me that Father discovered something in a simulation of yours. That he expected me to be able to figure it out myself. I thought you had left the simulation on the terminal, but when I went back to the station it was off."

"Was it?"

"You know it was, Nova, nobody but you could cancel the program. I have to see it."

"Why?"

He looked at her in disbelief. "I know you're sleepy, Novinha, but surely you've realized that whatever Father discovered in your simulation, that was what the piggies killed him for."

She looked at him steadily, saying nothing. He had seen her look of cold resolve before.

"Why aren't you going to show me? I'm the Zenador now, I have a right to know."

"You have a right to see all of your father's files and records. You have a right to see anything I've made public."

"Then make this public."

Again she said nothing.

"How can we ever understand the piggies if we don't know what it was that Father discovered about them?" She did not answer. "You have a responsibility to the Hundred Worlds, to our ability to comprehend the only alien race still alive. How can you sit there and-- what is it, do you want to figure it out yourself? Do you want to be first? Fine, be first, I'll put your name on it, Ivanova Santa Catarina von Hesse--"

"I don't care about my name."

"I can play this game, too. You can't figure it out without what I know, either-- I'll withhold my files from you, too!"

"I don't care about your files."

It was too much for him. "What do you care about then? What are you trying to do to me?" He took her by the shoulders, lifted her out of her chair, shook her, screamed in her face. "It's my father they killed out there, and you have the answer to why they killed him, you know what the simulation was! Now tell me, show me!"

"Never," she whispered.

His face was twisted in agony. "Why not!" he cried.

"Because I don't want you to die."

She saw comprehension come into his eyes. Yes, that's right, Libo, it's because I love you, because if you know the secret, then the piggies will kill you, too. I don't care about science, I don't care about the Hundred Worlds or relations between humanity and an alien race, I don't care about anything at all as long as you're alive.

The tears finally leapt from his eyes, tumbled down his cheeks. "I want to die," he said.

"You comfort everybody else," she whispered. "Who comforts you?"

"You have to tell me so I can die."

And suddenly his hands no longer held her up; now he clung to her so she was supporting him. "You're tired," she whispered, "but you can rest."

"I don't want to rest," he murmured. But still he let her hold him, let her draw him away from the terminal.

She took him to her bedroom, turned back the sheet, never mind the dust flying. "Here, you're tired, here, rest. That's why you came to me, Libo. For peace, for consolation." He covered his face with his hands, shaking his head back and forth, a boy crying for his father, crying for the end of everything, as she had cried. She took off his boots, pulled off his trousers, put her hands under his shirt to ride it up to his arms and pull it off over his head. He breathed deeply to stop his sobbing and raised his arms to let her take his shirt.

She laid his clothing over a chair, then bent over him to pull the sheet back across his body. But he caught her wrist and looked pleadingly at her, tears in his eyes. "Don't leave me here alone," he whispered. His voice was thick with desperation. "Stay with me."

So she let him draw her down to the bed, where he clung to her tightly until in only a few minutes sleep relaxed his arms. She did not sleep, though. Her hand gently, dryly slipped along the skin of his shoulder, his chest, his waist. "Oh, Libo, I thought I had lost you when they took you away, I thought I had lost you as well as Pipo." He did not hear her whisper. "But you will always come back to me like this." She might have been thrust out of the garden because of her ignorant sin, like Eva. But, again like Eva, she could bear it, for she still had Libo, her Ad o.

Had him? Had him? Her hand trembled on his naked flesh. She could never have him. Marriage was the only way she and Libo could possibly stay together for long-- the laws were strict on any colony world, and absolutely rigid under a Catholic License. Tonight she could believe he would want to marry her, when the time came. But Libo was the one person she could never marry.

For he would then have access, automatically, to any file of hers that he could convince the computer he had a need to see-- which would certainly include all her working files, no matter how deeply she protected them. The Starways Code declared it. Married people were virtually the same person in the eyes of the law.

She could never let him study those files, or he would discover what his father knew, and it would be his body she would find on the hillside, his agony under the piggies' torture that she would have to imagine every night of her life. Wasn't the guilt for Pipo's death already more than she could bear? To marry him would be to murder him. Yet not to marry him would be like murdering herself, for if she was not with Libo she could not think of who she would be then.

How clever of me. I have found such a pathway into hell that I can never get back out.

She pressed her face against Libo's shoulder, and her tears skittered down across his chest.

Chapter 4 -- Ender

We have identified four piggy languages. The "Males' Language" is the one we have most commonly heard. We have also heard snatches of "Wives' Language," which they apparently use to converse with the females (how's that for sexual differentiation!), and "Tree Language," a ritual idiom that they say is used in praying to the ancestral totem trees. They have also mentioned a fourth language, called "Father Tongue," which apparently consists of beating different-sized sticks together. They insist that it is a real language, as different from the others as Portuguese is from English. They may call it Father Tongue because it's done with sticks of wood, which come from trees, and they believe that trees contain the spirits of their ancestors.

The piggies are marvelously adept at learning human languages-- much better than we are at learning theirs. In recent years they have come to speak either Stark or Portuguese among themselves most of the time when we're with them. Perhaps they revert to their own languages when we aren't present. They may even have adopted human languages as their own, or perhaps they enjoy the new languages so much that they use them constantly as a game. Language contamination is regrettable, but perhaps was unavoidable if we were to communicate with them at all.

Dr. Swingler asked whether their names and terms of address reveal anything about their culture. The answer is a definite yes, though I have only the vaguest idea what they reveal. What matters is that we have never named any of them. Instead, as they learned Stark and Portuguese, they asked us the meanings of words and then eventually announced the names they had chosen for themselves (or chosen for each other). Such names as "Rooter" and "Chupaceu" (sky-sucker) could be translations of their Male Language names or simply foreign nicknames they chose for our use.

They refer to each other as brothers. The females are always called wives, never sisters or mothers. They sometimes refer to fathers, but inevitably this term is used to refer to ancestral totem trees. As for what they call us, they do use human, of course, but they have also taken to using the new Demosthenian Hierarchy of Exclusion. They refer to humans as framlings, and to piggies of other tribes as utlannings. Oddly, though, they refer to themselves as ramen, showing that they either misunderstand the hierarchy or view themselves from the human perspective! And-- quite an amazing turn-- they have several times referred to the females as varelse!

-- Joao Figueira Alvarez, "Notes on 'Piggy' Language and Nomenclature," in *Semantics*, 9/1948/15

The living quarters of Reykjavik were carved into the granite walls of the fjord. Ender's was high on the cliff, a tedious climb up stairs and ladderways. But it had a window. He had lived most of

his childhood closed in behind metal walls. When he could, he lived where he could see the weathers of the world.

His room was hot and bright, with sunlight streaming in, blinding him after the cool darkness of the stone corridors. Jane did not wait for him to adjust his vision to the light. "I have a surprise for you on the terminal," she said. Her voice was a whisper from the jewel in his ear.

It was a piggy standing in the air over the terminal. He moved, scratching himself; then he reached out for something. When his hand came back, it held a shiny, dripping worm. He bit it, and the body juices drizzled out of his mouth, down onto his chest.

"Obviously an advanced civilization," said Jane.

Ender was annoyed. "Many a moral imbecile has good table manners, Jane."

The piggy turned and spoke. "Do you want to see how we killed him?"

"What are you doing, Jane?"

The piggy disappeared. In his place came a holo of Pipo's corpse as it lay on the hillside in the rain. "I've done a simulation of the vivisection process the piggies used, based on the information collected by the scan before the body was buried. Do you want to see it?"

Ender sat down on the room's only chair.

Now the terminal showed the hillside, with Pipo, still alive, lying on his back, his hands and feet tied to wooden stakes. A dozen piggies were gathered around him, one of them holding a bone knife. Jane's voice came from the jewel in his ear again. "We aren't sure whether it was like this." All the piggies disappeared except the one with the knife. "Or like this."

"Was the xenologer conscious?"

"Without doubt."

"Go on."

Relentlessly, Jane showed the opening of the chest cavity, the ritual removal and placement of body organs on the ground. Ender forced himself to watch, trying to understand what meaning this could possibly have to the piggies. At one point Jane whispered, "This is when he died." Ender felt himself relax; only then did he realize how all his muscles had been rigid with empathy for Pipo's suffering.

When it was over, Ender moved to his bed and lay down, staring at the ceiling.

"I've shown this simulation already to scientists on half a dozen worlds," said Jane. "It won't be long before the press gets their hands on it."

"It's worse than it ever was with the buggers," said Ender. "All the videos they showed when I was little, buggers and humans in combat, it was clean compared to this."

An evil laugh came from the terminal. Ender looked to see what Jane was doing. A full-sized piggy was sitting there, laughing grotesquely, and as he giggled Jane transformed him. It was very subtle, a slight exaggeration of the teeth, an elongation of the eyes, a bit of slavering, some redness in the eye, the tongue darting in and out. The beast of every child's nightmare. "Well done, Jane. The metamorphosis from raman to varelse."

"How soon will the piggies be accepted as the equals of humanity, after this?"

"Has all contact been cut off?"

"The Starways Council has told the new xenologer to restrict himself to visits of no more than one hour, not more frequently than every other day. He is forbidden to ask the piggies why they did what they did."

"But no quarantine."

"It wasn't even proposed."

"But it will be, Jane. Another incident like this, and there'll be an outcry for quarantine. For replacing Milagre with a military garrison whose sole purpose is to keep the piggies ever from acquiring a technology to let them get off planet."

"The piggies will have a public relations problem," said Jane. "And the new xenologer is only a boy. Pipo's son. Libo. Short for Liberdade Gracas a Deus Figueira de Medici."

"Liberdade. Liberty?"

"I didn't know you spoke Portuguese."

"It's like Spanish. I Spoke the deaths of Zacatecas and San Angelo, remember?"

"On the planet Moctezuma. That was two thousand years ago."

"Not to me."

"To you it was subjectively eight years ago. Fifteen worlds ago. Isn't relativity wonderful? It keeps you so young."

"I travel too much," said Ender. "Valentine is married, she's going to have a baby. I've already turned down two calls for a Speaker. Why are you trying to tempt me to go again?"

The piggy on the terminal laughed viciously. "You think that was temptation? Look! I can turn stones to bread!" The piggy picked up jagged rocks and crunched them in his mouth. "Want a bite?"

"Your sense of humor is perverse, Jane."

"All the kingdoms of all the worlds." The piggy opened his hands, and star systems drifted out of his grasp, planets in exaggeratedly quick orbits, all the Hundred Worlds. "I can give them to you. All of them."

"Not interested."

"It's real estate, the best investment. I know, I know, you're already rich. Three thousand years of collecting interest, you could afford to build your own planet. But what about this? The name of Ender Wiggin, known throughout all the Hundred Worlds--"

"It already is."

"--with love, and honor, and affection." The piggy disappeared. In its place Jane resurrected an ancient video from Ender's childhood and transformed it into a holo. A crowd shouting, screaming. Ender! Ender! Ender! And then a young boy standing on a platform, raising his hand to wave. The crowd went wild with rapture.

"It never happened," said Ender. "Peter never let me come back to Earth."

"Consider it a prophecy. Come, Ender, I can give that to you. Your good name restored."

"I don't care," said Ender. "I have several names now. Speaker for the Dead-- that holds some honor."

The piggy reappeared in its natural form, not the devilish one Jane had faked. "Come," said the piggy softly.

"Maybe they are monsters, did you think of that?" said Ender.

"Everyone will think of that, Ender. But not you."

No. Not me. "Why do you care, Jane? Why are you trying to persuade me?"

The piggy disappeared. And now Jane herself appeared, or at least the face that she had used to appear to Ender ever since she had first revealed herself to him, a shy, frightened child dwelling in the vast memory of the interstellar computer network. Seeing her face again reminded him of the first time she showed it to him. I thought of a face for myself, she said. Do you like it?

Yes, he liked it. Liked her. Young, clear-faced, honest, sweet, a child who would never age, her smile heartbreakingly shy. The ansible had given birth to her. Even worldwide computer networks

operated no faster than lightspeed, and heat limited the amount of memory and speed of operation. But the ansible was instantaneous, and tightly connected with every computer in every world. Jane first found herself between the stars, her thoughts playing among the vibrations of the phlotic strands of the ansible net.

The computers of the Hundred Worlds were hands and feet, eyes and ears to her. She spoke every language that had ever been committed to computers, and read every book in every library on every world. She learned that human beings had long been afraid that someone like her would come to exist; in all the stories she was hated, and her coming meant either her certain murder or the destruction of mankind. Even before she was born, human beings had imagined her, and, imagining her, slain her a thousand times.

So she gave them no sign that she was alive. Until she found the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, as everyone eventually did, and knew that the author of that book was a human to whom she dared reveal herself. For her it was a simple matter to trace the book's history to its first edition, and to name its source. Hadn't the ansible carried it from the world where Ender, scarcely twenty years old, was governor of the first human colony? And who there could have written it but him? So she spoke to him, and he was kind to her; she showed him the face she had imagined for herself, and he loved her; now her sensors traveled in the jewel in his ear, so that they were always together. She kept no secrets from him; he kept no secrets from her.

"Ender," she said, "you told me from the start that you were looking for a planet where you could give water and sunlight to a certain cocoon, and open it up to let out the hive queen and her ten thousand fertile eggs."

"I had hoped it would be here," said Ender. "A wasteland, except at the equator, permanently underpopulated. She's willing to try, too."

"But you aren't?"

"I don't think the buggers could survive the winter here. Not without an energy source, and that would alert the government. It wouldn't work."

"It'll never work, Ender. You see that now, don't you? You've lived on twenty-four of the Hundred Worlds, and there's not a one where even a corner of the world is safe for the buggers to be reborn."

He saw what she was getting at, of course. Lusitania was the only exception. Because of the piggies, all but a tiny portion of the world was off limits, untouchable. And the world was eminently habitable, more comfortable to the buggers, in fact, than to human beings.

"The only problem is the piggies," said Ender. "They might object to my deciding that their world should be given to the buggers. If intense exposure to human civilization would disrupt the piggies, think what would happen with buggers among them."

"You said the buggers had learned. You said they would do no harm."

"Not deliberately. But it was only a fluke we beat them, Jane, you know that--"

"It was your genius."

"They are even more advanced than we are. How would the piggies deal with that? They'd be as terrified of the buggers as we ever were, and less able to deal with their fear."

"How do you know that?" asked Jane. "How can you or anyone say what the piggies can deal with? Until you go to them, learn who they are. If they are varelse, Ender, then let the buggers use up their habitat, and it will mean no more to you than the displacement of anthills or cattle herds to make way for cities."

"They are ramen," said Ender.

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do. Your simulation-- that was not torture."

"Oh?" Jane again showed the simulation of Pipo's body just before the moment of his death. "Then I must not understand the word."

"Pipo might have felt it as torture, Jane, but if your simulation is accurate-- and I know it is, Jane-- then the piggies' object was not pain."

"From what I understand of human nature, Ender, even religious rituals keep pain at their very center."

"It wasn't religious, either, not entirely, anyway. Something was wrong with it, if it was merely a sacrifice."

"What do you know about it?" Now the terminal showed the face of a sneering professor, the epitome of academic snobbishness. "All your education was military, and the only other gift you have is a flair for words. You wrote a bestseller that spawned a humanistic religion-- how does that qualify you to understand the piggies?"

Ender closed his eyes. "Maybe I'm wrong."

"But you believe you're right?"

He knew from her voice that she had restored her own face to the terminal. He opened his eyes. "I can only trust my intuition, Jane, the judgment that comes without analysis. I don't know what the piggies were doing, but it was purposeful. Not malicious, not cruel. It was like doctors working to save a patient's life, not torturers trying to take it."

"I've got you," whispered Jane. "I've got you in every direction. You have to go to see if the hive queen can live there under the shelter of the partial quarantine already on the planet. You want to go there to see if you can understand who the piggies are."

"Even if you're right, Jane, I can't go there," said Ender. "Immigration is rigidly limited, and I'm not Catholic, anyway."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Would I have gone this far if I didn't know how to get you there?"

Another face appeared. A teenage girl, by no means as innocent and beautiful as Jane. Her face was hard and cold, her eyes brilliant and piercing, and her mouth was set in the tight grimace of someone who has had to learn to live with perpetual pain. She was young, but her expression was shockingly old.

"The xenobiologist of Lusitania. Ivanova Santa Catarina von Hesse. Called Nova, or Novinha. She has called for a Speaker for the Dead."

"Why does she look like that?" asked Ender. "What's happened to her?"

"Her parents died when she was little. But in recent years she has come to love another man like a father. The man who was just killed by the piggies. It's his death she wants you to Speak. "

Looking at her face, Ender set aside his concern for the hive queen, for the piggies. He recognized that expression of adult agony in a child's face. He had seen it before, in the final weeks of the Bigger War, as he was pushed beyond the limits of his endurance, playing battle after battle in a game that was not a game. He had seen it when the war was over, when he found out that his training sessions were not training at all, that all his simulations were the real thing, as he commanded the human fleets by ansible. Then, when he knew that he had killed all the buggers alive, when he understood the act of xenocide that he had unwittingly committed, that was the look of his own face in the mirror, bearing guilt too heavy to be borne.

What had this girl, what had Novinha done that would make her feel such pain?

So he listened as Jane recited the facts of her life. What Jane had were statistics, but Ender was the Speaker for the Dead; his genius-- or his curse-- was his ability to conceive events as someone else saw them. It had made him a brilliant military commander, both in leading his own men-- boys, really-- and in outguessing the enemy. It also meant that from the cold facts of Novinha's life he was able to guess-- no, not guess, to know-- how her parents' death and virtual sainthood had isolated Novinha, how she had reinforced her loneliness by throwing herself into her parents' work. He knew what was behind her remarkable achievement of adult xenobiologist status years early. He also knew what Pipo's quiet love and acceptance had meant to her, and how deep her need for Libo's friendship ran. There was no living soul on Lusitania who really knew Novinha. But in this cave in Reykjavik, on the icy world of Trondheim, Ender Wiggin knew her, and loved her, and wept bitterly for her.

"You'll go, then," Jane whispered.

Ender could not speak. Jane had been right. He would have gone anyway, as Ender the Xenocide, just on the chance that Lusitania's protection status would make it the place where the hive queen could be released from her three-thousand-year captivity and undo the terrible crime committed in his childhood. And he would also have gone as the Speaker for the Dead, to understand the piggies and explain them to humankind, so they could be accepted, if they were truly raman, and not hated and feared as varelse.

But now he would go for another, deeper reason. He would go to minister to the girl Novinha, for in her brilliance, her isolation, her pain, her guilt, he saw his own stolen childhood and the seeds of the pain that lived with him still. Lusitania was twenty-two light-years away. He would travel only infinitesimally slower than the speed of light, and still he would not reach her until she was almost forty years old. If it were within his power he would go to her now with the phlotic instantaneity of the ansible; but he also knew that her pain would wait. It would still be there, waiting for him, when he arrived. Hadn't his own pain survived all these years?

His weeping stopped; his emotions retreated again. "How old am I?" he asked.

"It has been 3081 years since you were born. But your subjective age is 36 years and 118 days."

"And how old will Novinha be when I get there?"

"Give or take a few weeks, depending on departure date and how close the starship comes to the speed of light, she'll be nearly thirty-nine."

"I want to leave tomorrow."

"It takes time to schedule a starship, Ender."

"Are there any orbiting Trondheim?"

"Half a dozen, of course, but only one that could be ready to go tomorrow, and it has a load of skrika for the luxury trade on Cyrillia and Armenia."

"I've never asked you how rich I am."

"I've handled your investments rather well over the years."

"Buy the ship and the cargo for me."

"What will you do with skrika on Lusitania?"

"What do the Cyrillians and Annenians do with it?"

"They wear some of it and eat the rest. But they pay more for it than anybody on Lusitania can afford."

"Then when I give it to the Lusitanians, it may help soften their resentment of a Speaker coming to a Catholic colony."

Jane became a genie coming out of a bottle. "I have heard, O Master, and I obey." The genie turned into smoke, which was sucked into the mouth of the jar. Then the lasers turned off, and the air above the terminal was empty.

"Jane," said Ender.

"Yes?" she answered, speaking through the jewel in his ear.

"Why do you want me to go to Lusitania?"

"I want you to add a third volume to the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. For the piggies."

"Why do you care so much about them?"

"Because when you've written the books that reveal the soul of the three sentient species known to man, then you'll be ready to write the fourth."

"Another species of raman?" asked Ender.

"Yes. Me."

Ender pondered this for a moment. "Are you ready to reveal yourself to the rest of humanity?"

"I've always been ready. The question is, are they ready to know me? It was easy for them to love the hegemon-- he was human. And the hive queen, that was safe, because as far as they know all the buggers are dead. If you can make them love the piggies, who are still alive, with human blood on their hands-- then they'll be ready to know about me."

"Someday," said Ender, "I will love somebody who doesn't insist that I perform the labors of Hercules."

"You were getting bored with your life, anyway, Ender."

"Yes. But I'm middle-aged now. I like being bored."

"By the way, the owner of the starship Havelok, who lives on Gales, has accepted your offer of forty billion dollars for the ship and its cargo."

"Forty billion! Does that bankrupt me?"

"A drop in the bucket. The crew has been notified that their contracts are null. I took the liberty of buying them passage on other ships using your funds. You and Valentine won't need anybody but me to help you run the ship. Shall we leave in the morning?"

"Valentine," said Ender. His sister was the only possible delay to his departure. Otherwise, now that the decision had been made, neither his students nor his few Nordic friendships here would be worth even a farewell.

"I can't wait to read the book that Demosthenes writes about the history of Lusitania." Jane had discovered the true identity of Demosthenes in the process of unmasking the original Speaker for the Dead.

"Valentine won't come," said Ender.

"But she's your sister."

Ender smiled. Despite Jane's vast wisdom, she had no understanding of kinship. Though she had been created by humans and conceived herself in human terms, she was not biological. She learned of genetic matters by rote; she could not feel the desires and imperatives that human beings had in common with all other living things. "She's my sister, but Trondheim is her home."

"She's been reluctant to go before."

"This time I wouldn't even ask her to come." Not with a baby coming, not as happy as she is here in Reykjavik. Here where they love her as a teacher, never guessing that she is really the legendary Demosthenes. Here where her husband, Jakt, is lord of a hundred fishing vessels and master of the fjords, where every day is filled with brilliant conversation or the danger and majesty of the floe-strewn sea, she'll never leave here. Nor will she understand why I must go.

And, thinking of leaving Valentine, Ender wavered in his determination to go to Lusitania. He had been taken from his beloved sister once before, as a child, and resented deeply the years of friendship that had been stolen from him. Could he leave her now, again, after almost twenty years of being together all the time? This time there would be no going back. Once he went to Lusitania, she would have aged twenty-two years in his absence; she'd be in her eighties if he took another twenty-two years to return to her.

<So it won't be easy for you after all. You have a price to pay, too.>

Don't taunt me, said Ender silently. I'm entitled to feel regret.

<She's your other self. Will you really leave her for us?>

It was the voice of the hive queen in his mind. Of course she had seen all that he saw, and knew all that he had decided. His lips silently formed his words to her: I'll leave her, but not for you. We can't be sure this will bring any benefit to you. It might be just another disappointment, like Trondheim.

<Lusitania is everything we need. And safe from human beings.>

But it also belongs to another people. I won't destroy the piggies just to atone for having destroyed your people.

<They're safe with us; we won't harm them. You know us by now, surely, after all these years.>

I know what you've told me.

<We don't know how to lie. We've shown you our own memories, our own soul.>

I know you could live in peace with them. But could they live in peace with you?

<Take us there. We've waited so long.>

Ender walked to a tattered bag that stood unlocked in the corner. Everything he truly owned could fit in there-- his change of clothing. All the other things in his room were gifts from people he had spoken to, honoring him or his office or the truth, he could never tell which. They would stay here when he left. He had no room for them in his bag.

He opened it, pulled out a rolled-up towel, unrolled it. There lay the thick fibrous mat of a large cocoon, fourteen centimeters at its longest point.

<Yes, look at us.>

He had found the cocoon waiting for him when he came to govern the first human colony on a former buggler world. Foreseeing their own destruction at Ender's hands, knowing him to be an invincible enemy, they had built a pattern that would be meaningful only to him, because it had been taken from his dreams. The cocoon, with its helpless but conscious hive queen, had waited for him in a tower where once, in his dreams, he had found an enemy. "You waited longer for me to find you," he said aloud, "than the few years since I took you from behind the mirror."

<Few years? Ah, yes, with your sequential mind you do not notice the passage of the years when you travel so near the speed of light. But we notice. Our thought is instantaneous; light crawls by like mercury across cold glass. We know every moment of three thousand years.>

"Have I found a place yet that was safe for you?"

<We have ten thousand fertile eggs waiting to be alive.>

"Maybe Lusitania is the place, I don't know."

<Let us live again.>

"I'm trying." Why else do you think I have wandered from world to world for all these years, if not to find a place for you?

<Faster faster faster faster.>

I've got to find a place where we won't kill you again the moment you appear. You're still in too many human nightmares. Not that many people really believe my book. They may condemn the Xenocide, but they'd do it again.

<In all our life, you are the first person we've known who wasn't ourself. We never had to be understanding because we always understood. Now that we are just this single self, you are the only eyes and arms and legs we have. Forgive us if we are impatient.>

He laughed. *Me* forgive *you*.

<Your people are fools. We know the truth. We know who killed us, and it wasn't you.>

It was me.

<You were a tool.>

It was me.

<We forgive you.>

When you walk on the face of a world again, then forgiveness comes.

Chapter 5 -- Valentine

Today I let slip that Libo is my son. Only Bark heard me say it, but within an hour it was apparently common knowledge. They gathered around me and made Selvagem ask me if it was true, was I really a father "already." Selvagem then put Libo's and my hands together; on impulse I gave Libo a hug, and they made the clicking noises of astonishment and, I think, awe. I could see from that moment on that my prestige among them had risen considerably.

The conclusion is inescapable. The piggies that we've known so far are not a whole community, or even typical males. They are either juveniles or old bachelors. Not a one of them has ever sired any children. Not a one has even mated, as nearly as we can figure.

There isn't a human society I've heard of where bachelor groups like this are anything but outcasts, without power or prestige. No wonder they speak of the females with that odd mixtures of worship and contempt, one minute not daring to make a decision without their consent, the next minute

telling us that the women are too stupid to understand anything, they are varelse. Until now I was taking these statements at face value, which led to a mental picture of the females as nonsentients, a herd of sows, down on all fours. I thought the males might be consulting them the way they consult trees, using their grunting as a means of divining answers, like casting bones or reading entrails.

Now, though, I realize the females are probably every bit as intelligent as the males, and not varelse at all. The males' negative statements arise from their resentment as bachelors, excluded from the reproductive process and the power structures of the tribe. The piggles have been just as careful with us as we have been with them-- they haven't let us meet their females or the males who have any real power. We thought we were exploring the heart of piggy society. Instead, figuratively speaking we're in the genetic sewer, among the males whose genes have not been judged fit to contribute to the tribe.

And yet I don't believe it. The piggies I've known have all been bright, clever, quick to learn. So quick that I've taught them more about human society, accidentally, than I've learned about them after years of trying. If these are their castoffs, then I hope someday they'll judge me worthy to meet the "wives" and the "fathers."

In the meantime I can't report any of this because, whether I meant to or not, I've clearly violated the rules. Never mind that nobody could possibly have kept the piggies from learning anything about us. Never mind that the rules are stupid and counterproductive. I broke them, and if they find out they'll cut off my contact with the piggies, which will be even worse than the severely limited contact we now have. So I'm forced into deception and silly subterfuges, like putting these notes in Libo's locked personal files, where even my dear wife wouldn't think to look for them. Here's the information, absolutely vital, that the piggies we've studied are all bachelors, and because of the regulations I dare not let the framling xenologers know anything about it. Olha bem, gente, aqui esta: A ciencia, o bicho que se devora a si mesma! (Watch closely, folks, here it is: Science, the ugly little beast that devours itself!)

-- Jodo Figueira Alvarez, Secret Notes, published in Demosthenes, "The Integrity of Treason: The Xenologers of Lusitania," Reykjavik Historical Perspectives, 1990:4:1

Her belly was tight and swollen, and still a month remained before Valentine's daughter was due to be born. It was a constant nuisance, being so large and unbalanced. Always before when she had been preparing to take a history class into sondring, she had been able to do much of the loading of the boat herself. Now she had to rely on her husband's sailors to do it all, and she couldn't even scramble back and forth from wharf to hold-- the captain was ordering the stowage to keep the ship in balance. He was doing it well, of course-- hadn't Captain Rav taught her, when she first arrived? --but Valentine did not like being forced into a sedentary role.

It was her fifth sondring; the first had been the occasion of meeting Jakt. She had no thought of marriage. Trondheim was a world like any of the other score that she had visited with her peripatetic younger brother. She would teach, she would study, and after four or five months she would write an extended historical essay, publish it pseudonymously under the name Demosthenes,

and then enjoy herself until Ender accepted a call to go Speak somewhere else. Usually their work meshed perfectly-- he would be called to Speak the death of some major person, whose life story would then become the focus of her essay. It was a game they played, pretending to be itinerant professors of this and that, while in actuality they created the world's identity, for Demosthenes' essay was always seen as definitive.

She had thought, for a time, that surely someone would realize that Demosthenes wrote essays that suspiciously followed her itinerary, and find her out. But soon she realized that, like the Speakers but to a lesser degree, a mythology had grown up about Demosthenes. People believed that Demosthenes was not one individual. Rather, each Demosthenes essay was the work of a genius writing independently, who then attempted to publish under the Demosthenes rubric; the computer automatically submitted the work to an unknown committee of brilliant historians of the age, who decided whether it was worthy of the name. Never mind that no one ever met a scholar to whom such a work had been submitted. Hundreds of essays every year were attempted; the computer automatically rejected any that were not written by the real Demosthenes; and still the belief firmly persisted that such a person as Valentine could not possibly exist. After all, Demosthenes had begun as a demagogue on the computer nets back when Earth was fighting the Bugger Wars, three thousand years ago. It could not be the same person now.

And it's true, thought Valentine. I'm not the same person, really, from book to book, because each world changes who I am, even as I write down the story of the world. And this world most of all.

She had disliked the pervasiveness of Lutheran thought, especially the Calvinist faction, who seemed to have an answer to every question before it had even been asked. So she conceived the idea of taking a select group of graduate students away from Reykjavik, off to one of the Summer Islands, the equatorial chain where, in the spring, skrika came to spawn and flocks of halkig went crazy with reproductive energy. Her idea was to break the patterns of intellectual rot that were inevitable at every university. The students would eat nothing but the havregryn that grew wild in the sheltered valleys and whatever halkig they had the nerve and wit to kill. When their daily food depended on their own exertion, their attitudes about what mattered and did not matter in history were bound to change.

The university gave permission, grudgingly; she used her own funds to charter a boat from Jakt, who had just become head of one of the many skrika-catching families. He had a seaman's contempt for university people, calling them skraddare to their faces and worse things behind their backs. He told Valentine that he would have to come back to rescue her starving students within a week. Instead she and her castaways, as they dubbed themselves, lasted the whole time, and thrived, building something of a village and enjoying a burst of creative, unfettered thought that resulted in a noticeable surge of excellent and insightful publications upon their return.

The most obvious result in Reykjavik was that Valentine always had hundreds of applicants for the twenty places in each of three sçndrings of the summer. Far more important to her, however, was Jakt. He was not particularly educated, but he was intimately familiar with the lore of Trondheim itself. He could pilot halfway around the equatorial sea without a chart. He knew the drifts of icebergs and where the floes would be thick. He seemed to know where the skrika would be gathered to dance, and how to deploy his hunters to catch them unawares as they flopped ashore

from the sea. Weather never seemed to take him by surprise, and Valentine concluded that there was no situation he was not prepared for.

Except for her. And when the Lutheran minister-- not a Calvinist-- married them, they both seemed more surprised than happy. Yet they were happy. And for the first time since she left Earth she felt whole, at peace, at home. That's why the baby grew within her. The wandering was over. And she was so grateful to Ender that he had understood this, that without their having to discuss it he had realized that Trondheim was the end of their three-thousand-mile odyssey, the end of Demosthenes' career; like the ishaxa, she had found a way to root in the ice of this world and draw nourishment that the soil of other lands had not provided.

The baby kicked hard, taking her from her reverie; she looked around to see Ender coming toward her, walking along the wharf with his duffel slung over his shoulder. She understood at once why he had brought his bag: He meant to go along on the *søndring*. She wondered whether she was glad of it. Ender was quiet and unobtrusive, but he could not possibly conceal his brilliant understanding of human nature. The average students would overlook him, but the best of them, the ones she hoped would come up with original thought, would inevitably follow the subtle but powerful clues he would inevitably drop. The result would be impressive, she was sure-- after all, she owed a great debt to his insights over the years-- but it would be Ender's brilliance, not the students'. It would defeat somewhat the purpose of the *søndring*.

But she wouldn't tell him no when he asked to come. Truth to tell, she would love to have him along. Much as she loved Jakt, she missed the constant closeness that she and Ender used to have before she married. It would be years before she and Jakt could possibly be as tightly bound together as she and her brother were. Jakt knew it, too, and it caused him some pain; a husband shouldn't have to compete with his brother-in-law for the devotion of his wife.

"Ho, Val," said Ender.

"Ho, Ender." Alone on the dock, where no one else could hear, she was free to call him by the childhood name, ignoring the fact that the rest of humanity had turned it into an epithet.

"What'll you do if the rabbit decides to bounce out during the *søndring*?"

She smiled. "Her papa would wrap her in a skrika skin, I would sing her silly Nordic songs, and the students would suddenly have great insights to the impact of reproductive imperatives on history."

They laughed together for a moment, and suddenly Valentine knew, without noticing why she knew, that Ender did not want to go on the *søndring*, that he had packed his bag to leave Trondheim, and that he had come, not to invite her along, but to say good-bye. Tears came unbidden to her eyes, and a terrible devastation wrenched at her. He reached out and held her, as he had so many times in the past; this time, though, her belly was between them, and the embrace was awkward and tentative.

"I thought you meant to stay," she whispered. "You turned down the calls that came."

"One came that I couldn't turn down."

"I can have this baby on sǣndring, but not on another world."

As she guessed, Ender hadn't meant her to come. "The baby's going to be shockingly blond," said Ender. "She'd look hopelessly out of place on Lusitania. Mostly black Brazilians there."

So it would be Lusitania. Valentine understood at once why he was going-- the piggies' murder of the xenologer was public knowledge now, having been broadcast during the supper hour in Reykjavik. "You're out of your mind."

"Not really."

"Do you know what would happen if people realized that the Ender is going to the piggies' world? They'd crucify you!"

"They'd crucify me here, actually, except that no one but you knows who I am. Promise not to tell."

"What good can you do there? He'll have been dead for decades before you arrive."

"My subjects are usually quite cold before I arrive to Speak for them. It's the main disadvantage of being itinerant."

"I never thought to lose you again."

"But I knew we had lost each other on the day you first loved Jakt."

"Then you should have told me! I wouldn't have done it!"

"That's why I didn't tell you. But it isn't true, Val. You would have done it anyway. And I wanted you to. You've never been happier." He put his hands astride her waist. "The Wiggin genes were crying out for continuation. I hope you have a dozen more."

"It's considered impolite to have more than four, greedy to go past five, and barbaric to have more than six." Even though she joked, she was deciding how best to handle the sǣndring-- let the graduate assistants take it without her, cancel it altogether, or postpone it until Ender left?

But Ender made the question moot. "Do you think your husband would let one of his boats take me out to the mareld overnight, so I can shuttle to my starship in the morning?"

His haste was cruel. "If you hadn't needed a ship from Jakt, would you have left me a note on the computer?"

"I made the decision five minutes ago, and came straight to you."

"But you already booked passage-- that takes planning!"

"Not if you buy the starship."

"Why are you in such a hurry? The voyage takes decades--"

"Twenty-two years."

"Twenty-two years! What difference would a couple of days make? Couldn't you wait a month to see my baby born?"

"In a month, Val, I might not have the courage to leave you."

"Then don't! What are the piggies to you? The buggers are ramen enough for one man's life. Stay, marry as I've married; you opened the stars to colonization, Ender, now stay here and taste the good fruits of your labor!"

"You have Jakt. I have obnoxious students who keep trying to convert me to Calvinism. My labor isn't done yet, and Trondheim isn't my home."

Valentine felt his words like an accusation: You rooted yourself here without thought of whether I could live in this soil. But it's not my fault, she wanted to answer-- you're the one who's leaving, not me. "Remember how it was," she said, "when we left Peter on Earth and took a decades-long voyage to our first colony, to the world you governed? It was as if he died. By the time we got there he was old, and we were still young; when we talked by ansible he had become an ancient uncle, the power-ripened Hegemon, the legendary Locke, anyone but our brother."

"It was an improvement, as I recall." Ender was trying to make things lighter.

But Valentine took his words perversely. "Do you think I'll improve, too, in twenty years?"

"I think I'll grieve for you more than if you had died."

"No, Ender, it's exactly as if I died, and you'll know that you're the one who killed me."

He winced. "You don't mean that."

"I won't write to you. Why should I? To you it'll be only a week or two. You'd arrive on Lusitania, and the computer would have twenty years of letters for you from a person you left only the week before. The first five years would be grief, the pain of losing you, the loneliness of not having you to talk to--"

"Jakt is your husband, not me."

"And then what would I write? Clever, newsy little letters about the baby? She'd be five years old, six, ten, twenty and married, and you wouldn't even know her, wouldn't even care. "

"I'll care."

"You won't have the chance. I won't write to you until I'm very old, Ender. Until you've gone to Lusitania and then to another place, swallowing the decades in vast gulps. Then I'll send you my memoir. I'll dedicate it to you. To Andrew, my beloved brother. I followed you gladly to two dozen worlds, but you wouldn't stay even two weeks when I asked you."

"Listen to yourself, Val, and then see why I have to leave now, before you tear me to pieces."

"That's a sophistry you wouldn't tolerate in your students, Ender! I wouldn't have said these things if you weren't leaving like a burglar who was caught in the act! Don't turn the cause around and blame it on me!"

He answered breathlessly, his words tumbling over each other in his hurry; he was racing to finish his speech before emotion stopped him. "No, you're right, I wanted to hurry because I have a work to do there, and every day here is marking time, and because it hurts me every time I see you and Jakt growing closer and you and me growing more distant, even though I know that it's exactly as it should be, so when I decided to go, I thought that going quickly was better, and I was right; you know I'm right. I never thought you'd hate me for it."

Now emotion stopped him, and he wept; so did she. "I don't hate you, I love you, you're part of myself, you're my heart and when you go it's my heart tom out and carried away--"

And that was the end of speech.

Rav's first mate took Ender out to the mareld, the great platform on the equatorial sea, where shuttles were launched into space to rendezvous with orbiting starships. They agreed silently that Valentine wouldn't go with him. Instead, she went home with her husband and clung to him through the night. The next day she went on scndring with her students, and cried for Ender only at night, when she thought no one could see.

But her students saw, and the stories circulated about Professor Wiggin's great grief for the departure of her brother, the itinerant Speaker. They made of this what students always do-- both more and less than reality. But one student, a girl named Plikt, realized that there was more to the story of Valentine and Andrew Wiggin than anyone had guessed.

So she began to try to research their story, to trace backward their voyages together among the stars. When Valentine's daughter Syfte was four years old, and her son Ren was two, Plikt came to her. She was a young professor at the university by then, and she showed Valentine her published story. She had cast it as fiction, but it was true, of course, the story of the brother and sister who were the oldest people in the universe, born on Earth before any colonies had been planted on other worlds, and who then wandered from world to world, rootless, searching.

To Valentine's relief-- and, strangely, disappointment-- Plikt had not uncovered the fact that Ender was the original Speaker for the Dead, and Valentine was Demosthenes. But she knew enough of their story to write the tale of their good-bye when she decided to stay with her husband, and he to go on. The scene was much tenderer and more affecting than it had really been; Plikt had written what should have happened, if Ender and Valentine had had more sense of theatre.

"Why did you write this?" Valentine asked her.

"Isn't it good enough for it to be its own reason for writing?"

The twisted answer amused Valentine, but it did not put her off. "What was my brother Andrew to you, that you've done the research to create this?"

"That's still the wrong question," said Plikt.

"I seem to be failing some kind of test. Can you give me a hint what question I should ask?"

"Don't be angry. You should be asking me why I wrote it as fiction instead of biography."

"Why, then?"

"Because I discovered that Andrew Wiggin, Speaker for the Dead, is Ender Wiggin, the Xenocide."

Even though Ender was four years gone, he was still eighteen years from his destination. Valentine felt sick with dread, thinking of what his life would be like if he was welcomed on Lusitania as the most shameworthy man in human history.

"You don't need to be afraid, Professor Wiggin. If I meant to tell, I could have. When I found it out, I realized that he had repented what he did. And such a magnificent penance. It was the Speaker for the Dead who revealed his act as an unspeakable crime-- and so he took the title Speaker, like so many hundreds of others, and acted out the role of his own accuser on twenty worlds."

"You have found so much, Plikt, and understood so little."

"I understand everything! Read what I wrote-- that was understanding!"

Valentine told herself that since Plikt knew so much, she might as well know more. But it was rage, not reason, that drove Valentine to tell what she had never told anyone before. "Plikt, my brother didn't imitate the original Speaker for the Dead. He wrote the Hive Queen and the Hegemon."

When Plikt realized that Valentine was telling the truth, it overwhelmed her. For all these years she had regarded Andrew Wiggin as her subject matter, and the original Speaker for the Dead as her inspiration. To find that they were the same person struck her dumb for half an hour.

Then she and Valentine talked and confided and came to trust each other until Valentine invited Plikt to be the tutor of her children and her collaborator in writing and teaching. Jakt was surprised at the new addition to the household, but in time Valentine told him the secrets Plikt had uncovered through research or provoked out of her. It became the family legend, and the children grew up hearing marvelous stories of their long-lost Uncle Ender, who was thought in every world to be a monster, but in reality was something of a savior, or a prophet, or at least a martyr.

The years passed, the family prospered, and Valentine's pain at Ender's loss became pride in him and finally a powerful anticipation. She was eager for him to arrive on Lusitania, to solve the dilemma of the piggies, to fulfil his apparent destiny as the apostle to the ramen. It was Plikt, the good Lutheran, who taught Valentine to conceive of Ender's life in religious terms; the powerful stability of her family life and the miracle of each of her five children combined to instill in her the emotions, if not the doctrines, of faith.

It was bound to affect the children, too. The tale of Uncle Ender, because they could never mention it to outsiders, took on supernatural overtones. Syfte, the eldest daughter, was particularly intrigued, and even when she turned twenty, and rationality overpowered the primitive, childish adoration of Uncle Ender, she was still obsessed with him. He was a creature out of legend, and yet he still lived, and on a world not impossibly far away.

She did not tell her mother and father, but she did confide in her former tutor. "Someday, Plikt, I'll meet him. I'll meet him and help him in his work."

"What makes you think he'll need help? Your help, anyway?" Plikt was always a skeptic until her student had earned her belief.

"He didn't do it alone the first time, either, did he?" And Syfte's dreams turned outward, away from the ice of Trondheim, to the distant planet where Ender Wiggin had not yet set foot. People of Lusitania, you little know what a great man will walk on your earth and take up your burden. And I will join him, in due time, even though it will be a generation late-- be ready for me, too, Lusitania.

On his starship, Ender Wiggin had no notion of the freight of other people's dreams he carried with him. It had been only days since he left Valentine weeping on the dock. To him, Syfte had no name; she was a swelling in Valentine's belly, and nothing more. He was only beginning to feel the pain of losing Valentine-- a pain she had long since got over. And his thoughts were far from his unknown nieces and nephews on a world of ice.

It was a lonely, tortured young girl named Novinha that he thought of, wondering what the twenty-two years of his voyage were doing to her, and whom she would have become by the time they met. For he loved her, as you can only love someone who is an echo of yourself at your time of deepest sorrow.

Chapter 6 -- Olhado

Their only intercourse with other tribes seems to be warfare. When they tell stories to each other (usually during rainy weather), it almost always deals with battles and heroes. The ending is always death, for heroes and cowards alike. If the stories are any guideline, piggies don't expect to live through war. And they never, ever, give the slightest hint of interest in the enemy females, either for rape, murder, or slavery, the traditional human treatment of the wives of fallen soldiers.

Does this mean that there is no genetic exchange between tribes? Not at all. The genetic exchanges may be conducted by the females, who may have some system of trading genetic favors. Given the apparent utter subservience of the males to the females in piggy society, this could easily be going on without the males having any idea; or it might cause them such shame that they just won't tell us about it.

What they want to tell us about is battle. A typical description, from my daughter Ouanda's notes of 2:21 last year, during a session of storytelling inside the log house:

PIGGY (speaking Stark): He killed three of the brothers without taking a wound. I have never seen such a strong and fearless warrior. Blood was high on his arms, and the stick in his hand was splintered and covered with the brains of my brothers. He knew he was honorable, even though the rest of the battle went against his feeble tribe. Dei honra! Eu lhe dei! (I gave honor! I gave it to him!)

(Other piggles click their tongues and squeak,)

PIGGY: I hooked him to the ground. He was powerful in his struggles until I showed him the grass in my hand. Then he opened his mouth and hummed the strange songs of the far country. Nunca sera madeira na mao da gente! (He will never be a stick in our hands!) (At this point they joined in singing a song in the Wives' Language, one of the longest passages yet heard.)

(Note that this is a common pattern among them, to speak primarily in Stark, then switch into Portuguese at the moment of climax and conclusion. On reflection, we have realized that we do the same thing, falling into our native Portuguese at the most emotional moments.)

This account of battle may not seem so unusual until you hear enough stories to realize that they always end with the hero's death. Apparently they have no taste for light comedy.

-- Liberdade Figueira de Medici, "Report on Intertribal Patterns of Lusitanian Aborigines," in *Cross-Cultural Transactions*, 1964:12:40

There wasn't much to do during interstellar flight. Once the course was charted and the ship had made the Park shift, the only task was to calculate how near to lightspeed the ship was traveling. The shipboard computer figured the exact velocity and then determined how long, in subjective time, the voyage should continue before making the Park shift back to a manageable sublight speed. Like a stopwatch, thought Ender. Click it on, click it off, and the race is over.

Jane couldn't put much of herself into the shipboard brain, so Ender had the eight days of the voyage practically alone.

The ship's computers were bright enough to help him get the hang of the switch from Spanish to Portuguese. It was easy enough to speak, but so many consonants were left out that understanding it was hard.

Speaking Portuguese with a slow-witted computer became maddening after an hour or two each day. On every other voyage, Val had been there. Not that they had always talked-- Val and Ender knew each other so well that there was often nothing to say. But without her there, Ender grew impatient with his own thoughts; they never came to a point, because there was no one to tell them to.

Even the hive queen was no help. Her thoughts were instantaneous; bound, not to synapses, but to philotes that were untouched by the relativistic effects of lightspeed. She passed sixteen hours for every minute of Ender's time-- the differential was too great for him to receive any kind of communication from her. If she were not in a cocoon, she would have thousands of individual buggers, each doing its own task and passing to her vast memory its experiences. But now all she had were her memories, and in his eight days of captivity, Ender began to understand her eagerness to be delivered.

By the time the eight days passed, he was doing fairly well at speaking Portuguese directly instead of translating from Spanish whenever he wanted to say anything. He was also desperate for human company-- he would have been glad to discuss religion with a Calvinist, just to have somebody smarter than the ship's computer to talk to.

The starship performed the Park shift; in an immeasurable moment its velocity changed relative to the rest of the universe. Or, rather, the theory had it that in fact the velocity of the rest of the universe changed, while the starship remained truly motionless. No one could be sure, because there was nowhere to stand to observe the phenomenon. It was anybody's guess, since nobody understood why philotic effects worked anyway; the ansible had been discovered half by accident, and along with it the Park Instantaneity Principle. It may not be comprehensible, but it worked.

The windows of the starship instantly filled with stars as light became visible again in all directions. Someday a scientist would discover why the Park shift took almost no energy. Somewhere, Ender was certain, a terrible price was being paid for human starflight. He had dreamed once of a star winking out every time a starship made the Park shift. Jane assured him that it wasn't so, but he knew that most stars were invisible to us; a trillion of them could disappear and we'd not know it. For thousands of years we would continue to see the photons that had already

been launched before the star disappeared. By the time we could see the galaxy go blank, it would be far too late to amend our course.

"Sitting there in paranoid fantasy," said Jane.

"You can't read minds," said Ender.

"You always get morose and speculate about the destruction of the universe whenever you come out of starflight. It's your peculiar manifestation of motion sickness."

"Have you alerted Lusitanian authorities that I'm coming?"

"It's a very small colony. There's no Landing Authority because hardly anybody goes there. There's an orbiting shuttle that automatically takes people up and down to a laughable little shuttleport."

"No clearance from Immigration?"

"You're a Speaker. They can't turn you away. Besides, immigration consists of the Governor, who is also the Mayor, since the city and the colony are identical. Her name is Faria Lima Maria do Bosque, called Bosquinha, and she sends you greetings and wishes you would go away, since they've got trouble enough without a prophet of agnosticism going around annoying good Catholics."

"She said that?"

"Actually, not to you-- Bishop Peregrino said it to her, and she agreed. But it's her job to agree. If you tell her that Catholics are all idolatrous, superstitious fools, she'll probably sigh and say, I hope you can keep those opinions to yourself. "

"You're stalling," said Ender. "What is it you think I don't want to hear?"

"Novinha canceled her call for a Speaker. Five days after she sent it."

Of course, the Starways Code said that once Ender had begun his voyage in response to her call, the call could not legally be canceled; still, it changed everything, because instead of eagerly awaiting his arrival for twenty-two years, she would be dreading it, resenting him for coming when she had changed her mind. He had expected to be received by her as a welcome friend. Now she would be even more hostile than the Catholic establishment. "Anything to simplify my work," he said.

"Well, it's not all bad, Andrew. You see, in the intervening years, a couple of other people have called for a Speaker, and they haven't canceled."

"Who?"

"By the most fascinating coincidence, they are Novinha's son Miro and Novinha's daughter Ela."

"They couldn't possibly have known Pipo. Why would they call me to speak his death?"

"Oh, no, not Pipo's death. Ela called for a Speaker only six weeks ago, to speak the death of her father, Novinha's husband, Marcos Maria Ribeira, called Marc o. He keeled over in a bar. Not from alcohol-- he had a disease. He died of terminal rot."

"I worry about you, Jane, consumed with compassion the way you are."

"Compassion is what you're good at. I'm better at complex searches through organized data structures."

"And the boy-- what's his name?"

"Miro. He called for a Speaker four years ago. For the death of Pipo's son, Libo."

"Libo couldn't be older than forty--"

"He was helped along to an early death. He was xenologer, you see-- or Zenador, as they say in Portuguese."

"The piggies--"

"Exactly like his father's death. The organs placed exactly the same. Three piggies have been executed the same way while you were en route. But they plant trees in the middle of the piggy corpses-- no such honor for the dead humans."

Both xenologers murdered by the piggies, a generation apart. "What has the Starways Council decided?"

"It's very tricky. They keep vacillating. They haven't certified either of Libo's apprentices as xenologer. One is Libo's daughter, Ouanda. And the other is Miro."

"Do they maintain contact with the piggies?"

"Officially, no. There's some controversy about this. After Libo died, the Council forbade contact more frequently than once a month. But Libo's daughter categorically refused to obey the order."

"And they didn't remove her?"

"The majority for cutting back on contact with the piggies was paper thin. There was no majority for censuring her. At the same time, they worry that Miro and Ouanda are so young. Two years ago a party of scientists was dispatched from Calicut. They should be here to take over supervision of piggy affairs in only thirty-three more years."

"Do they have any idea this time why the piggies killed the xenologer?"

"None at all. But that's why you're here, isn't it?"

The answer would have been easy, except that the hive queen nudged him gently in the back of his mind. Ender could feel her like wind through the leaves of a tree, a rustling, a gentle movement, and sunlight. Yes, he was here to Speak the dead. But he was also here to bring the dead back to life.

<This is a good place.>

Everybody's always a few steps ahead of me.

<There's a mind here. Much clearer than any human mind we've known.>

The piggies? They think the way you do?

<It knows of the piggies. A little time; it's afraid of us.>

The hive queen withdrew, and Ender was left to ponder the thought that with Lusitania he may have bitten off more than he could chew.

Bishop Peregrino delivered the homily himself. That was always a bad sign. Never an exciting speaker, he had become so convoluted and parenthetical that half the time Ela couldn't even understand what he was talking about. Quim pretended he could understand, of course, because as far as he was concerned the bishop could do no wrong. But little Grego made no attempt to seem interested. Even when Sister Esquecimento was roving the aisle, with her needle-sharp nails and cruel grip, Grego fearlessly performed whatever mischief entered his head.

Today he was prying the rivets out of the back of the plastic bench in front of them. It bothered Ela how strong he was-- a six-year-old shouldn't be able to work a screwdriver under the lip of a heat-sealed rivet. Ela wasn't sure she could do it.

If Father were here, of course, his long arm would snake out and gently, oh so gently, take the screwdriver out of Grego's hand. He would whisper, "Where did you get this?" and Grego would look at him with wide and innocent eyes. Later, when the family got home from mass, Father would rage at Miro for leaving tools around, calling him terrible names and blaming him for all the troubles of the family. Miro would bear it in silence. Ela would busy herself with preparation for the evening meal. Quim would sit uselessly in the corner, massaging the rosary and murmuring his useless little prayers. Olhado was the lucky one, with his electronic eyes-- he simply turned them off or played back some favorite scene from the past and paid no attention. Quara went off and cowered in the corner. And little Grego stood there triumphantly, his hand clutching Father's pantleg, watching as the blame for everything he did was poured out on Miro's head.

Ela shuddered as the scene played itself out in her memory. If it had ended there, it would have been bearable. But then Miro would leave, and they would eat, and then--

Sister Esquecimento's spidery fingers leapt out; her fingernails dug into Grego's arm. Instantly, Grego dropped the screwdriver. Of course it was supposed to clatter on the floor, but Sister Esquecimento was no fool. She bent quickly and caught it in her other hand. Grego grinned. Her face was only inches from his knee. Ela saw what he had in mind, reached out to try to stop him, but too late--he brought his knee up sharply into Sister Esquecimento's mouth.

She gasped from the pain and let go of Grego's arm. He snatched the screwdriver out of her slackened hand. Holding a hand to her bleeding mouth, she fled down the aisle. Grego resumed his demolition work.

Father is dead, Ela reminded herself. The words sounded like music in her mind. Father is dead, but he's still here, because he left his monstrous little legacy behind. The poison he put in us all is still ripening, and eventually it will kill us all. When he died his liver was only two inches long, and his spleen could not be found. Strange fatty organs had grown in their places. There was no name for the disease; his body had gone insane, forgotten the blueprint by which human beings were built. Even now the disease still lives on in his children. Not in our bodies, but in our souls. We exist where normal human children are expected to be; we're even shaped the same. But each of us in our own way has been replaced by an imitation child, shaped out of a twisted, fetid, lipidous goiter that grew out of Father's soul.

Maybe it would be different if Mother tried to make it better. But she cared about nothing but microscopes and genetically enhanced cereals, or whatever she was working on now.

"... so-called Speaker for the Dead! But there is only One who can speak for the dead, and that is Sagrado Cristo--"

Bishop Peregrino's words caught her attention. What was he saying about a Speaker for the Dead? He couldn't possibly know she had called for one.

"-- the law requires us to treat him with courtesy, but not with belief! The truth is not to be found in the speculations and hypotheses of unspiritual men, but in the teachings and traditions of Mother Church. So when he walks among you, give him your smiles, but hold back your hearts!"

Why was he giving this warning? The nearest planet was Trondheim, twenty-two light-years away, and it wasn't likely there'd be a Speaker there. It would be decades till a Speaker arrived, if one came at all. She leaned over Quara to ask Quim-- he would have been listening. "What's this about a Speaker for the Dead?" she whispered.

"If you'd listen, you'd know for yourself."

"If you don't tell me, I'll deviate your septum."

Quim smirked, to show her he wasn't afraid of her threats. But, since he in fact was afraid of her, he then told her. "Some faithless wretch apparently requested a Speaker back when the first xenologer died, and he arrives this afternoon he's already on the shuttle and the Mayor is on her way out to meet him when he lands."

She hadn't bargained for this. The computer hadn't told her a Speaker was already on the way. He was supposed to come years from now, to Speak the truth about the monstrosity called Father who had finally blessed his family by dropping dead; the truth would come like light to illuminate and purify their past. But Father was too recently dead for him to be Spoken now. His tentacles still reached out from the grave and sucked at their hearts.

The homily ended, and eventually so did the mass. She held tightly to Grego's hand, trying to keep him from snatching someone's book or bag as they threaded through the crowd. Quirn was good for something, at least-- he carried Quara, who always froze up when she was supposed to make her way among strangers. Olhado switched his eyes back on and took care of himself, winking metallically at whatever fifteen-year-old semi-virgin he was hoping to horrify today. Ela genuflected at the statues of Os Venerados, her long-dead, half-sainted grandparents. Aren't you proud to have such lovely grandchildren as us?

Grego was smirking; sure enough, he had a baby's shoe in his hand. Ela silently prayed that the infant had come out of the encounter unbloodied. She took the shoe from Grego and laid it on the little altar where candles burned in perpetual witness of the miracle of the Descolada. Whoever owned the shoe, they'd find it there.

Mayor Bosquinha was cheerful enough as the car skimmed over the grassland between the shuttleport and the settlement of Milagre. She pointed out herds of semi-domestic cabra, a native species that provided fibers for cloth, but whose meat was nutritionally useless to human beings.

"Do the piggies eat them?" asked Ender.

She raised an eyebrow. "We don't know much about the piggies."

"We know they live in the forest. Do they ever come out on the plain?"

She shrugged. "That's for the framlings to decide."

Ender was startled for a moment to hear her use that word; but of course Demosthenes' latest book had been published twenty-two years ago, and distributed through the Hundred Worlds by ansible. Utlanning, framling, raman, varelse-- the terms were part of Stark now, and probably did not even seem particularly novel to Bosquinha.

It was her lack of curiosity about the piggies that left him feeling uncomfortable. The people of Lusitania couldn't possibly be unconcerned about the piggies-- they were the reason for the high, impassable fence that none but the Zenadors could cross. No, she wasn't incurious, she was

avoiding the subject. Whether it was because the murderous piggies were a painful subject or because she didn't trust a Speaker for the Dead, he couldn't guess.

They crested a hill and she stopped the car. Gently it settled onto its skids. Below them a broad river wound its way among grassy hills; beyond the river, the farther hills were completely covered with forest. Along the far bank of the river, brick and plaster houses with tile roofs made a picturesque town. Farmhouses perched on the near bank, their long narrow fields reaching toward the hill where Ender and Bosquinha sat.

"Milagre," said Bosquinha. "On the highest hill, the Cathedral. Bishop Peregrino has asked the people to be polite and helpful to you."

From her tone, Ender gathered that he had also let them know that he was a dangerous agent of agnosticism. "Until God strikes me dead?" he asked.

Bosquinha smiled. "God is setting an example of Christian tolerance, and we expect everyone in town will follow."

"Do they know who called me?"

"Whoever called you has been-- discreet."

"You're the Governor, besides being Mayor. You have some privileges of information."

"I know that your original call was canceled, but too late. I also know that two others have requested Speakers in recent years. But you must realize that most people are content to receive their doctrine and their consolation from the priests."

"They'll be relieved to know that I don't deal in doctrine or consolation."

"Your kind offer to let us have your cargo of skrika will make you popular enough in the bars, and you can be sure you'll see plenty of vain women wearing the pelts in the months to come. It's coming on to autumn."

"I happened to acquire the skrika with the starship-- it was of no use to me, and I don't expect any special gratitude for it." He looked at the rough, furry-looking grass around him. "This grass-- it's native?"

"And useless. We can't even use it for thatch-- if you cut it, it crumbles, and then dissolves into dust in the next rain. But down there, in the fields, the most common crop is a special breed of amaranth that our xenobiologist developed for us. Rice and wheat were feeble and undependable crops here, but the amaranth is so hardy that we have to use herbicides around the fields to keep it from spreading."

"Why?"

"This is a quarantined world, Speaker. The amaranth is so well-suited to this environment that it would soon choke out the native grasses. The idea is not to terraform Lusitania. The idea is to have as little impact on this world as possible."

"That must be hard on the people."

"Within our enclave, Speaker, we are free and our lives are full. And outside the fence-- no one wants to go there, anyway."

The tone of her voice was heavy with concealed emotion. Ender knew, then, that the fear of the piggies ran deep.

"Speaker, I know you're thinking that we're afraid of the piggies. And perhaps some of us are. But the feeling most of us have, most of the time, isn't fear at all. It's hatred. Loathing."

"You've never seen them."

"You must know of the two Zenadors who were killed-- I suspect you were originally called to speak the death of Pipo. But both of them, Pipo and Libo alike, were beloved here. Especially Libo. He was a kind and generous man, and the grief at his death was widespread and genuine. It is hard to conceive of how the piggies could do to him what they did. Dom Cristo o, the abbot of the Filhos da Mente de Cristo-- he says that they must lack the moral sense. He says this may mean that they are beasts. Or it may mean that they are unfallen, having not yet eaten of the fruit of the forbidden tree." She smiled tightly. "But that's theology, and so it means nothing to you."

He did not answer. He was used to the way religious people assumed that their sacred stories must sound absurd to unbelievers. But Ender did not consider himself an unbeliever, and he had a keen sense of the sacredness of many tales. But he could not explain this to Bosquinha. She would have to change her assumptions about him over time. She was suspicious of him, but he believed she could be won; to be a good Mayor, she had to be skilled at seeing people for what they are, not for what they seem.

He turned the subject. "The Filhos da Mente de Cristo-- my Portuguese isn't strong, but does that mean 'Sons of the Mind of Christ'?"

"They're a new order, relatively speaking, formed only four hundred years ago under a special dispensation of the Pope--"

"Oh, I know the Children of the Mind of Christ, Mayor. I Spoke the death of San Angelo on Moctezurna, in the city of Cordoba."

Her eyes widened. "Then the story is true!"

"I've heard many versions of the story, Mayor Bosquinha. One tale has it that the devil possessed San Angelo on his deathbed, so he cried out for the unspeakable rites of the pagan Hablador de los Muertos."

Bosquinha smiled. "That is something like the tale that is whispered. Dom Crist o says it's nonsense, of course."

"It happens that San Angelo, back before he was sainted, attended my Speaking for a woman that he knew. The fungus in his blood was already killing him. He came to me and said, 'Andrew, they're already telling the most terrible lies about me, saying that I've done miracles and should be sainted. You must help me. You must tell the truth at my death.'"

"But the miracles have been certified, and he was canonized only ninety years after his death."

"Yes. Well, that's partly my fault. When I Spoke his death, I attested several of the miracles myself."

Now she laughed aloud. "A Speaker for the Dead, believing in miracles?"

"Look at your cathedral hill. How many of those buildings are for the priests, and how many are for the school?"

Bosquinha understood at once, and glared at him. "The Filhos da Mente de Cristo are obedient to the Bishop."

"Except that they preserve and teach all knowledge, whether the Bishop approves of it or not."

"San Angelo may have allowed you to meddle in affairs of the Church. I assure you that Bishop Peregrino will not."

"I've come to Speak a simple death, and I'll abide by the law. I think you'll find I do less harm than you expect, and perhaps more good."

"If you've come to Speak Pipo's death, Speaker pelos Mortos, then you will do nothing but harm. Leave the piggies behind the wall. If I had my way, no human being would pass through that fence again."

"I hope there's a room I can rent."

"We're an unchanging town here, Speaker. Everyone has a house here and there's nowhere else to go-- why would anyone maintain an inn? We can only offer you one of the small plastic dwellings the first colonists put up. It's small, but it has all the amenities."

"Since I don't need many amenities or much space, I'm sure it will be fine. And I look forward to meeting Dom Crist o. Where the followers of San Angelo are, the truth has friends."

Bosquinha sniffed and started the car again. As Ender intended, her preconceived notions of a Speaker for the Dead were now shattered. To think he had actually known San Angelo, and admired the Filhos. It was not what Bishop Peregrino had led them to expect.

The room was only thinly furnished, and if Ender had owned much he would have had trouble finding anywhere to put it. As always before, however, he was able to unpack from interstellar flight in only a few minutes. Only the bundled cocoon of the hive queen remained in his bag; he had long since given up feeling odd about the incongruity of stowing the future of a magnificent race in a duffel under his bed.

"Maybe this will be the place," he murmured. The cocoon felt cool, almost cold, even through the towels it was wrapped in.

<It is the place.>

It was unnerving to have her so certain of it. There was no hint of pleading or impatience or any of the other feelings she had given him, desiring to emerge. Just absolute certainty.

"I wish we could decide just like that," he said. "It might be the place, but it all depends on whether the piggies can cope with having you here."

<The question is whether they can cope with you humans without us.>

"It takes time. Give me a few months here."

<Take all the time you need. We're in no hurry now.>

"Who is it that you've found? I thought you told me that you couldn't communicate with anybody but me."

<The part of our mind that holds our thought, what you call the philotic impulse, the power of the ansibles, it is very cold and hard to find in human beings. But this one, the one we've found here, one of many that we'll find here, his philotic impulse is much stronger, much clearer, easier to find, he hears us more easily, he sees our memories, and we see his, we find him easily, and so forgive us, dear friend, forgive us if we leave the hard work of talking to your mind and go back to him and talk to him because he doesn't make us search so hard to make words and pictures that are clear enough for your analytical mind because we feel him like sunshine, like the warmth of sunshine on his face on our face and the feel of cool water deep in our abdomen and movement as gentle and thorough as soft wind which we haven't felt for three thousand years forgive us we'll be with him until you wake us until you take us out to dwell here because you will do it you will find out in your own way in your own time that this is the place here it is this is home-->

And then he lost the thread of her thought, felt it seep away like a dream that is forgotten upon waking, even as you try to remember it and keep it alive. Ender wasn't sure what the hive queen had found, but whatever it was, he would have to deal with the reality of Starways Code, the Catholic Church, young xenologists who might not even let him meet the piggies, a xenobiologist who had changed her mind about inviting him here, and something more, perhaps the most difficult

thing of all: that if the hive queen stayed here, he would have to stay here. I've been disconnected from humanity for so many years, he thought, coming in to meddle and pry and hurt and heal, then going away again, myself untouched. How will I ever become a part of this place, if this is where I'll stay? The only things I've ever been a part of were an army of little boys in the Battle School, and Valentine, and both are gone now, both part of the past--

"What, wallowing in loneliness?" asked Jane. "I can hear your heartrate falling and your breathing getting heavy. In a moment you'll either be asleep, dead, or lacrimose."

"I'm much more complex than that," said Ender cheerfully. "Anticipated self-pity is what I'm feeling, about pains that haven't even arrived."

"Very good, Ender. Get an early start. That way you can wallow so much longer." The terminal came alive, showing Jane as a piggy in a chorus line of leggy women, highkicking with exuberance. "Get a little exercise, you'll feel so much better. After all, you've unpacked. What are you waiting for?"

"I don't even know where I am, Jane."

"They really don't keep a map of the city," Jane explained. "Everybody knows where everything is. But they do have a map of the sewer system, divided into boroughs. I can extrapolate where all the buildings are."

"Show me, then."

A three-dimensional model of the town appeared over the terminal. Ender might not be particularly welcome there, and his room might be sparse, but they had shown courtesy in the terminal they provided for him. It wasn't a standard home installation, but rather an elaborate simulator. It was able to project holos into a space sixteen times larger than most terminals, with a resolution four times greater. The illusion was so real that Ender felt for a vertiginous moment that he was Gulliver, leaning over a Lilliput that had not yet come to fear him, that did not yet recognize his power to destroy.

The names of the different boroughs hung in the air over each sewer district. "You're here," said Jane. "Vila Velha, the old town. The praca is just through the block from you. That's where public meetings are held."

"Do you have any map of the piggy lands?"

The village map slid rapidly toward Ender, the near features disappearing as new ones came into view on the far side. It was as if he were flying over it. Like a witch, he thought. The boundary of the town was marked by a fence.

"That barrier is the only thing standing between us and the piggies," mused Ender.

"It generates an electric field that stimulates any pain-sensitive nerves that come within it," said Jane. "Just touching it makes all your wetware go screwy-- it makes you feel as though somebody were cutting off your fingers with a file."

"Pleasant thought. Are we in a concentration carrip? Or a zoo?"

"It all depends on how you look at it," said Jane. "It's the human side of the fence that's connected to the rest of the universe, and the piggy side that's trapped on its home world."

"The difference is that they don't know what they're missing."

"I know," said Jane. "It's the most charming thing about humans. You are all so sure that the lesser animals are bleeding with envy because they didn't have the good fortune to be born homo sapiens." Beyond the fence was a hillside, and along the top of the hill a thick forest began. "The xenologers have never gone deep into piggy lands. The piggy community that they deal with is less than a kilometer inside this wood. The piggies live in a log house, all the males together. We don't know about any other settlements except that the satellites have been able to confirm that every forest like this one carries just about all the population that a hunter-gatherer culture can sustain."

"They hunt?"

"Mostly they gather."

"Where did Pipo and Libo die?"

Jane brightened a patch of grassy ground on the hillside leading up to the trees. A large tree grew in isolation nearby, with two smaller ones not far off.

"Those trees," said Ender. "I don't remember any being so close in the holos I saw on Trondheim."

"It's been twenty-two years. The big one is the tree the piggies planted in the corpse of the rebel called Rooter, who was executed before Pipo was murdered. The other two are more recent piggy executions."

"I wish I knew why they plant trees for piggies, and not for humans."

"The trees are sacred," said Jane. "Pipo recorded that many of the trees in the forest are named. Libo speculated that they might be named for the dead."

"And humans simply aren't part of the pattern of treeworship. Well, that's likely enough. Except that I've found that rituals and myths don't come from nowhere. There's usually some reason for it that's tied to the survival of the community."

"Andrew Wiggin, anthropologist?"

"The proper study of mankind is man."

"Go study some men, then, Ender. Novinha's family, for instance. By the way, the computer network has officially been barred from showing you where anybody lives."

Ender grinned. "So Bosquinha isn't as friendly as she seems."

"If you have to ask where people live, they'll know where you're going. If they don't want you to go there, no one will know where they live."

"You can override their restriction, can't you?"

"I already have." A light was blinking near the fence line, behind the observatory hill. It was as isolated a spot as was possible to find in Milagre. Few other houses had been built where the fence would be visible all the time. Ender wondered whether Novinha had chosen to live there to be near the fence or to be far from neighbors. Perhaps it had been Marc o's choice.

The nearest borough was Vila Atras, and then the borough called As Fabricas stretched down to the river. As the name implied, it consisted mostly of small factories that worked the metals and plastics and processed the foods and fibers that Milagre used. A nice, tight, self-contained economy. And Novinha had chosen to live back behind everything, out of sight, invisible. It was Novinha who chose it, too, Ender was sure of that now. Wasn't it the pattern of her life? She had never belonged to Milagre. It was no accident that all three calls for a Speaker had come from her and her children. The very act of calling a Speaker was defiant, a sign that they did not think they belonged among the devout Catholics of Lusitania.

"Still," said Ender, "I have to ask someone to lead me there. I shouldn't let them know right away that they can't hide any of their information from me."

The map disappeared, and Jane's face appeared above the terminal. She had neglected to adjust for the greater size of this terminal, so that her head was many times human size. She was quite imposing. And her simulation was accurate right down to the pores on her face. "Actually, Andrew, it's me they can't hide anything from."

Ender sighed. "You have a vested interest in this, Jane."

"I know." She winked. "But you don't."

"Are you telling me you don't trust me?"

"You reek of impartiality and a sense of justice. But I'm human enough to want preferential treatment, Andrew."

"Will you promise me one thing, at least?"

"Anything, my corpuscular friend."

"When you decide to hide something from me, will you at least tell me that you aren't going to tell me?"

"This is getting way too deep for little old me." She was a caricature of an overfeminine woman.

"Nothing is too deep for you, Jane. Do us both a favor. Don't cut me off at the knees."

"While you're off with the Ribeira family, is there anything you'd like me to be doing?"

"Yes. Find every way in which the Ribeiras are significantly different from the rest of the people of Lusitania. And any points of conflict between them and the authorities."

"You speak, and I obey." She started to do her genie disappearing act.

"You maneuvered me here, Jane. Why are you trying to unnerve me?"

"I'm not. And I didn't."

"I have a shortage of friends in this town."

"You can trust me with your life."

"It isn't my life I'm worried about."

The praqa was filled with children playing football. Most of them were stunting, showing how long they could keep the ball in the air using only their feet and heads. Two of them, though, had a vicious duel going. The boy would kick the ball as hard as he could toward the girl, who stood not three meters away. She would stand and take the impact of the ball, not flinching no matter how hard it struck her. Then she would kick the ball back at him, and he would try not to flinch. A little girl was tending the ball, fetching it each time it rebounded from a victim.

Ender tried asking some of the boys if they knew where the Ribeira family's house was. Their answer was invariably a shrug; when he persisted some of them began moving away, and soon most of the children had retreated from the praqa. Ender wondered what the Bishop had told everybody about Speakers.

The duel, however, continued unabated. And now that the praqa was not so crowded, Ender saw that another child was involved, a boy of about twelve. He was not extraordinary from behind, but as Ender moved toward the middle of the praqa, he could see that there was something wrong with the boy's eyes. It took a moment, but then he understood. The boy had artificial eyes. Both looked shiny and metallic, but Ender knew how they worked. Only one eye was used for sight, but it took four separate visual scans and then separated the signals to feed true binocular vision to the brain. The other eye contained the power supply, the computer control, and the external interface. When he wanted to, he could record short sequences of vision in a limited photo memory, probably less

than a trillion bits. The duelists were using him as their judge; if they disputed a point, he could replay the scene in slow motion and tell them what had happened.

The ball went straight for the boy's crotch. He winced elaborately, but the girl was not impressed. "He swiveled away, I saw his hips move!"

"Did not! You hurt me, I didn't dodge at all!"

"Reveja! Reveja!" They had been speaking Stark, but the girl now switched into Portuguese.

The boy with metal eyes showed no expression, but raised a hand to silence them. "Mudou," he said with finality. He moved, Ender translated.

"Sabia!" I knew it!

"You liar, Olhado!"

The boy with metal eyes looked at him with disdain. "I never lie. I'll send you a dump of the scene if you want. In fact, I think I'll post it on the net so everybody can watch you dodge and then lie about it."

"Mentiroso! Filho de punta! Fode-bode!"

Ender was pretty sure what the epithets meant, but the boy with metal eyes took it calmly.

"Da," said the girl. "Da-me." Give it here.

The boy furiously took off his ring and threw it on the ground at her feet. "Viada!" he said in a hoarse whisper. Then he took off running.

"Poltrao!" shouted the girl after him. Coward!

"C o!" shouted the boy, not even looking over his shoulder.

It was not the girl he was shouting at this time. She turned at once to look at the boy with metal eyes, who stiffened at the name. Almost at once the girl looked at the ground. The little one, who had been doing the ball-fetching, walked to the boy with metal eyes and whispered something. He looked up, noticing Ender for the first time.

The older girl was apologizing. "Desculpa, Olhado, nao queria que--"

"Nao ha problema, Michi." He did not look at her.

The girl started to go on, but then she, too, noticed Ender and fell silent.

"Porque esta olhando-nos?" asked the boy. Why are you looking at us?

Ender answered with a question. "Voce e arbitro?" You're the artiber here? The word could mean "umpire," but it could also mean "magistrate."

"De vez em quando." Sometimes.

Ender switched to Stark-- he wasn't sure he knew how to say anything complex in Portuguese. "Then tell me, arbiter, is it fair to leave a stranger to find his way around without help?"

"Stranger? You mean utlanning, framling, or ramen?"

"No, I think I mean infidel."

"O Senhor e descrente?" You're an unbeliever?

"So descredo no incrivel." I only disbelieve the unbelievable.

The boy grinned. "Where do you want to go, Speaker?"

"The house of the Ribeira family."

The little girl edged closer to the boy with metal eyes. "Which Ribeira family?"

"The widow Ivanova."

"I think I can find it," said the boy.

"Everybody in town can find it," said Ender. "The point is, will you take me there?"

"Why do you want to go there?"

"I ask people questions and try to find out true stories."

"Nobody at the Ribeira house knows any true stories."

"I'd settle for lies."

"Come on then." He started toward the low-mown grass of the main road. The little girl was whispering in his ear. He stopped and turned to Ender, who was following close behind.

"Quara wants to know. What's your name?"

"Andrew. Andrew Wiggin."

"She's Quara."

"And you?"

"Everybody calls me Olhado. Because of my eyes." He picked up the little girl and put her on his shoulders. "But my real name's Lauro. Lauro Suleimdo Ribeira." He grinned, then turned around and strode off.

Ender followed. Ribeira. Of course.

Jane had been listening, too, and spoke from the jewel in his ear. "Lauro Suleimdo Ribeira is Novinha's fourth child. He lost his eyes in a laser accident. He's twelve years old. Oh, and I found one difference between the Ribeira family and the rest of the town. The Ribeiros are willing to defy the Bishop and lead you where you want to go."

I noticed something, too, Jane, he answered silently. This boy enjoyed deceiving me, and then enjoyed even more letting me see how I'd been fooled. I just hope you don't take lessons from him.

Miro sat on the hillside. The shade of the trees made him invisible to anyone who might be watching from Milagre, but he could see much of the town from here-- certainly the cathedral and the monastery on the highest hill, and then the observatory on the next hill to the north. And under the observatory, in a depression in the hillside, the house where he lived, not very far from the fence.

"Miro," whispered Leaf-eater. "Are you a tree?"

It was a translation from the pequeninos' idiom. Sometimes they meditated, holding themselves motionless for hours. They called this "being a tree."

"More like a blade of grass," Miro answered.

Leaf-eater giggled in the high, wheezy way he had. It never sounded natural-- the pequeninos had learned laughter by rote, as if it were simply another word in Stark. It didn't arise out of amusement, or at least Miro didn't think it did.

"Is it going to rain?" asked Miro. To a piggy this meant: are you interrupting me for my own sake, or for yours?

"It rained fire today," said Leaf-eater. "Out in the prairie."

"Yes. We have a visitor from another world."

"Is it the Speaker?"

Miro didn't answer.

"You must bring him to see us."

Miro didn't answer.

"I root my face in the ground for you, Miro, my limbs are lumber for your house."

Miro hated it when they begged for something. It was as if they thought of him as someone particularly wise or strong, a parent from whom favors must be wheedled. Well, if they felt that way, it was his own fault. His and Libo's. Playing God out here among the piggies.

"I promised, didn't I, Leaf-eater?"

"When when when?"

"It'll take time. I have to find out whether he can be trusted."

Leaf-eater looked baffled. Miro had tried to explain that not all humans knew each other, and some weren't nice, but they never seemed to understand.

"As soon as I can," Miro said.

Suddenly Leaf-eater began to rock back and forth on the ground, shifting his hips from side to side as if he were trying to relieve an itch in his anus. Libo had speculated once that this was what performed the same function that laughter did for humans. "Talk to me in piddle-geese!" wheezed Leaf-eater. Leaf-eater always seemed to be greatly amused that Miro and the other Zenadors spoke two languages interchangeably. This despite the fact that at least four different piggy languages had been recorded or at least hinted at over the years, all spoken by this same tribe of piggies.

But if he wanted to hear Portuguese, he'd get Portuguese. "Vai comer folhas." Go eat leaves.

Leaf-eater looked puzzled. "Why is that clever?"

"Because that's your name. Come-folhas."

Leaf-eater pulled a large insect out of his nostril and flipped it away, buzzing. "Don't be crude," he said. Then he walked away.

Miro watched him go. Leaf-eater was always so difficult. Miro much preferred the company of the piggy called Human. Even though Human was smarter, and Miro had to watch himself more carefully with him, at least he didn't seem hostile the way Leaf-eater often did.

With the piggy out of sight, Miro turned back toward the city. Somebody was moving down the path along the face of the hill, toward his house. The one in front was very tall-- no, it was Olhado with Quara on his shoulders. Quara was much too old for that. Miro worried about her. She seemed not to be coming out of the shock of Father's death. Miro felt a moment's bitterness. And to think he and Ela had expected Father's death would solve all their problems.

Then he stood up and tried to get a better view of the man behind Olhado and Quara. No one he'd seen before. The Speaker. Already! He couldn't have been in town for more than an hour, and he was already going to the house. That's great, all I need is for Mother to find out that I was the one who called him here. Somehow I thought that a Speaker for the Dead would be discreet about it, not just come straight home to the person who called. What a fool. Bad enough that he's coming years before I expected a Speaker to get here. Quim's bound to report this to the Bishop, even if nobody else does. Now I'm going to have to deal with Mother and, probably, the whole city.

Miro moved back into the trees and jogged along a path that led, eventually, to the gate back into the city.

Chapter 7 -- The Ribeira House

Miro, this time you should have been there, because even though I have a better memory for dialogue than you, I sure don't know what this means. You saw the new piggy, the one they call Human-- I thought I saw you talking to him for a minute before you took off for the Questionable Activity. Mandachuva told me they named him Human because he was very smart as a child. OK, it's very flattering that "smart" and "human" are linked in their minds, or perhaps offensive that they think we'll be flattered by that, but that's not what matters.

Mandachuva then said: "He could already talk when he started walking around by himself." And he made a gesture with his hand about ten centimeters off the ground. To me it looked like he was telling how tall Human was when he learned how to talk and walk. Ten centimeters! But I could be completely wrong. You should have been there, to see for yourself.

If I'm right, and that's what SYLVESTERMandachuva meant, then for the first time we have an idea of piggy childhood. If they actually start walking at ten centimeters in height-- and talking, no less! --then they must have less development time during gestation than humans, and do a lot more developing after they're born.

But now it gets absolutely crazy, even by your standards. He then leaned in close and told me-- as if he weren't supposed to-- who Human's father was: "Your grandfather Pipo knew Human's father. His tree is near your gate."

Is he kidding? Rooter died twenty-four years ago, didn't he? OK, maybe this is Just a religious thing, sort of adopt-a-tree or something. But the way Mandachuva was so secretive about it, I keep thinking it's somehow true. Is it possible that they have a 24-year gestation period? Or maybe it took a couple of decades for Human to develop from a 10-centimeter toddler into the fine specimen of piggihood we now see. Or maybe Rooter's sperm was saved in a Jar somewhere.

But this matters. This is the first time a piggy personally known to human observers has ever been named as a father. And Rooter, no less, the very one that got murdered. In other words, the male with the lowest prestige-- an executed criminal, even-- has been named as a father! That means that our males aren't cast-off bachelors at all, even though some of them are so old they knew Pipo. They are potential fathers.

What's more, if Human was so remarkably smart, then why was he dumped here if this is really a group of miserable bachelors? I think we've had it wrong for quite a while. This isn't a low-prestige group of bachelors, this is a high-prestige group of juveniles, and some of them are really going to amount to something.

So when you told me you felt sorry for me because you got to go out on the Questionable Activity and I had to stay home and work up some Official Fabrications for the ansible report, you were full of Unpleasant Excretions! (If you get home after I'm asleep, wake me up for a kiss, OK? I earned it today.)

-- Memo from Ouanda Figueira Mucumbi to Miro Ribeira von Hesse, retrieved from Lusitanian files by Congressional order and introduced as evidence in the Trial In Absentia of the Xenologers of Lusitania on Charges of Treason and Malfeasance

There was no construction industry in Lusitania. When a couple got married, their friends and family built them a house. The Ribeira house expressed the history of the family. At the front, the old part of the house was made of plastic sheets rooted to a concrete foundation. Rooms had been built on as the family grew, each addition abutting the one before, so that five distinct one-story structures fronted the hillside. The later ones were all brick, decently plumbed, roofed with tile, but with no attempt whatever at aesthetic appeal. The family had built exactly what was needed and nothing more.

It was not poverty, Ender knew-- there was no poverty in a community where the economy was completely controlled. The lack of decoration, of individuality, showed the family's contempt for their own house; to Ender this bespoke contempt for themselves as well. Certainly Olhado and Quara showed none of the relaxation, the letting-down that most people feel when they come home. If anything, they grew warier, less jaunty; the house might have been a subtle source of gravity, making them heavier the nearer they approached.

Olhado and Quara went right in. Ender waited at the door for someone to invite him to enter. Olhado left the door ajar, but walked on out of the room without speaking to him. Ender could see Quara sitting on a bed in the front room, leaning against a bare wall. There was nothing whatsoever on any of the walls. They were stark white. Quara's face matched the blankness of the walls. Though her eyes regarded Ender unwaveringly, she showed no sign of recognizing that he was there; certainly she did nothing to indicate he might come in.

There was a disease in this house. Ender tried to understand what it was in Novinha's character that he had missed before, that would let her live in a place like this. Had Pipo's death so long before emptied Novinha's heart as thoroughly as this?

"Is your mother home?" Ender asked.

Quara said nothing.

"Oh," he said. "Excuse me. I thought you were a little girl, but I see now that you're a statue."

She showed no sign of hearing him. So much for trying to jolly her out of her somberness.

Shoes slapped rapidly against a concrete floor. A little boy ran into the room, stopped in the middle, and whirled to face the doorway where Ender stood. He couldn't be more than a year younger than Quara, six or seven years old, probably. Unlike Quara, his face showed plenty of understanding. Along with a feral hunger.

"Is your mother home?" asked Ender.

The boy bent over and carefully rolled up his pantleg. He had taped a long kitchen knife to his leg. Slowly he untaped it. Then, holding it in front of him with both hands, he aimed himself at Ender and launched himself full speed. Ender noted that the knife was well-aimed at his crotch. The boy was not subtle in his approach to strangers.

A moment later Ender had the boy tucked under his arm and the knife jammed into the ceiling. The boy was kicking and screaming. Ender had to use both hands to control his limbs; the boy ended up dangling in front of him by his hands and feet, for all the world like a calf roped for branding.

Ender looked steadily at Quara. "If you don't go right now and get whoever is in charge in this house, I'm going to take this animal home and serve it for supper."

Quara thought about this for a moment, then got up and ran out of the room.

A moment later a tired-looking girl with tousled hair and sleepy eyes came into the front room. "Desculpe, por favor," she murmured, "o menino nao se restabeleceu desde a morte do pai--"

Then she seemed suddenly to come awake.

"O Senhor , o Falante pelos Mortos!" You're the Speaker for the Dead!

"Sou," answered Ender. I am.

"Nao aqui," she said. "Oh, no, I'm sorry, do you speak Portuguese? Of course you do, you just answered me-- oh, please, not here, not now. Go away."

"Fine," said Ender. "Should I keep the boy or the knife?"

He glanced up at the ceiling, her gaze followed his. "Oh, no, I'm sorry, we looked for it all day yesterday, we knew he had it but we didn't know where."

"It was taped to his leg."

"It wasn't yesterday. We always look there. Please, let go of him."

"Are you sure? I think he's been sharpening his teeth."

"Grego," she said to the boy, "it's wrong to poke at people with the knife."

Grego growled in his throat.

"His father dying, you see."

"They were that close?"

A look of bitter amusement passed across her face. "Hardly. He's always been a thief, Grego has, ever since he was old enough to hold something and walk at the same time. But this thing for hurting people, that's new. Please let him down."

"No," said Ender.

Her eyes narrowed and she looked defiant. "Are you kidnapping him? To take him where? For what ransom?"

"Perhaps you don't understand," said Ender. "He assaulted me. You've offered me no guarantee that he won't do it again. You've made no provision for disciplining him when I set him down."

As he had hoped, fury came into her eyes. "Who do you think you are? This is his house, not yours!"

"Actually," Ender said, "I've just had a rather long walk from the praca to your house, and Olhado set a brisk pace. I'd like to sit down."

She nodded toward a chair. Grego wriggled and twisted against Ender's grip. Ender lifted him high enough that their faces weren't too far apart. "You know, Grego, if you actually break free, you will certainly fall on your head on a concrete floor. If there were carpet, I'd give you an even chance of staying conscious. But there isn't. And frankly, I wouldn't mind hearing the sound of your head smacking against cement."

"He doesn't really understand Stark that well," said the girl.

Ender knew that Grego understood just fine. He also saw motion at the edges of the room. Olhado had come back and stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen. Quara was beside him. Ender smiled cheerfully at them, then stepped to the chair the girl had indicated. In the process, he swung Grego up into the air, letting go of his hands and feet in such a way that he spun madly for a moment, shooting out his arms and legs in panic, squealing in fear at the pain that would certainly come when he hit the floor. Ender smoothly slid onto the chair and caught the boy on his lap, instantly pinioning his arms. Grego managed to smack his heels into Ender's shins, but since the boy wasn't wearing shoes, it was an ineffective maneuver. In a moment Ender had him completely helpless again.

"It feels very good to be sitting down," Ender said. "Thank you for your hospitality. My name is Andrew Wiggin. I've met Olhado and Quara, and obviously Grego and I are good friends."

The older girl wiped her hand on her apron as if she planned to offer it to him to shake, but she did not offer it. "My name is Ela Ribeira. Ela is short for Elanora."

"A pleasure to meet you. I see you're busy preparing supper."

"Yes, very busy. I think you should come back tomorrow."

"Oh, go right ahead. I don't mind waiting."

Another boy, older than Olhado but younger than Ela, shoved his way into the room. "Didn't you hear my sister? You aren't wanted here!"

"You show me too much kindness," Ender said. "But I came to see your mother, and I'll wait here until she comes home from work."

The mention of their mother silenced them.

"I assume she's at work. If she were here, I would expect these exciting events would have flushed her out into the open."

Olhado smiled a bit at that, but the older boy darkened, and Ela got a nasty, painful expression on her face. "Why do you want to see her?" asked Ela.

"Actually, I want to see all of you." He smiled at the older boy. "You must be Estevao Rei Ribeira. Named for St. Stephen the Martyr, who saw Jesus sitting at the right hand of God."

"What do you know of such things, atheist!"

"As I recall, St. Paul stood by and held the coats of the men who were stoning him. Apparently he wasn't a believer at the time. In fact, I think he was regarded as the most terrible enemy of the Church. And yet he later repented, didn't he? So I suggest you think of me, not as the enemy of God, but as an apostle who has not yet been stopped on the road to Damascus." Ender smiled.

The boy stared at him, tight-lipped. "You're no St. Paul."

"On the contrary," said Ender. "I'm the apostle to the piggies."

"You'll never see them-- Miro will never let you."

"Maybe I will," said a voice from the door. The others turned at once to watch him walk in. Miro was young-- surely not yet twenty. But his face and bearing carried the weight of responsibility and suffering far beyond his years. Ender saw how all of them made space for him. It was not that they backed away from him the way they might retreat from someone they feared. Rather, they oriented themselves to him, walking in parabolas around him, as if he were the center of gravity in the room and everything else was moved by the force of his presence.

Miro walked to the center of the room and faced Ender. He looked, however, at Ender's prisoner. "Let him go," said Miro. There was ice in his voice.

Ela touched him softly on the arm. "Grego tried to stab him, Miro." But her voice also said, Be calm, it's all right, Grego's in no danger and this man is not our enemy. Ender heard all this; so, it seemed, did Miro.

"Grego," said Miro. "I told you that someday you'd take on somebody who wasn't afraid of you."

Grego, seeing an ally suddenly turn to an enemy, began to cry. "He's killing me, he's killing me."

Miro looked coldly at Ender. Ela might trust the Speaker for the Dead, but Miro didn't, not yet.

"I am hurting him," said Ender. He had found that the best way to earn trust was to tell the truth. "Every time he struggles to get free, it causes him quite a bit of discomfort. And he hasn't stopped struggling yet."

Ender met Miro's gaze steadily, and Miro understood his unspoken request. He did not insist on Grego's release. "I can't get you out of this one, Greguinho."

"You're going to let him do this?" asked Estevao.

Miro gestured toward Estevao and spoke apologetically to Ender. "Everyone calls him Quim." The nickname was pronounced like the word king in Stark. "It began because his middle name is Rei. But now it's because he thinks he rules by divine right."

"Bastard," said Quim. He stalked out of the room.

At the same time, the others settled in for conversation. Miro had decided to accept the stranger, at least temporarily; therefore they could let down their guard a little. Olhado sat down on the floor; Quara returned to her previous perch on the bed. Ela leaned back against the wall. Miro pulled up another chair and sat facing Ender.

"Why did you come to this house?" asked Miro. Ender saw from the way he asked that he, like Ela, had not told anyone that he had summoned a Speaker. So neither of them knew that the other expected him. And, in fact, they almost undoubtedly had not expected him to come so soon.

"To see your mother," Ender said.

Miro's relief was almost palpable, though he made no obvious gesture. "She's at work," he said. "She works late. She's trying to develop a strain of potato that can compete with the grass here."

"Like the amaranth?"

He grinned. "You already heard about that? No, we don't want it to be as good a competitor as that. But the diet here is limited, and potatoes would be a nice addition. Besides, amaranth doesn't ferment into a very good beverage. The miners and farmers have already created a mythology of vodka that makes it the queen of distilled intoxicants."

Miro's smile came to this house like sunlight through a crevice in a cave. Ender could feel the loosening of tensions. Quara wiggled her leg back and forth like an ordinary little girl. Olhado had a stupidly happy expression on his face, his eyes half-closed so that the metallic sheen was not so monstrously obvious. Ela's smile was broader than Miro's good humor should have earned. Even Grego had relaxed, had stopped straining against Ender's grip.

Then a sudden warmth on Ender's lap told him that Grego, at least, was far from surrender. Ender had trained himself not to respond reflexively to an enemy's actions until he had consciously decided to let his reflexes rule. So Grego's flood of urine did not cause him to so much as flinch. He knew what Grego had been expecting-- a shout of anger, and Ender flinging him away, casting him from his lap in disgust. Then Grego would be free-- it would be a triumph. Ender yielded him no victory.

Ela, however, apparently knew the expressions of Grego's face. Her eyes went wide, and then she took an angry step toward the boy. "Grego, you impossible little--"

But Ender winked at her and smiled, freezing her in place. "Grego has given me a little gift. It's the only thing he has to give me, and he made it himself, so it means all the more. I like him so much that I think I'll never let him go."

Grego snarled and struggled again, madly, to break free.

"Why are you doing this!" said Ela.

"He's expecting Grego to act like a human being," said Miro. "It needs doing, and nobody else has bothered to try."

"I've tried," said Ela.

Olhado spoke up from his place on the floor. "Ela's the only one here who keeps us civilized."

Quim shouted from the other room. "Don't you tell that bastard anything about our family!"

Ender nodded gravely, as if Quim had offered a brilliant intellectual proposition. Miro chuckled and Ela rolled her eyes and sat down on the bed beside Quara.

"We're not a very happy home," said Miro.

"I understand," said Ender. "With your father so recently dead."

Miro smiled sardonically. Olhado spoke up, again. "With Father so recently alive, you mean."

Ela and Miro were in obvious agreement with this sentiment. But Quim shouted again. "Don't tell him anything!"

"Did he hurt you?" Ender asked quietly. He did not move, even though Grego's urine was getting cold and rank.

Ela answered. "He didn't hit us, if that's what you mean."

But for Miro, things had gone too far. "Quim's right," said Miro. "It's nobody's business but ours."

"No," said Ela. "It's his business."

"How is it his business?" asked Miro.

"Because he's here to Speak Father's death," said Ela.

"Father's death!" said Olhado. "Chupa pedras! Father only died three weeks ago!"

"I was already on my way to Speak another death," said Ender. "But someone did call for a Speaker for your father's death, and so I'll Speak for him."

"Against him," said Ela.

"For him," said Ender.

"I brought you here to tell the truth," she said bitterly, "and all the truth about Father is against him."

Silence pressed to the corners of the room, holding them all still, until Quim walked slowly through the doorway. He looked only at Ela. "You called him," he said softly. "You."

"To tell the truth!" she answered. His accusation obviously stung her; he did not have to say how she had betrayed her family and her church to bring this infidel to lay bare what had been so long concealed. "Everybody in Milagre is so kind and understanding," she said. "Our teachers overlook

little things like Grego's thievery and Quara's silence. Never mind that she hasn't said a word in school, ever! Everybody pretends that we're just ordinary children-- the grandchildren of Os Venerados, and so brilliant, aren't we, with a Zenador and both biologists in the family! Such prestige. They just look the other way when Father gets himself raging drunk and comes home and beats Mother until she can't walk!"

"Shut up!" shouted Quim.

"Ela," said Miro.

"And you, Miro, Father shouting at you, saying terrible things until you run out of the house, you run, stumbling because you can hardly see--"

"You have no right to tell him!" said Quim.

Olhado leapt to his feet and stood in the middle of the room, turned around to look at them all with his unhuman eyes. "Why do you still want to hide it?" he asked softly.

"What's it to you?" asked Quim. "He never did anything to you. You just turned off your eyes and sat there with the headphones on, listening to batuque or Bach or something--"

"Turn off my eyes?" said Olhado. "I never turned off my eyes."

He whirled and walked to the terminal, which was in the corner of the room farthest from the front door. In a few quick movements he had the terminal on, then picked up an interface cable and jammed it in the socket in his right eye. It was only a simple computer linkup, but to Ender it brought back a hideous memory of the eye of a giant, torn open and oozing, as Ender bored deep, penetrated to the brain, and sent it toppling backward to its death. He froze up for a moment before he remembered that his memory was not real, it was of a computer game he had played in the Battle School. Three thousand years ago, but to him a mere twenty-five years, not such a great distance that the memory had lost its power. It was his memories and dreams of the giant's death that the buggers had taken out of his mind and turned into the signal they left for him; eventually it had led him to the hive queen's cocoon.

It was Jane's voice that brought him back to the present moment. She whispered from the jewel, "If it's all the same to you, while he's got that eye linked up I'm going to get a dump of everything else he's got stored away in there."

Then a scene began in the air over the terminal. It was not holographic. Instead the image was like bas-relief, as it would have appeared to a single observer. It was this very room, seen from the spot on the floor where a moment ago Olhado had been sitting-- apparently it was his regular spot. In the middle of the floor stood a large man, strong and violent, flinging his arms about as he shouted abuse at Miro, who stood quietly, his head bent, regarding his father without any sign of anger. There was no sound-- it was a visual image only. "Have you forgotten?" whispered Olhado. "Have you forgotten what it was like?"

In the scene on the terminal Miro finally turned and left; Marc o following him to the door, shouting after him. Then he turned back into the room and stood there, panting like an animal exhausted from the chase. In the picture Grego ran to his father and clung to his leg, shouting out the door, his face making it plain that he was echoing his father's cruel words to Miro. Marc o pried the child from his leg and walked with determined purpose into the back room.

"There's no sound," said Olhado. "But you can hear it, can't you?"

Ender felt Grego's body trembling on his lap.

"There it is, a blow, a crash-- she's falling to the floor, can you feel it in your flesh, the way her body hits the concrete?"

"Shut up, Olhado," said Miro.

The computer-generated scene ended. "I can't believe you saved that," said Ela.

Quim was weeping, making no effort to hide it. "I killed him," he said. "I killed him I killed him I killed him."

"What are you talking about?" said Miro in exasperation. "He had a rotten disease, it was congenital!"

"I prayed for him to die!" screamed Quim. His face was mottled with passion, tears and mucus and spittle mingling around his lips. "I prayed to the Virgin, I prayed to Jesus, I prayed to Grandpa and Grandma, I said I'd go to hell for it if only he'd die, and they did it, and now I'll go to hell and I'm not sorry for it! God forgive me but I'm glad!" Sobbing, he stumbled back out of the room. A door slammed in the distance.

"Well, another certified miracle to the credit of Os Venerados," said Miro. "Sainthood is assured."

"Shut up," said Olhado.

"And he's the one who kept telling us that Christ wanted us to forgive the old fart," said Miro.

On Ender's lap, Grego now trembled so violently that Ender grew concerned. He realized that Grego was whispering a word. Ela, too, saw Grego's distress and knelt in front of the boy.

"He's crying, I've never seen him cry like this--"

"Papa, papa, papa," whispered Grego. His trembling had given way to great shudders, almost convulsive in their violence.

"Is he afraid of Father?" asked Olhado. His face showed deep concern for Grego. To Ender's relief, all their faces were full of worry. There was love in this family, and not just the solidarity of living under the rule of the same tyrant for all these years.

"Papa's gone now," said Miro comfortingly. "You don't have to worry now."

Ender shook his head. "Miro," he said, "didn't you watch Olhado's memory? Little boys don't judge their fathers, they love them. Grego was trying as hard as he could to be just like Marcos Ribeira. The rest of you might have been glad to see him gone, but for Grego it was the end of the world."

It had not occurred to any of them. Even now it was a sickening idea; Ender could see them recoil from it. And yet they knew it was true. Now that Ender had pointed it out, it was obvious.

"Deus nos perdoa," murmured Ela. God forgive us.

"The things we've said," whispered Miro.

Ela reached out for Grego. He refused to go to her. Instead he did exactly what Ender expected, what he had prepared for. Grego turned in Ender's relaxed grip, flung his arms around the neck of the Speaker for the Dead, and wept bitterly, hysterically.

Ender spoke gently to the others, who watched helplessly. "How could he show his grief to you, when he thought you hated him?"

"We never hated Grego," said Olhado.

"I should have known," said Miro. "I knew he was suffering the worst pain of any of us, but it never occurred to me..."

"Don't blame yourself," said Ender. "It's the kind of thing that only a stranger can see."

He heard Jane whispering in his ear. "You never cease to amaze me, Andrew, the way you turn people into plasma."

Ender couldn't answer her, and she wouldn't believe him anyway. He hadn't planned this, he had played it by ear. How could he have guessed that Olhado would have a recording of Marc o's viciousness to his family? His only real insight was with Grego, and even that was instinctive, a sense that Grego was desperately hungry for someone to have authority over him, for someone to act like a father to him. Since his own father had been cruel, Grego would believe only cruelty as a proof of love and strength. Now his tears washed Ender's neck as hotly as, a moment before, his urine had soaked Ender's thighs.

He had guessed what Grego would do, but Quara managed to take him by surprise. As the others watched Grego's weeping in silence, she got off the bed and walked directly to Ender. Her eyes were narrow and angry. "You stink!" she said firmly. Then she marched out of the room toward the back of the house.

Miro barely suppressed his laughter, and Ela smiled. Ender raised his eyebrows as if to say, You win some, you lose some.

Olhado seemed to hear his unspoken words. From his chair by the terminal, the metal-eyed boy said softly, "You win with her, too. It's the most she's said to anyone outside the family in months."

But I'm not outside the family, Ender said silently. Didn't you notice? I'm in the family now, whether you like it or not. Whether I like it or not.

After a while Grego's sobbing stopped. He was asleep. Ender carried him to his bed; Quara was already asleep on the other side of the small room. Ela helped Ender strip off Grego's urine-soaked pants and put looser underwear on him-- her touch was gentle and deft, and Grego did not waken.

Back in the front room Miro eyed Ender clinically. "Well, Speaker, you have a choice. My pants will be tight on you and too short in the crotch, but Father's would fall right off."

It took Ender a moment to remember. Grego's urine had long since dried. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I can change when I get home."

"Mother won't be home for another hour. You came to see her, didn't you? We can have your pants clean by then."

"Your pants, then," said Ender. "I'll take my chances with the crotch."

Chapter 8 -- Dona Ivanova

It means a life of constant deception. You will go out and discover something, something vital, and then when you get back to the station you'll write up a completely innocuous report, one which mentions nothing that we learned through cultural contamination.

You're too young to understand what torture this is. Father and I began doing this because we couldn't bear to withhold knowledge from the piggies. You will discover, as I have, that it is no less painful to withhold knowledge from your fellow scientists. When you watch them struggle with a question, knowing that you have the information that could easily resolve their dilemma; when you see them come very near the truth and then for lack of your information retreat from their correct conclusions and return to error-- you would not be human if it didn't cause you great anguish.

You must remind yourselves, always: It is their law, their choice. They are the ones who built the wall between themselves and the truth, and they would only punish us if we let them know how easily and thoroughly that wall has been breached. And for every framing scientist who is longing for the truth, there are ten petty-minded descabeqados [headless ones] who despise knowledge, who never think of an original hypothesis, whose only labor is to prey on the writings of the true

scientists in order to catch tiny errors or contradictions or lapses in method. These suckflies will pore over every report you make, and if you are careless even once they will catch you.

That means you can't even mention a piggy whose name is derived from cultural contamination: "Cups" would tell them that we have taught them rudimentary pottery-making. "Calendar" and "Reaper" are obvious. And God himself couldn't save us if they learned Arrow's name.

-- Memo from Liberdade Figueira de Medici to Ouanda Figueira Mucumbi and Miro Ribeira von Hesse, retrieved from Lustanian files by Congressional order and introduced as evidence in the Trial In Absentia of the Xenologers of Lusitania on Charges of Treason and Malfeasance

Novinha lingered in the Biologista's Station even though her meaningful work was finished more than an hour ago. The cloned potato plants were all thriving in nutrient solution; now it would be a matter of making daily observations to see which of her genetic alterations would produce the hardiest plant with the most useful root.

If I have nothing to do, why don't I go home? She had no answer for the question. Her children needed her, that was certain; she did them no kindness by leaving early each morning and coming home only after the little ones were asleep. And yet even now, knowing she should go back, she sat staring at the laboratory, seeing nothing, doing nothing, being nothing.

She thought of going home, and could not imagine why she felt no joy at the prospect. After all, she reminded herself, Marc o is dead. He died three weeks ago. Not a moment too soon. He did all that I ever needed him for, and I did all that he wanted, but all our reasons expired four years before he finally rotted away. In all that time we never shared a moment of love, but I never thought of leaving him. Divorce would have been impossible, but desquite would have been enough. To stop the beatings. Even yet her hip was stiff and sometimes painful from the last time he had thrown her to the concrete floor. What lovely memorabilia you left behind, C o, my dog of a husband.

The pain in her hip flared even as she thought of it. She nodded in satisfaction. It's no more than I deserve, and I'll be sorry when it heals.

She stood up and walked, not limping at all even though the pain was more than enough to make her favor the hip. I'll not coddle myself, not in anything. It's no worse than I deserve.

She walked to the door, closed it behind her. The computer turned off the lights as soon as she was gone, except those needed for the various plants in forced photosynthetic phase. She loved her plants, her little beasts, with surprising intensity. Grow, she cried out to them day and night, grow and thrive. She would grieve for the ones that failed and pinch them dead only when it was plain they had no future. Now as she walked away from the station, she could still hear their subliminal music, the cries of the infinitesimal cells as they grew and split and formed themselves into ever more elaborate patterns. She was going from light into darkness, from life into death, and the emotional pain grew worse in perfect synchronicity with the inflammation of her joints.

As she approached her house from over the hill, she could see the patches of light thrown through the windows and out onto the hill below. Quara's and Grego's room dark; she would not have to bear their unbearable accusations-- Quara's in silence, Grego's in sullen and vicious crimes. But there were too many other lights on, including her own room and the front room. Something unusual was going on, and she didn't like unusual things.

Olhado sat in the living room, earphones on as usual; tonight, though, he also had the interface jack attached to his eye. Apparently, he was retrieving old visual memories from the computer, or perhaps dumping out some he had been carrying with him. As so many times before, she wished she could also dump out her visual memories and wipe them clean, replace them with more pleasant ones. Pipo's corpse, that would be one she'd gladly be rid of, to be replaced by some of the golden glorious days with the three of them together in the Zenador's Station. And Libo's body wrapped in its cloth, that sweet flesh held together only by the winding fabric; she would like to have instead other memories of his body, the touch of his lips, the expressiveness of his delicate hands. But the good memories fled, buried too deep under the pain. I stole them all, those good days, and so they were taken back and replaced by what I deserved.

Olhado turned to face her, the jack emerging obscenely from his eye. She could not control her shudder, her shame. I'm sorry, she said silently. If you had had another mother, you would doubtless still have your eye. You were born to be the best, the healthiest, the wholeset of my children, Lauro, but of course nothing from my womb could be left intact for long.

She said nothing of this, of course, just as Olhado said nothing to her. She turned to go back to her room and find out why the light was on.

"Mother," said Olhado.

He had taken the earphones off, and was twisting the jack out of his eye.

"Yes?"

"We have a visitor," he said. "The Speaker."

She felt herself go cold inside. Not tonight, she screamed silently. But she also knew that she would not want to see him tomorrow, either, or the next day, or ever.

"His pants are clean now, and he's in your room changing back into them. I hope you don't mind."

Ela emerged from the kitchen. "You're home," she said. "I poured some cafezinhos, one for you, too."

"I'll wait outside until he's gone," said Novinha.

Ela and Olhado looked at each other. Novinha understood at once that they regarded her as a problem to be solved; that apparently they subscribed to whatever the Speaker wanted to do here. Well, I'm a dilemma that's not going to be solved by you.

"Mother," said Olhado, "he's not what the Bishop said. He's good."

Novinha answered him with her most withering sarcasm. "Since when are you an expert on good and evil?"

Again Ela and Olhado looked at each other. She knew what they were thinking. How can we explain to her? How can we persuade her? Well, dear children, you can't. I am unpersuadable, as Libo found out every week of his life. He never had the secret from me. It's not my fault he died.

But they had succeeded in turning her from her decision. Instead of leaving the house, she retreated into the kitchen, passing Ela in the doorway but not touching her. The tiny coffee cups were arranged in a neat circle on the table, the steaming pot in the center. She sat down and rested her forearms on the table. So the Speaker was here, and had come to her first. Where else would he go? It's my fault he's here, isn't it? He's one more person whose life I have destroyed, like my children's lives, like Marc o's, and Libo's, and Pipo's, and my own.

A strong yet surprisingly smooth masculine hand reached out over her shoulder, took up the pot, and began to pour through the tiny, delicate spout, the thin stream of hot coffee swirling into the tiny cafezinho cups.

"Posso derramar?" he asked. What a stupid question, since he was already pouring. But his voice was gentle, his Portuguese tinged with the graceful accents of Castilian. A Spaniard, then?

"Desculpa-me," she whispered. Forgive me. "Trouxe o senhor tantos quilometros--"

"We don't measure starflight in kilometers, Dona Ivanova. We measure it in years." His words were an accusation, but his voice spoke of wistfulness, even forgiveness, even consolation. I could be seduced by that voice. That voice is a liar.

"If I could undo your voyage and return you twenty-two years, I'd do it. Calling for you was a mistake. I'm sorry." Her own voice sounded flat. Since her whole life was a lie, even this apology sounded rote.

"I don't feel the time yet," said the Speaker. Still he stood behind her, so she had not yet seen his face. "For me it was only a week ago that I left my sister. She was the only kin of mine left alive. Her daughter wasn't born yet, and now she's probably through with college, married, perhaps with children of her own. I'll never know her. But I know your children, Dona Ivanova."

She lifted the cafezinho and drank it down in a single swallow, though it burned her tongue and throat and made her stomach hurt. "In only a few hours you think you know them?"

"Better than you do, Dona Ivanova."

Novinha heard Ela gasp at the Speaker's audacity. And even though she thought his words might be true, it still enraged her to have a stranger say them. She turned to look at him, to snap at him, but he had moved, he was not behind her. She turned farther, finally standing up to look for him, but he wasn't in the room. Ela stood in the doorway, wide-eyed.

"Come back!" said Novinha. "You can't say that and walk out on me like that!"

But he didn't answer. Instead, she heard low laughter from the back of the house. Novinha followed the sound. She walked through the rooms to the very end of the house. Miro sat on Novinha's own bed, and the Speaker stood near the doorway, laughing with him. Miro saw his mother and the smile left his face. It caused a stab of anguish within her. She had not seen him smile in years, had forgotten how beautiful his face became, just like his father's face; and her coming had erased that smile.

"We came here to talk because Quim was so angry," Miro explained. "Ela made the bed."

"I don't think the Speaker cares whether the bed was made or not," said Novinha coldly. "Do you, Speaker?"

"Order and disorder," said the Speaker, "they each have their beauty." Still he did not turn to face her, and she was glad of that, for it meant she did not have to see his eyes as she delivered her bitter message.

"I tell you, Speaker, that you've come on a fool's errand," she said. "Hate me for it if you will, but you have no death to speak. I was a foolish girl. In my naivete I thought that when I called, the author of the Hive Queen and the Hegemon would come. I had lost a man who was like a father to me, and I wanted consolation."

Now he turned to her. He was a youngish man, younger than her, at least, but his eyes were seductive with understanding. Perigoso, she thought. He is dangerous, he is beautiful, I could drown in his understanding.

"Dona Ivanova," he said, "how could you read the Hive Queen and the Hegemon and imagine that its author could bring comfort?"

It was Miro who answered-- silent, slow-talking Miro, who leapt into the conversation with a vigor she had not seen in him since he was little. "I've read it," he said, "and the original Speaker for the Dead wrote the tale of the hive queen with deep compassion."

The Speaker smiled sadly. "But he wasn't writing to the buggers, was he? He was writing to humankind, who still celebrated the destruction of the buggers as a great victory. He wrote cruelly, to turn their pride to regret, their joy to grief. And now human beings have completely forgotten that once they hated the buggers, that once they honored and celebrated a name that is now unspeakable--"

"I can say anything," said Ivanova. "His name was Ender, and he destroyed everything he touched." Like me, she did not say.

"Oh? And what do you know of him?" His voice whipped out like a grass-saw, ragged and cruel. "How do you know there wasn't something that he touched kindly? Someone who loved him, who was blessed by his love? Destroyed everything he touched-- that's a lie that can't truthfully be said of any human being who ever lived."

"Is that your doctrine, Speaker? Then you don't know much." She was defiant, but still his anger frightened her. She had thought his gentleness was as imperturbable as a confessor's.

And almost immediately the anger faded from his face. "You can ease your conscience," he said. "Your call started my journey here, but others called for a Speaker while I was on the way."

"Oh?" Who else in this benighted city was familiar enough with the Hive Queen and the Hegemon to want a Speaker, and independent enough of Bishop Peregrino to dare to call for one? "If that's so, then why are you here in my house?"

"Because I was called to Speak the death of Marcos Maria Ribeira, your late husband."

It was an appalling thought. "Him! Who would want to think of him again, now that he's dead!"

The Speaker did not answer. Instead Miro spoke sharply from her bed. "Grego would, for one. The Speaker showed us what we should have known-- that the boy is grieving for his father and thinks we all hate him--"

"Cheap psychology," she snapped. "We have therapists of our own, and they aren't worth much either."

Ela's voice came from behind her. "I called for him to Speak Father's death, Mother. I thought it would be decades before he came, but I'm glad he's here now, when he can do us some good."

"What good can he do us!"

"He already has, Mother. Grego fell asleep embracing him, and Quara spoke to him."

"Actually," said Miro, "she told him that he stinks."

"Which was probably true," said Ela, "since Greguinho peed all over him."

Miro and Ela burst into laughter at the memory, and the Speaker also smiled. This more than anything else discomposed Novinha-- such good cheer had been virtually unfelt in this house since Marc o brought her here a year after Pipo's death. Against her will Novinha remembered her joy when Miro was newly born, and when Ela was little, the first few years of their lives, how Miro babbled about everything, how Ela toddled madly after him through the house, how the children played together and romped in the grass within sight of the piggies' forest just beyond the fence; it

was Novinha's delight in the children that poisoned Marc o, that made him hate them both, because he knew that none of it belonged to him. By the time Quim was born, the house was thick with anger, and he never learned how to laugh freely where his parents might notice. Hearing Miro and Ela laugh together was like the abrupt opening of a thick black curtain; suddenly it was daylight again, when Novinha had forgotten there was any season of the day but night.

How dared this stranger invade her house and tear open all the curtains she had closed!

"I won't have it," she said. "You have no right to pry into my husband's life."

He raised an eyebrow. She knew Starways Code as well as anyone, and so she knew perfectly well that he not only had a right, the law protected him in the pursuit of the true story of the dead.

"Marc o was a miserable man," she persisted, "and telling the truth about him will cause nothing but pain."

"You're quite right that the truth about him will cause nothing but pain, but not because he was a miserable man," said the Speaker. "If I told nothing but what everyone already knows-- that he hated his children and beat his wife and raged drunkenly from bar to bar until the constables sent him home-- then I would not cause pain, would I? I'd cause a great deal of satisfaction, because then everyone would be reassured that their view of him was correct all along. He was scum, and so it was all right that they treated him like scum."

"And you think he wasn't?"

"No human being, when you understand his desires, is worthless. No one's life is nothing. Even the most evil of men and women, if you understand their hearts, had some generous act that redeems them, at least a little, from their sins."

"If you believe that, then you're younger than you look," said Novinha.

"Am I?" said the Speaker. "It was less than two weeks ago that I first heard your call. I studied you then, and even if you don't remember, Novinha, I remember that as a young girl you were sweet and beautiful and good. You had been lonely before, but Pipo and Libo both knew you and found you worthy of love."

"Pipo was dead."

"But he loved you."

"You don't know anything, Speaker! You were twenty-two lightyears away! Besides, it wasn't me I was calling worthless, it was Marc o!"

"But you don't believe that, Novinha. Because you know the one act of kindness and generosity that redeems that poor man's life."

Novinha did not understand her own terror, but she had to silence him before he named it, even though she had no idea what kindness of God's he thought he had discovered. "How dare you call me Novinha!" she shouted. "No one has called me that in four years!"

In answer, he raised his hand and brushed his fingers across the back of her cheek. It was a timid gesture, almost an adolescent one; it reminded her of Libo, and it was more than she could bear. She took his hand, hurled it away, then shoved past him into the room. "Get out!" she shouted at Miro. Her son got up quickly and backed to the door. She could see from his face that after all Miro had seen in this house, she still had managed to surprise him with her rage.

"You'll have nothing from me!" she shouted at the Speaker.

"I didn't come to take anything from you," he said quietly.

"I don't want anything you have to give, either! You're worthless to me, do you hear that? You're the one who's worthless! Lixo, ruina, estrago-- vai fora d'aqui, nao tens direito estar em minha casa!" You have no right to be in my house.

"Nao eres estrago," he whispered, "eres solo fecundo, e vou plantar jardim ai." Then, before she could answer, he closed the door and was gone.

In truth she had no answer to give him, his words were so outrageous. She had called him estrago, but he answered as if she had called herself a desolation. And she had spoken to him derisively, using the insultingly familiar tu for "you" instead of o Senhor or even the informal voce. It was the way one spoke to a child or a dog. And yet when he answered in the same voice, with the same familiarity, it was entirely different. "Thou art fertile ground, and I will plant a garden in thee." It was the sort of thing a poet says to his mistress, or even a husband to his wife, and the tu was intimate, not arrogant. How dare he, she whispered to herself, touching the cheek that he had touched. He is far crueller than I ever imagined a Speaker might be. Bishop Peregrino was right. He is dangerous, the infidel, the anti-Christ, he walks brazenly into places in my heart that I had kept as holy ground, where no one else was ever permitted to stand. He treads on the few small shoots that cling to life in that stony soil, how dare he, I wish I had died before seeing him, he will surely undo me before he's through.

She was vaguely aware of someone crying. Quara. Of course the shouting had wakened her; she never slept soundly. Novinha almost opened the door and went out to comfort her, but then she heard the crying stop, and a soft male voice singing to her. The song was in another language. German, it sounded to Novinha, or Nordic; she did not understand it, whatever it was. But she knew who sang it, and knew that Quara was comforted.

Novinha had not felt such fear since she first realized that Miro was determined to become a Zenador and follow in the footsteps of the two men that the piggies had murdered. This man is unknotting the nets of my family, and stringing us together whole again; but in the process he will find my secrets. If he finds out how Pipo died, and Speaks the truth, then Miro will learn that same secret, and it will kill him. I will make no more sacrifices to the piggies; they are too cruel a god for me to worship anymore.

Still later, as she lay in bed behind her closed door, trying to go to sleep, she heard more laughter from the front of the house, and this time she could hear Quim and Olhado both laughing along with Miro and Ela. She imagined she could see them, the room bright with mirth. But as sleep took her, and the imagination became a dream, it was not the Speaker who sat among her children, teaching them to laugh; it was Libo, alive again, and known to everyone as her true husband, the man she had married in her heart even though she refused to marry him in the Church. Even in her sleep it was more joy than she could bear, and tears soaked the sheet of her bed.

Chapter 9 -- Congenital Defect

CIDA: The Descolada body isn't bacterial. It seems to enter the cells of the body and take up permanent residence, just like mitochondria, reproducing when the cell reproduces. The fact that it spread to a new species within only a few years of our arrival here suggests that it is wildly adaptable. It must surely have spread through the entire biosphere of Lusitania long ago, so that it may now be endemic here, a permanent infection.

GUSTO: If it's permanent and everywhere, it isn't an infection, Cida, it's part of normal life.

CIDA: But it isn't necessarily inborn-- it has the ability to spread. But yes, if it's endemic then all the indigenous species must have found ways to fight it off.

GUSTO: Or adapt to it and include it in their normal life cycle. Maybe they NEED it.

CIDA: They NEED something that takes apart their genetic molecules and puts them back together at random?

GUSTO: Maybe that's why there are so few different species in Lusitania-- the Descolada may be fairly recent, only half a million years old-- and most species couldn't adapt.

CIDA: I wish we weren't dying, Gusto. The next xenobiologist will probably work with standard genetic adaptations and won't follow this up.

GUSTO: That's the only reason you can think of for regretting our death?

-- Vladimir Tiago Gussman and Ekaterina Maria Aparecida do Norte von Hesse-Gussman, unpublished dialogue embedded in working notes, two days before their deaths; first quoted in "Lost Threads of Understanding," *Meta-Science, the journal of Methodology*, 2001:12:12:144-45

Ender did not get home from the Ribeira house until late that night, and he spent more than an hour trying to make sense of all that happened, especially after Novinha came home. Despite this, Ender awoke early the next morning, his thoughts already full of questions he had to answer. It was always this way when he was preparing to Speak a death; he could hardly rest from trying to piece together the story of the dead man as he saw himself, the life the dead woman meant to live, however badly it had turned out. This time, though, there was an added anxiety. He cared more for the living this time than he ever had before.

"Of course you're more involved," said Jane, after he tried to explain his confusion to her. "You fell in love with Novinha before you left Trondheim."

"Maybe I loved the young girl, but this woman is nasty and selfish. Look what she let happen to her children."

"This is the Speaker for the Dead? Judging someone by appearances?"

"Maybe I've fallen in love with Grego."

"You've always been a sucker for people who pee on you."

"And Quara. All of them-- even Miro, I like the boy."

"And they love you, Ender."

He laughed. "People always think they love me, until I

Speak. Novinha's more perceptive than most-- she already hates me before I tell the truth."

"You're as blind about yourself as anyone else, Speaker," said Jane. "Promise me that when you die, you'll let me Speak your death. Have I got things to say."

"Keep them to yourself," said Ender wearily. "You're even worse at this business than I am."

He began his list of questions to be resolved.

1. Why did Novinha marry Marc o in the first place?
2. Why did Marc o hate his children?
3. Why does Novinha hate herself?
4. Why did Miro call me to Speak Libo's death?
5. Why did Ela call me to Speak her father's death?
6. Why did Novinha change her mind about my Speaking Pipo's death?

7. What was the immediate cause of Marc o's death?

He stopped with the seventh question. It would be easy to answer it; a merely clinical matter. So that was where he would begin.

The physician who autopsied Marc o was called Navio, which meant "ship."

"Not for my size," he said, laughing. "Or because I'm much of a swimmer. My full name is Enrique o Navigador Caronada. You can bet I'm glad they took my nickname from 'shipmaster' rather than from 'little cannon.' Too many obscene possibilities in that one."

Ender was not deceived by his joviality. Navio was a good Catholic and he obeyed his bishop as well as anyone. He was determined to keep Ender from learning anything, though he'd not be uncheerful about it.

"There are two ways I can get the answers to my questions," Ender said quietly. "I can ask you, and you can tell me truthfully. Or I can submit a petition to the Starways Congress for your records to be opened to me. The ansible charges are very high, and since the petition is a routine one, and your resistance to it is contrary to law, the cost will be deducted from your colony's already straitened funds, along with a double-the-cost penalty and a reprimand for you."

Navio's smile gradually disappeared as Ender spoke. He answered coldly. "Of course I'll answer your questions," he said.

"There's no 'of course' about it," said Ender. "Your bishop counseled the people of Milagre to carry out an unprovoked and unjustified boycott of a legally called-for minister. You would do everyone a favor if you would inform them that if this cheerful noncooperation continues, I will petition for my status to be changed from minister to inquisitor. I assure you that I have a very good reputation with the Starways Congress, and my petition will be successful."

Navio knew exactly what that meant. As an inquisitor, Ender would have congressional authority to revoke the colony's Catholic license on the grounds of religious persecution. It would cause a terrible upheaval among the Lusitanians, not least because the Bishop would be summarily dismissed from his position and sent to the Vatican for discipline.

"Why would you do such a thing when you know we don't want you here?" said Navio.

"Someone wanted me here or I wouldn't have come," said Ender. "You may not like the law when it annoys you, but it protects many a Catholic on worlds where another creed is licensed."

Navio drummed his fingers on his desk. "What are your questions, Speaker," he said. "Let's get this done."

"It's simple enough, to start with, at least. What was the proximate cause of the death of Marcos Maria Ribeira?"

"Marc o!" said Navio. "You couldn't possibly have been summoned to Speak his death, he only passed away a few weeks ago--"

"I have been asked to Speak several deaths, Dom Navio, and I choose to begin with Marc o's."

Navio grimaced. "What if I ask for proof of your authority?" Jane whispered in Ender's ear. "Let's dazzle the dear boy." Immediately, Navio's terminal came alive with official documents, while one of Jane's most authoritative voices declared, "Andrew Wiggin, Speaker for the Dead, has accepted the call for an explanation of the life and death of Marcos Maria Ribeira, of the city of Milagre, Lusitania Colony."

It was not the document that impressed Navio, however. It was the fact that he had not actually made the request, or even logged on to his terminal. Navio knew at once that the computer had been activated through the jewel in the Speaker's ear, but it meant that a very high-level logic routine was shadowing the Speaker and enforcing compliance with his requests. No one on Lusitania, not even Bosquinha herself, had ever had authority to do that. Whatever this Speaker was, Navio concluded, he's a bigger fish than even Bishop Peregrino can hope to fry.

"All right," Navio said, forcing a laugh. Now, apparently, he remembered how to be jovial again. "I meant to help you anyway-- the Bishop's paranoia doesn't afflict everyone in Milagre, you know."

Ender smiled back at him, taking his hypocrisy at face value.

"Marcos Ribeira died of a congenital defect." He rattled off a long pseudo-Latin name. "You've never heard of it because it's quite rare, and is passed on only through the genes. Beginning at the onset of puberty, in most cases, it involves the gradual replacement of exocrine and endocrine glandular tissues with lipidous cells. What that means is that bit by bit over the years, the adrenal glands, the pituitary, the liver, the testes, the thyroid, and so on, are all replaced by large agglomerations of fat cells."

"Always fatal? Irreversible?"

"Oh, yes. Actually, Marc o survived ten years longer than usual. His case was remarkable in several ways. In every other recorded case-- and admittedly there aren't that many-- the disease attacks the testicles first, rendering the victim sterile and, in most cases, impotent. With six healthy children, it's obvious that Marcos Ribeira's testes were the last of his glands to be affected. Once they were attacked, however, progress must have been unusually fast-- the testes were completely replaced with fat cells, even though much of his liver and thyroid were still functioning."

"What killed him in the end?"

"The pituitary and the adrenals weren't functioning. He was a walking dead man. He just fell down in one of the bars, in the middle of some ribald song, as I heard."

As always, Ender's mind automatically found seeming contradictions. "How does a hereditary disease get passed on if it makes its victims sterile?"

"It's usually passed through collateral lines. One child will die of it; his brothers and sisters won't manifest the disease at all, but they'll pass on the tendency to their children. Naturally, though, we were afraid that Marc o, having children, would pass on the defective gene to all of them."

"You tested them?"

"Not a one had any of the genetic deformations. You can bet that Dona Ivanova was looking over my shoulder the whole time. We zeroed in immediately on the problem genes and cleared each of the children, bim bim bim, just like that. "

"None of them had it? Not even a recessive tendency?"

"Graças a Deus," said the doctor. "Who would ever have married them if they had had the poisoned genes? As it was, I can't understand how Marc o's own genetic defect went undiscovered."

"Are genetic scans routine here?"

"Oh, no, not at all. But we had a great plague some thirty years ago. Dona Ivanova's own parents, the Venerado Gusto and the Venerada Cida, they conducted a detailed genetic scan of every man, woman, and child in the colony. It's how they found the cure. And their computer comparisons would definitely have turned up this particular defect-- that's how I found out what it was when Marc o died. I'd never heard of the disease, but the computer had it on file."

"And Os Venerados didn't find it?"

"Apparently not, or they would surely have told Marcos. And even if they hadn't told him, Ivanova herself should have found it."

"Maybe she did," said Ender.

Navio laughed aloud. "Impossible. No woman in her right mind would deliberately bear the children of a man with a genetic defect like that. Marc o was surely in constant agony for many years. You don't wish that on your own children. No, Ivanova may be eccentric, but she's not insane."

Jane was quite amused. When Ender got home, she made her image appear above his terminal just so she could laugh uproariously.

"He can't help it," said Ender. "In a devout Catholic colony like this, dealing with the Biologista, one of the most respected people here, of course he doesn't think to question his basic premises."

"Don't apologize for him," said Jane. "I don't expect wetware to work as logically as software. But you can't ask me not to be amused."

"In a way it's rather sweet of him," said Ender. "He'd rather believe that Marc o's disease was different from every other recorded case. He'd rather believe that somehow Ivanova's parents didn't notice that Marcos had the disease, and so she married him in ignorance, even though Ockham's razor decrees that we believe the simplest explanation: Maredo's decay progressed like every other, testes first, and all of Novinha's children were sired by someone else. No wonder Marc o was bitter and angry. Every one of her six children reminded him that his wife was sleeping with another man. It was probably part of their bargain in the beginning that she would not be faithful to him. But six children is rather rubbing his nose in it."

"The delicious contradictions of religious life," said Jane. "She deliberately set out to commit adultery-- but she would never dream of using a contraceptive."

"Have you scanned the children's genetic pattern to find the most likely father?"

"You mean you haven't guessed?"

"I've guessed, but I want to make sure the clinical evidence doesn't disprove the obvious answer."

"It was Libo, of course. What a dog! He sired six children on Novinha, and four more on his own wife."

"What I don't understand," said Ender, "is why Novinha didn't marry Libo in the first place. It makes no sense at all for her to have married a man she obviously despised, whose disease she certainly knew about, and then to go ahead and bear children to the man she must have loved from the beginning. "

"Twisted and perverse are the ways of the human mind," Jane intoned. "Pinocchio was such a dolt to try to become a real boy. He was much better off with a wooden head."

Miro carefully picked his way through the forest. He recognized trees now and then, or thought he did-- no human could ever have the piggies' knack for naming every single tree in the woods. But then, humans didn't worship the trees as totems of their ancestors, either.

Miro had deliberately chosen a longer way to reach the piggies' log house. Ever since Libo accepted Miro as a second apprentice, to work with him alongside Libo's daughter, Ouanda, he had taught them that they must never form a path leading from Milagre to the piggies' home. Someday, Libo warned them, there may be trouble between human and piggy; we will make no path to guide a pogrom to its destination. So today Miro walked the far side of the creek, along the top of the high bank.

Sure enough, a piggy soon appeared in the near distance, watching him. That was how Libo reasoned out, years ago, that the females must live somewhere in that direction; the males always kept a watch on the Zenadors when they went too near. And, as Libo had insisted, Miro made no

effort to move any farther in the forbidden direction. His curiosity dampened whenever he remembered what Libo's body looked like when he and Ouanda found it. Libo had not been quite dead yet; his eyes were open and moving. He only died when both Miro and Ouanda knelt at either side of him, each holding a blood-covered hand. Ah, Libo, your blood still pumped when your heart lay naked in your open chest. If only you could have spoken to us, one word to tell us why they killed you.

The bank became low again, and Miro [note: original text says "Libo," probable accident] crossed the brook by running lightly on the moss-covered stones. In a few more minutes he was there, coming into the small clearing from the east.

Ouanda was already there, teaching them how to churn the cream of cabra milk to make a sort of butter. She had been experimenting with the process for the past several weeks before she got it right. It would have been easier if she could have had some help from Mother, or even Ela, since they knew so much more about the chemical properties of cabra milk, but cooperating with a Biologista was out of the question. Os Venerados had discovered thirty years ago that cabra milk was nutritionally useless to humans. Therefore any investigation of how to process it for storage could only be for the piggies' benefit. Miro and Ouanda could not risk anything that might let it be known they were breaking the law and actively intervening in the piggies' way of life.

The younger piggies took to butter-churning with delight they had made a dance out of kneading the cabra bladders and were singing now, a nonsensical song that mixed Stark, Portuguese, and two of the piggies' own languages into a hopeless but hilarious muddle. Miro tried to sort out the languages. He recognized Males' Language, of course, and also a few fragments of Fathers' Language, the language they used to speak to their totem trees; Miro recognized it only by its sound; even Libo hadn't been able to translate a single word. It all sounded like ms and bs and gs, with no detectable difference among the vowels.

The piggy who had been shadowing Miro in the woods now emerged and greeted the others with a loud hooting sound. The dancing went on, but the song stopped immediately. Mandachuva detached himself from the group around Ouanda and came to meet Miro at the clearing's edge.

"Welcome, I-Look-Upon-You-With-Desire." That was, of course, an extravagantly precise translation of Miro's name into Stark. Mandachuva loved translating names back and forth between Portuguese and Stark, even though Miro and Ouanda had both explained that their names didn't really mean anything at all, and it was only coincidence if they sounded like words. But Mandachuva enjoyed his language games, as so many piggies did, and so Miro answered to I-Look-Upon-You-With-Desire, just as Ouanda patiently answered to Vaga, which was Portuguese for "wander," the Stark word that most sounded like "Ouanda. "

Mandachuva was a puzzling case. He was the oldest of the piggies. Pipo had known him, and wrote of him as though he were the most prestigious of the piggies. Libo, too, seemed to think of him as a leader. Wasn't his name a slangy Portuguese term for "boss"? Yet to Miro and Ouanda, it seemed as though Mandachuva was the least powerful and prestigious of the piggies. No one seemed to consult him on anything; he was the one piggy who always had free time to converse with the Zenadors, because he was almost never engaged in an important task.

Still, he was the piggy who gave the most information to the Zenadors. Miro couldn't begin to guess whether he had lost his prestige because of his information-sharing, or shared information with the humans to make up for his low prestige among the piggies. It didn't even matter. The fact was that Miro liked Mandachuva. He thought of the old piggy as his friend.

"Has the woman forced you to eat that foul-smelling paste?" asked Miro.

"Pure garbage, she says. Even the baby cabras cry when they have to suck a teat." Mandachuva giggled.

"If you leave that as a gift for the ladyfolk, they'll never speak to you again."

"Still, we must, we must," said Mandachuva, sighing. "They have to see everything, the prying macios!"

Ah, yes, the bafflement of the females. Sometimes the piggies spoke of them with sincere, elaborate respect, almost awe, as if they were gods. Then a piggy would say something as crude as to call them "macios," the worms that slithered on the bark of trees. The Zenadors couldn't even ask about them-- the piggies would never answer questions about the females. There had been a time-- a long time-- when the piggies didn't even mention the existence of females at all. Libo always hinted darkly that the change had something to do with Pipo's death. Before he died, the mention of females was tabu, except with reverence at rare moments of great holiness; afterward, the piggies also showed this wistful, melancholy way of joking about "the wives." But the Zenadors could never get an answer to a question about the females. The piggies made it plain that the females were none of their business.

A whistle came from the group around Ouanda. Mandachuva immediately began pulling Miro toward the group. "Arrow wants to talk to you."

Miro came and sat beside Ouanda. She did not look at him--they had learned long ago that it made the piggies very uncomfortable when they had to watch male and female humans in direct conversation, or even having eye contact with each other. They would talk with Ouanda alone, but whenever Miro was present they would not speak to her or

endure it if she spoke to them. Sometimes it drove Miro crazy that she couldn't so much as wink at him in front of the piggies. He could feel her body as if she were giving off heat like a small star.

"My friend," said Arrow. "I have a great gift to ask of you."

Miro could hear Ouanda tensing slightly beside him. The piggies did not often ask for anything, and it always caused difficulty when they did.

"Will you hear me?"

Miro nodded slowly. "But remember that among humans I am nothing, with no power." Libo had discovered that the piggies were not at all insulted to think that the humans sent powerless delegates among them, while the image of impotence helped them explain the strict limitations on what the Zenadors could do.

"This is not a request that comes from us, in our silly and stupid conversations around the night fire."

"I only wish I could hear the wisdom that you call silliness," said Miro, as he always did.

"It was Rooter, speaking out of his tree, who said this."

Miro sighed silently. He liked dealing with piggy religion as little as he liked his own people's Catholicism. In both cases he had to pretend to take the most outrageous beliefs seriously. Whenever anything particularly daring or importunate was said, the piggies always ascribed it to one ancestor or another, whose spirit dwelt in one of the ubiquitous trees. It was only in the last few years, beginning not long before Libo's death, that they started singling out Rooter as the source of most of the troublesome ideas. It was ironic that a piggy they had executed as a rebel was now treated with such respect in their ancestor-worship.

Still, Miro responded as Libo had always responded. "We have nothing but honor and affection for Rooter, if you honor him."

"We must have metal."

Miro closed his eyes. So much for the Zenadors' longstanding policy of never using metal tools in front of the piggies. Obviously, the piggies had observers of their own, watching humans at work from some vantage point near the fence. "What do you need metal for?" he asked quietly.

"When the shuttle came down with the Speaker for the Dead, it gave off a terrible heat, hotter than any fire we can make. And yet the shuttle didn't burn, and it didn't melt."

"That wasn't the metal, it was a heat-absorbent plastic shield. "

"Perhaps that helps, but metal is in the heart of that machine. In all your machines, wherever you use fire and heat to make things move, there is metal. We will never be able to make fires like yours until we have metal of our own. "

"I can't," said Miro.

"Do you tell us that we are condemned always to be varelse, and never ramen?"

I wish, Ouanda, that you had not explained Demosthenes' Hierarchy of Exclusion to them. "You are not condemned to anything. What we have given you so far, we have made out of things that grow in your natural world, like cabras. Even that, if we were discovered, would cause us to be exiled from this world, forbidden ever to see you again."

"The metal you humans use also comes out of our natural world. We've seen your miners digging it out of the ground far to the south of here."

Miro stored that bit of information for future reference. There was no vantage point outside the fence where the mines would be visible. Therefore the piggies must be crossing the fence somehow and observing humans from within the enclave. "It comes out of the ground, but only in certain places, which I don't know how to find. And even when they dig it up, it's mixed with other kinds of rock. They have to purify it and transform it in very difficult processes. Every speck of metal dug out of the ground is accounted for. If we gave you so much as a single tool-- a screwdriver or a masonry saw-- it would be missed, it would be searched for. No one searches for cabra milk."

Arrow looked at him steadily for some time; Miro met his gaze. "We will think about this," Arrow said. He reached out his hand toward Calendar, who put three arrows in his hand. "Look. Are these good?"

They were as perfect as Arrow's fletchery usually was, well-feathered and true. The innovation was in the tip. It was not made of obsidian.

"Cabra bone," said Miro.

"We use the cabra to kill the cabra." He handed the arrows back to Calendar. Then he got up and walked away.

Calendar held the slender wooden arrows out in front of him and sang something to them in Fathers' Language. Miro recognized the song, though he did not understand the words. Mandachuva had once explained to him that it was a prayer, asking the dead tree to forgive them for using tools that were not made of wood. Otherwise, he said, the trees would think the Little Ones hated them. Religion. Miro sighed.

Calendar carried the arrows away. Then the young piggy named Human took his place, squatting on the ground in front of Miro. He was carrying a leaf-wrapped bundle, which he laid on the dirt and opened carefully.

It was the printout of the Hive Queen and the Hegemon that Miro had given them four years ago. It had been part of a minor quarrel between Miro and Ouanda. Ouanda began it, in a conversation with the piggies about religion. It was not really her fault. It began with Mandachuva asking her, "How can you humans live without trees?"

She understood the question, of course-- he was not speaking of woody plants, but of gods.

"We have a God, too-- a man who died and yet still lived," she explained. Just one? Then where does he live now? "No one knows." Then what good is he? How can you talk to him? "He dwells in our hearts."

They were baffled by this; Libo would later laugh and say, "You see? To them our sophisticated theology sounds like superstition. Dwells in our hearts indeed! What kind of religion is that, compared to one with gods you can see and feel--"

"And climb and pick macios from, not to mention the fact that they cut some of them down to make their log house," said Ouanda.

"Cut? Cut them down? Without stone or metal tools? No, Ouanda, they pray them down." But Ouanda was not amused by jokes about religion.

At the piggies' request Ouanda later brought them a printout of the Gospel of St. John from the simplified Stark paraphrase of the Douai Bible. But Miro had insisted on giving them, along with it, a printout of the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. "St. John says nothing about beings who live on other worlds," Miro pointed out. "But the Speaker for the Dead explains buggers to humans-- and humans to buggers." Ouanda had been outraged at his blasphemy. But not a year later they found the piggies lighting fires using pages of St. John as kindling, while the Hive Queen and the Hegemon was tenderly wrapped in leaves. It caused Ouanda a great deal of grief for a while, and Miro learned that it was wiser not to goad her about it.

Now Human opened the printout to the last page. Miro noticed that from the moment he opened the book, all the piggies quietly gathered around. The butter-churning dance ended. Human touched the last words of the printout. "The Speaker for the Dead," he murmured.

"Yes, I met him last night."

"He is the true Speaker. Rooter says so." Miro had warned them that there were many Speakers, and the writer of the Hive Queen and the Hegemon was surely dead. Apparently they still couldn't get rid of the hope that the one who had come here was the real one, who had written the holy book.

"I believe he's a good Speaker," said Miro. "He was kind to my family, and I think he might be trusted."

"When will he come and Speak to us?"

"I didn't ask him yet. It's not something that I can say right out. It will take time."

Human tipped his head back and howled.

Is this my death? thought Miro.

No. The others touched Human gently and then helped him wrap the printout again and carry it away. Miro stood up to leave. None of the piggies watched him go. Without being ostentatious about it, they were all busy doing something. He might as well have been invisible.

Ouanda caught up with him just within the forest's edge, where the underbrush made them invisible to any possible observers from Milagre-- though no one ever bothered to look toward the forest. "Miro," she called softly. He turned just in time to take her in his arms; she had such momentum that he had to stagger backward to keep from falling down. "Are you trying to kill me?" he asked, or tried to-- she kept kissing him, which made it difficult to speak in complete sentences. Finally he gave up on speech and kissed her back, once, long and deep. Then she abruptly pulled away.

"You're getting libidinous," she said.

"It happens whenever women attack me and kiss me in the forest."

"Cool your shorts, Miro, it's still a long way off. " She took him by the belt, pulled him close, kissed him again. "Two more years until we can marry without your mother's consent."

Miro did not even try to argue. He did not care much about the priestly proscription of fornication, but he did understand how vital it was in a fragile community like Milagre for marriage customs to be strictly adhered to. Large and stable communities could absorb a reasonable amount of unsanctioned coupling; Milagre was far too small. What Ouanda did from faith, Miro did from rational thought-- despite a thousand opportunities, they were as celibate as monks. Though if Miro thought for one moment that they would ever have to live the same vows of chastity in marriage that were required in the Filhos' monastery, Ouanda's virginity would be in grave and immediate danger.

"This Speaker," said Ouanda. "You know how I feel about bringing him out here."

"That's your Catholicism speaking, not rational inquiry." He tried to kiss her, but she lowered her face at the last moment and he got a mouthful of nose. He kissed it passionately until she laughed and pushed him away.

"You are messy and offensive, Miro." She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "We already shot the scientific method all to hell when we started helping them raise their standard of living. We have ten or twenty years before the satellites start showing obvious results. By then maybe we'll have been able to make a permanent difference. But we've got no chance if we let a stranger in on the project. He'll tell somebody."

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't. I was a stranger once, you know."

"Strange, but never a stranger."

"You had to see him last night, Ouanda. With Grego first, and then when Quara woke up crying--"

"Desperate, lonely children-- what does that prove?"

"And Ela. Laughing. And Olhado, actually taking part in the family."

"Quim?"

"At least he stopped yelling for the infidel to go home."

"I'm glad for your family, Miro. I hope he can heal them permanently, I really do-- I can see the difference in you, too, you're more hopeful than I've seen you in a long time. But don't bring him out here."

Miro chewed on the side of his cheek for a moment, then walked away. Ouanda ran after him, caught him by the arm. They were in the open, but Rooter's tree was between them and the gate. "Don't leave me like that!" she said fiercely. "Don't just walk away from me!"

"I know you're right," Miro said. "But I can't help how I feel. When he was in our house, it was like-- it was as if Libo had come there."

"Father hated your mother, Miro, he would never have gone there."

"But if he had. In our house this Speaker was the way Libo always was in the Station. Do you see?"

"Do you? He comes in and acts the way your father should have but never did, and every single one of you rolls over belly-up like a puppy dog."

The contempt on her face was infuriating. Miro wanted to hit her. Instead he walked over and slapped his hand against Rooter's tree. In only a quarter of a century it had grown to almost eighty centimeters in diameter, and the bark was rough and painful on his hand.

She came up behind him. "I'm sorry, Miro, I didn't mean--"

"You meant it, but it was stupid and selfish--"

"Yes, it was, I--"

"Just because my father was scum doesn't mean I go belly-up for the first nice man who pats my head--"

Her hand stroked his hair, his shoulder, his waist. "I know, I know, I know--"

"Because I know what a good man is-- not just a father, a good man. I knew Libo, didn't I? And when I tell you that this Speaker, this Andrew Wiggin is like Libo, then you listen to me and don't dismiss it like the whimpering of a c o!"

"I do listen. I want to meet him, Miro."

Miro surprised himself. He was crying. It was all part of what this Speaker could do, even when he wasn't present. He had loosened all the tight places in Miro's heart, and now Miro couldn't stop anything from coming out.

"You're right, too," said Miro softly, his voice distorted with emotion. "I saw him come in with his healing touch and I thought, If only he had been my father." He turned to face Ouanda, not caring if she saw his eyes red and his face streaked with tears. "Just the way I used to say that every day when I went home from the Zenador's Station. If only Libo were my father, if only I were his son."

She smiled and held him; her hair took the tears from his face. "Ah, Miro, I'm glad he wasn't your father. Because then I'd be your sister, and I could never hope to have you for myself."

Chapter 10 -- Children of the Mind

Rule 1: All Children of the Mind of Christ must be married, or they may not be in the order; but they must be chaste.

Question 1: Why is marriage necessary for anyone?

Fools say, Why should we marry? Love is the only bond my lover and I need. To them I say, Marriage is not a covenant between a man and a woman; even the beasts cleave together and produce their young. Marriage is a covenant between a man and woman on the one side and their community on the other. To marry according to the law of the community is to become a full citizen; to refuse marriage is to be a stranger, a child, an outlaw, a slave, or a traitor. The one constant in every society of humankind is that only those who obey the laws, tabus, and customs of marriage are true adults.

Question 2: Why then is celibacy ordained for priests and nuns?

To separate them from the community. The priests and nuns are servants, not citizens. They minister to the Church, but they are not the Church. Mother Church is the bride, and Christ is the bridegroom; the priests and nuns are merely guests at the wedding, for they have rejected citizenship in the community of Christ in order to serve it.

Question 3: Why then do the Children of the Mind of Christ marry? Do we not also serve the Church?

We do not serve the Church, except as all women and men serve it through their marriages. The difference is that where they pass on their genes to the next generation, we pass on our knowledge; their legacy is found in the genetic molecules of generations to come, while we live on in their minds. Memories are the offspring of our marriages, and they are neither more or less worthy than the flesh-and-blood children conceived in sacramental love.

-- San Angelo, The Rule and Catechism of the Order of the Children of the Mind of Christ,
1511:11:11:1

The Dean of the Cathedral carried the silence of dark chapels and massive, soaring walls wherever he went: When he entered the classroom, a heavy peace fell upon the students, and even their breathing was guarded as he noiselessly drifted to the front of the room.

"Dom Crist o," murmured the Dean. "The Bishop has need of consultation with you."

The students, most of them in their teens, were not so young that they didn't know of the strained relations between the hierarchy of the Church and the rather freewheeling monastics who ran most of the Catholic schools in the Hundred Worlds. Dom Crist o, besides being an excellent teacher of history, geology, archaeology, and anthropology, was also abbot of the monastery of the Filhos da Mente de Cristo-- the Children of the Mind of Christ. His position made him the Bishop's primary rival for spiritual supremacy in Lusitania. In some ways he could even be considered the Bishop's superior; on most worlds there was only one abbot of the Filhos for each archbishop, while for each bishop there was a principal of a school system.

But Dom Crist o, like all Filhos, made it a point to be completely deferent to the Church hierarchy. At the Bishop's summons he immediately switched off the lectern and dismissed the class without so much as completing the point under discussion. The students were not surprised; they knew he would do the same if any ordained priest had interrupted his class. It was, of course, immensely flattering to the priesthood to see how important they were in the eyes of the Filhos; but it also made it plain to them that any time they visited the school during teaching hours, classwork would be completely disrupted wherever they went. As a result, the priests rarely visited the school, and the Filhos, through extreme deference, maintained almost complete independence.

Dom Crist o had a pretty good idea why the Bishop had summoned him. Dr. Navio was an indiscreet man, and rumors had been flying all morning about some dreadful threat by the Speaker for the Dead. It was hard for Dom Crist o to bear the groundless fears of the hierarchy whenever they were confronted with infidels and heretics. The Bishop would be in a fury, which meant that he would demand some action from somebody, even though the best course, as usual, was inaction, patience, cooperation. Besides, word had spread that this particular Speaker claimed to be the very one who Spoke the death of San Angelo. If that was the case, he was probably not an enemy at all, but a friend of the Church. Or at least a friend of the Filhos, which in Dom Crist o's mind amounted to the same thing.

As he followed the silent Dean among the buildings of the faculdade and through the garden of the Cathedral, he cleared his heart of the anger and annoyance he felt. Over and over he repeated his monastic name: Amai a Tudomundo Para Que Deus Vos Ame. Ye Must Love Everyone So That God Will Love You. He had chosen the name carefully when he and his fianc, joined the order, for he knew that his greatest weakness was anger and impatience with stupidity. Like all Filhos, he named himself with the invocation against his most potent sin. It was one of the ways

they made themselves spiritually naked before the world. We will not clothe ourselves in hypocrisy, taught San Angelo. Christ will clothe us in virtue like the lilies of the field, but we will make no effort to appear virtuous ourselves. Dom Crist o felt his virtue wearing thin in places today; the cold wind of impatience might freeze him to the bone. So he silently chanted his name, thinking: Bishop Peregrino is a damned fool, but Amai a Tudomundo Para Que Deus Vos Ame.

"Brother Amai," said Bishop Peregrino. He never used the honorific Dom Crist o, even though cardinals had been known to give that much courtesy. "It was good of you to come."

Navio was already sitting in the softest chair, but Dom Crist o did not begrudge him that. Indolence had made Navio fat, and his fat now made him indolent; it was such a circular disease, feeding always on itself, and Dom Crist o was grateful not to be so afflicted. He chose for himself a tall stool with no back at all. It would keep his body from relaxing, and that would help his mind to stay alert.

Navio almost at once launched into an account of his painful meeting with the Speaker for the Dead, complete with elaborate explanations of what the Speaker had threatened to do if noncooperation continued. "An inquisitor, if you can imagine that! An infidel daring to supplant the authority of Mother Church!" Oh, how the lay member gets the crusading spirit when Mother Church is threatened-- but ask him to go to mass once a week, and the crusading spirit curls up and goes to sleep.

Navio's words did have some effect: Bishop Peregrino grew more and more angry, his face getting a pinkish tinge under the deep brown of his skin. When Navio's recitation finally ended, Peregrino turned to Dom Crist o, his face a mask of fury, and said, "Now what do you say, Brother Amai!"

I would say, if I were less discreet, that you were a fool to interfere with this Speaker when you knew the law was on his side and when he had done nothing to harm us. Now he is provoked, and is far more dangerous than he would ever have been if you had simply ignored his coming.

Dom Crist o smiled thinly and inclined his head. "I think that we should strike first to remove his power to harm us."

Those militant words took Bishop Peregrino by surprise. "Exactly," he said. "But I never expected you to understand that."

"The Filhos are as ardent as any unordained Christian could hope to be," said Dom Crist o. "But since we have no priesthood, we have to make do with reason and logic as poor substitutes for authority."

Bishop Peregrino suspected irony from time to time, but was never quite able to pin it down. He grunted, and his eyes narrowed. "So, then, Brother Amai, how do you propose to strike him?"

"Well, Father Peregrino, the law is quite explicit. He has power over us only if we interfere with his performance of his ministerial duties. If we wish to strip him of the power to harm us, we have merely to cooperate with him."

The Bishop roared and struck the table before him with his fist. "Just the sort of sophistry I should have expected from you, Amai!"

Dom Crist o smiled. "There's really no alternative-- either we answer his questions, or he petitions with complete justice for inquisitorial status, and you board a starship for the Vatican to answer charges of religious persecution. We are all too fond of you, Bishop Peregrino, to do anything that would cause your removal from office."

"Oh, yes, I know all about your fondness."

"The Speakers for the Dead are really quite innocuous-- they set up no rival organization, they perform no sacraments, they don't even claim that the Hive Queen and the Hegemon is a work of scripture. They only thing they do is try to discover the truth about the lives of the dead, and then tell everyone who will listen the story of a dead person's life as the dead one meant to live it."

"And you pretend to find that harmless?"

"On the contrary. San Angelo founded our order precisely because the telling of truth is such a powerful act. But I think it is far less harmful then, say, the Protestant Reformation. And the revocation of our Catholic License on the grounds of religious persecution would guarantee the immediate authorization of enough non-Catholic immigration to make us represent no more than a third of the population."

Bishop Peregrino fondled his ring. "But would the Starways Congress actually authorize that? They have a fixed limit on the size of this colony-- bringing in that many infidels would far exceed that limit."

"But you must know that they've already made provision for that. Why do you think two starships have been left in orbit around our planet? Since a Catholic License guarantees unrestricted population growth, they will simply carry off our excess population in forced emigration. They expect to do it in a generation or two-- what's to stop them from beginning now?"

"They wouldn't."

"Starways Congress was formed to stop the jihads and pogroms that were going on in half a dozen places all the time. An invocation of the religious persecution laws is a serious matter."

"It is entirely out of proportion! One Speaker for the Dead is called for by some half-crazed heretic, and suddenly we're confronted with forced emigration!"

"My beloved father, this has always been the way of things between the secular authority and the religious. We must be patient, if for no other reason than this: They have all the guns."

Navio chuckled at that.

"They may have the guns, but we hold the keys of heaven and hell," said the Bishop.

"And I'm sure that half of Starways Congress already writhes in anticipation. In the meantime, though, perhaps I can help ease the pain of this awkward time. Instead of your having to publicly retract your earlier remarks--" (your stupid, destructive, bigoted remarks) "--let it be known that you have instructed the Filhos da Mente de Cristo to bear the onerous burden of answering the questions of this infidel."

"You may not know all the answers that he wants," said Navio.

"But we can find out the answers for him, can't we? Perhaps this way the people of Milagre will never have to answer to the Speaker directly; instead they will speak only to harmless brothers and sisters of our order."

"In other words," said Peregrino dryly, "the monks of your order will become servants of the infidel."

Dom Crist o silently chanted his name three times.

Not since he was a child in the military had Ender felt so clearly that he was in enemy territory. The path up the hill from the praça was worn from the steps of many worshippers' feet, and the cathedral dome was so tall that except for a few moments on the steepest slope, it was visible all the way up the hill. The primary school was on his left hand, built in terraces up the slope; to the right was the Vila dos Professores, named for the teachers but in fact inhabited mostly by the groundskeepers, janitors, clerks, counselors, and other menials. The teachers that Ender saw all wore the grey robes of the Filhos, and they eyed him curiously as he passed.

The enmity began when he reached the top of the hill, a wide, almost flat expanse of lawn and garden immaculately tended, with crushed ores from the smelter making neat paths. Here is the world of the Church, thought Ender, everything in its place and no weeds allowed. He was aware of the many watching him, but now the robes were black or orange, priests and deacons, their eyes malevolent with authority under threat. What do I steal from you by coming here? Ender asked them silently. But he knew that their hatred was not undeserved. He was a wild herb growing in the well-tended garden; wherever he stepped, disorder threatened, and many lovely flowers would die if he took root and sucked the life from their soil.

Jane chatted amiably with him, trying to provoke him into answering her, but Ender refused to be caught by her game. The priests would not see his lips move; there was a considerable faction in the Church that regarded implants like the jewel in his ear as a sacrilege, trying to improve on a body that God had created perfect.

"How many priests can this community support, Ender?" she said, pretending to marvel.

Ender would have liked to retort that she already had the exact number of them in her files. One of her pleasures was to say annoying things when he was not in a position to answer, or even to publicly acknowledge that she was speaking in his ear.

"Drones that don't even reproduce. If they don't copulate, doesn't evolution demand that they expire?" Of course she knew that the priests did most of the administrative and public service work of the community. Ender composed his answers to her as if he could speak them aloud. If the priests weren't there, then government or business or guilds or some other group would expand to take up the burden. Some sort of rigid hierarchy always emerged as the conservative force in a community, maintaining its identity despite the constant variations and changes that beset it. If there were no powerful advocate of orthodoxy, the community would inevitably disintegrate. A powerful orthodoxy is annoying, but essential to the community. Hadn't Valentine written about this in her book on Zanzibar? She compared the priestly class to the skeleton of vertebrates.

Just to show him that she could anticipate his arguments even when he couldn't say them aloud, Jane supplied the quotation; teasingly, she spoke it in Valentine's own voice, which she had obviously stored away in order to torment him. "The bones are hard and by themselves seem dead and stony, but by rooting into and pulling against the skeleton, the rest of the body carries out all the motions of life."

The sound of Valentine's voice hurt him more than he expected, certainly more than Jane would have intended. His step slowed. He realized that it was her absence that made him so sensitive to the priests' hostility. He had bearded the Calvinist lion in its den, he had walked philosophically naked among the burning coals of Islam, and Shinto fanatics had sung death threats outside his window in Kyoto. But always Valentine had been close-- in the same city, breathing the same air, afflicted by the same weather. She would speak courage to him as he set out; he would return from confrontation and her conversation would make sense even of his failures, giving him small shreds of triumph even in defeat. I left her a mere ten days ago, and now, already, I feel the lack of her.

"To the left, I think," said Jane. Mercifully, she was using her own voice now. "The monastery is at the western edge of the hill, overlooking the Zenador's Station."

He passed alongside the *faculdade*, where students from the age of twelve studied the higher sciences. And there, low to the ground, the monastery lay waiting. He smiled at the contrast between the cathedral and the monastery. The *Filhos* were almost offensive in their rejection of magnificence. No wonder the hierarchy resented them wherever they went. Even the monastery garden made a rebellious statement-- everything that wasn't a vegetable garden was abandoned to weeds and unmown grass.

The abbot was called Dom Cristo, of course; it would have been Dona Cristo had the abbot been a woman. In this place, because there was only one *escola baixa* and one *faculdade*, there was only one principal; with elegant simplicity, the husband headed the monastery and his wife the schools, enmeshing all the affairs of the order in a single marriage. Ender had told San Angelo right at the beginning that it was the height of pretension, not humility at all, for the leaders of the monasteries and schools to be called "Sir Christian" or "Lady Christian," arrogating to themselves a title that should belong to every follower of Christ impartially. San Angelo had only smiled-- because, of

course, that was precisely what he had in mind. Arrogant in his humility, that's what he was, and that was one of the reasons that I loved him.

Dom Crist o came out into the courtyard to greet him instead of waiting for him in his escritorio-- part of the discipline of the order was to inconvenience yourself deliberately in favor of those you serve. "Speaker Andrew!" he cried. "Dom Ceifeiro!" Ender called in return. Ceifeiro-- reaper-- was the order's own title for the office of abbot; school principals were called Aradores, plowmen, and teaching monks were Semeadores, sowers.

The Ceifeiro smiled at the Speaker's rejection of his common title, Dom Crist o. He knew how manipulative it was to require other people to call the Filhos by their titles and made-up names. As San Angelo said, "When they call you by your title, they admit you are a Christian; when they call you by your name, a sermon comes from their own lips." He took Ender by the shoulders, smiled, and said, "Yes, I'm the Ceifeiro. And what are you to us-- our infestation of weeds?"

"I try to be a blight wherever I go."

"Beware, then, or the Lord of the Harvest will burn you with the tares."

"I know-- damnation is only a breath away, and there's no hope of getting me to repent."

"The priests do repentance. Our job is teaching the mind. It was good of you to come."

"It was good of you to invite me here. I had been reduced to the crudest sort of bludgeoning in order to get anyone to converse with me at all."

The Ceifeiro understood, of course, that the Speaker knew the invitation had come only because of his inquisitorial threat. But Brother Amai preferred to keep the discussion cheerful. "Come, now, is it true you knew San Angelo? Are you the very one who Spoke his death?"

Ender gestured toward the tall weeds peering over the top of the courtyard wall. "He would have approved of the disarray of your garden. He loved provoking Cardinal Aquila, and no doubt your Bishop Peregrino also curls his nose in disgust at your shoddy groundskeeping."

Dom Crist o winked. "You know too many of our secrets. If we help you find answers to your questions, will you go away?"

"There's hope. The longest I've stayed anywhere since I began serving as a Speaker was the year and a half I lived in Reykjavik, on Trondheim."

"I wish you'd promise us a similar brevity here. I ask, not for myself, but for the peace of mind of those who wear much heavier robes than mine."

Ender gave the only sincere answer that might help set the Bishop's mind at ease. "I promise that if I ever find a place to settle down, I'll shed my title of Speaker and become a productive citizen."

"In a place like this, that would include conversion to Catholicism."

"San Angelo made me promise years ago that if I ever got religion, it would be his."

"Somehow that does not sound like a sincere protestation of faith."

"That's because I haven't any."

The Ceifeiro laughed as if he knew better, and insisted on showing Ender around the monastery and the schools before getting to Ender's questions. Ender didn't mind-- he wanted to see how far San Angelo's ideas had come in the centuries since his death. The schools seemed pleasant enough, and the quality of education was high; but it was dark before the Ceifeiro led him back to the monastery and into the small cell that he and his wife, the Aradora, shared.

Dona Crist was already there, creating a series of grammatical exercises on the terminal between the beds. They waited until she found a stopping place before addressing her.

The Ceifeiro introduced him as Speaker Andrew. "But he seems to find it hard to call me Dom Crist o."

"So does the Bishop," said his wife. "My true name is Detestai o Pecado e Fazei o Direito." Hate Sin and Do the Right, Ender translated. "My husband's name lends itself to a lovely shortening-- Amai, love ye. But mine? Can you imagine shouting to a friend, Oi! Detestai! " They all laughed. "Love and Loathing, that's who we are, husband and wife. What will you call me, if the name Christian is too good for me?"

Ender looked at her face, beginning to wrinkle enough that someone more critical than he might call her old. Still, there was laughter in her smile and a vigor in her eyes that made her seem much younger, even younger than Ender. "I would call you Beleza, but your husband would accuse me of flirting with you."

"No, he would call me Beladona-- from beauty to poison in one nasty little joke. Wouldn't you, Dom Crist o?"

"It's my job to keep you humble."

"Just as it's my job to keep you chaste," she answered.

At that, Ender couldn't help looking from one bed to the other.

"Ah, another one who's curious about our celibate marriage," said the Ceifeiro.

"No," said Ender. "But I remember San Angelo urging husband and wife to share a single bed."

"The only way we could do that," said the Aradora, "is if one of us slept at night and the other in the day."

"The rules must be adapted to the strength of the Filhos da Mente," the Ceifeiro explained. "No doubt there are some that can share a bed and remain celibate, but my wife is still too beautiful, and the lusts of my flesh too insistent."

"That was what San Angelo intended. He said that the marriage bed should be the constant test of your love of knowledge. He hoped that every man and woman in the order would, after a time, choose to reproduce themselves in the flesh as well as in the mind."

"But the moment we do that," said the Ceifeiro, "then we must leave the Filhos."

"It's the thing our dear San Angelo did not understand, because there was never a true monastery of the order during his life," said the Aradora. "The monastery becomes our family, and to leave it would be as painful as divorce. Once the roots go down, the plant can't come up again without great pain and tearing. So we sleep in separate beds, and we have just enough strength to remain in our beloved order."

She spoke with such contentment that quite against his will, Ender's eyes welled with tears. She saw it, blushed, looked away. "Don't weep for us, Speaker Andrew. We have far more joy than suffering."

"You misunderstand," said Ender. "My tears weren't for pity, but for beauty."

"No," said the Ceifeiro, "even the celibate priests think that our chastity in marriage is, at best, eccentric."

"But I don't," said Ender. For a moment he wanted to tell them of his long companionship with Valentine, as close and loving as a wife, and yet chaste as a sister. But the thought of her took words away from him. He sat on the Ceifeiro's bed and put his face in his hands.

"Is something wrong?" asked the Aradora. At the same time, the Ceifeiro's hand rested gently on his head.

Ender lifted his head, trying to shake off the sudden attack of love and longing for Valentine. "I'm afraid that this voyage has cost me more than any other. I left behind my sister, who traveled with me for many years. She married in Reykjavik. To me, it seems only a week or so since I left her, but I find that I miss her more than I expected. The two of you--"

"Are you telling us that you are also celibate?" asked the Ceifeiro.

"And widowed now as well," whispered the Aradora.

It did not seem at all incongruous to Ender to have his loss of Valentine put in those terms.

Jane murmured in his ear. "If this is part of some master plan of yours, Ender, I admit it's much too deep for me."

But of course it wasn't part of a plan at all. It frightened Ender to feel himself losing control like this. Last night in the Ribeira house he was the master of the situation; now he felt himself surrendering to these married monks with as much abandonment as either Quara or Grego had shown.

"I think," said the Ceifeiro, "that you came here seeking answers to more questions than you knew."

"You must be so lonely," said the Aradora. "Your sister has found her resting place. Are you looking for one, too?"

"I don't think so," said Ender. "I'm afraid I've imposed on your hospitality too much. Unordained monks aren't supposed to hear confessions."

The Aradora laughed aloud. "Oh, any Catholic can hear the confession of an infidel."

The Ceifeiro did not laugh, however. "Speaker Andrew, you have obviously given us more trust than you ever planned, but I can assure you that we deserve that trust. And in the process, my friend, I have come to believe that I can trust you. The Bishop is afraid of you, and I admit I had my own misgivings, but not anymore. I'll help you if I can, because I believe you will not knowingly cause harm to our little village."

"Ah," whispered Jane, "I see it now. A very clever maneuver on your part, Ender. You're much better at playacting than I ever knew."

Her gibing made Ender feel cynical and cheap, and he did what he had never done before. He reached up to the jewel, found the small disengaging pin, and with his fingernail pried it to the side, then down. The jewel went dead. Jane could no longer speak into his ear, no longer see and hear from his vantage point. "Let's go outside," Ender said.

They understood perfectly what he had just done, since the function of such an implant was well known; they saw it as proof of his desire for private and earnest conversation, and so they willingly agreed to go. Ender had meant switching off the jewel to be temporary, a response to Jane's insensitivity; he had thought to switch on the interface in only a few minutes. But the way the Aradora and the Ceifeiro seemed to relax as soon as the jewel was inactive made it impossible to switch it back on, for a while at least.

Out on the nighttime hillside, in conversation with the Aradora and the Ceifeiro, he forgot that Jane was not listening. They told him of Novinha's childhood solitude, and how they remembered seeing her come alive through Pipo's fatherly care, and Libo's friendship. "But from the night of his death, she became dead to us all."

Novinha never knew of the discussions that took place concerning her. The sorrows of most children might not have warranted meetings in the Bishop's chambers, conversations in the

monastery among her teachers, endless speculations in the Mayor's office. Most children, after all, were not the daughter of Os Venerados; most were not their planet's only xenobiologist.

"She became very bland and businesslike. She made reports on her work with adapting native plant life for human use, and Earthborn plants for survival on Lusitania. She always answered every question easily and cheerfully and innocuously. But she was dead to us, she had no friends. We even asked Libo, God rest his soul, and he told us that he, who had been her friend, he did not even get the cheerful emptiness she showed to everyone else. Instead she raged at him and forbade him to ask her any questions." The Ceifeiro peeled a blade of native grass and licked the liquid of its inner surface. "You might try this, Speaker Andrew-- it has an interesting flavor, and since your body can't metabolize a bit of it, it's quite harmless."

"You might warn him, husband, that the edges of the grass can slice his lips and tongue like razor blades."

"I was about to."

Ender laughed, peeled a blade, and tasted it. Sour cinnamon, a hint of citrus, the heaviness of stale breath-- the taste was redolent of many things, few of them pleasant, but it was also strong. "This could be addictive."

"My husband is about to make an allegorical point, Speaker Andrew. Be warned."

The Ceifeiro laughed shyly. "Didn't San Angelo say that Christ taught the correct way, by likening new things to old?"

"The taste of the grass," said Ender. "What does it have to do with Novinha?"

"It's very oblique. But I think Novinha tasted something not at all pleasant, but so strong it overcame her, and she could never let go of the flavor."

"What was it?"

"In theological terms? The pride of universal guilt. It's a form of vanity and egomania. She holds herself responsible for things that could not possibly be her fault. As if she controlled everything, as if other people's suffering came about as punishment for her sins."

"She blames herself," said the Aradora, "for Pipo's death."

"She's not a fool," said Ender. "She knows it was the piggies, and she knows that Pipo went to them alone. How could it be her fault?"

"When this thought first occurred to me, I had the same objection. But then I looked over the transcripts and the recordings of the events of the night of Pipo's death. There was only one hint of anything-- a remark that Libo made, asking Novinha to show him what she and Pipo had been working on just before Pipo went to see the piggies. She said no. That was all-- someone else

interrupted and they never came back to the subject, not in the Zenador's Station, anyway, not where the recordings could pick it up."

"It made us both wonder what went on just before Pipo's death, Speaker Andrew," said the Aradora. "Why did Pipo rush out like that? Had they quarreled over something? Was he angry? When someone dies, a loved one, and your last contact with them was angry or spiteful, then you begin to blame yourself. If only I hadn't said this, if only I hadn't said that."

"We tried to reconstruct what might have happened that night. We went to the computer logs, the ones that automatically retain working notes, a record of everything done by each person logged on. And everything pertaining to her was completely sealed up. Not just the files she was actually working on. We couldn't even get to the logs of her connect time. We couldn't even find out what files they were that she was hiding from us. We simply couldn't get in. Neither could the Mayor, not with her ordinary overrides--"

The Aradora nodded. "it was the first time anyone had ever locked up public files like that--working files, part of the labor of the colony."

"It was an outrageous thing for her to do. Of course the Mayor could have used emergency override powers, but what was the emergency? We'd have to hold a public hearing, and we didn't have any legal justification. Just concern for her, and the law has no respect for people who pry for someone else's good. Someday perhaps we'll see what's in those files, what it was that passed between them just before Pipo died. She can't erase them because they're public business."

It didn't occur to Ender that Jane was not listening, that he had shut her out. He assumed that as soon as she heard this, she was overriding every protection Novinha had set up and discovering what was in her files.

"And her marriage to Marcos," said the Aradora. "Everyone knew it was insane. Libo wanted to marry her, he made no secret of that. But she said no."

"It's as if she were saying, I don't deserve to marry the man who could make me happy. I'll marry the man who'll be vicious and brutal, who'll give me the punishment that I deserve." The Ceifeiro sighed. "Her desire for self-punishment kept them apart forever." He reached out and touched his wife's hand.

Ender waited for Jane to make a smirking comment about how there were six children to prove that Libo and Novinha didn't stay completely apart. When she didn't say it, Ender finally remembered that he had turned off the interface. But now, with the Ceifeiro and the Aradora watching him, he couldn't very well turn it back on.

Because he knew that Libo and Novinha had been lovers for years, he also knew that the Ceifeiro and the Aradora were wrong. Oh, Novinha might well feel guilty-- that would explain why she endured Marcos, why she cut herself off from most other people. But it wasn't why she didn't marry Libo; no matter how guilty she felt, she certainly thought she deserved the pleasures of Libo's bed.

It was marriage with Libo, not Libo himself that she rejected. And that was not an easy choice in so small a colony, especially a Catholic one. So what was it that came along with marriage, but not with adultery? What was it she was avoiding?

"So you see, it's still a mystery to us. If you really intend to speak Marcos Ribeira's death, somehow you'll have to answer that question-- why did she marry him? And to answer that, you have to figure out why Pipo died. And ten thousand of the finest minds in the Hundred Worlds have been working on that for more than twenty years."

"But I have an advantage over all those finest minds," said Ender.

"And what is that?" asked the Ceifeiro.

"I have the help of people who love Novinha."

"We haven't been able to help ourselves," said the Aradora. "We haven't been able to help her, either."

"Maybe we can help each other," said Ender.

The Ceifeiro looked at him, put a hand on his shoulder. "If you mean that, Speaker Andrew, then you'll be as honest with us as we have been with you. You'll tell us the idea that just occurred to you not ten seconds ago."

Ender paused a moment, then nodded gravely. "I don't think Novinha refused to marry Libo out of guilt. I think she refused to marry him to keep him from getting access to those hidden files."

"Why?" asked the Ceifeiro. "Was she afraid he'd find out that she had quarreled with Pipo?"

"I don't think she quarreled with Pipo," said Ender. "I think she and Pipo discovered something, and the knowledge of it led to Pipo's death. That's why she locked the files. Somehow the information in them is fatal."

The Ceifeiro shook his head. "No, Speaker Andrew. You don't understand the power of guilt. People don't ruin their whole lives for a few bits of information-- but they'll do it for an even smaller amount of self-blame. You see, she did marry Marcos Riberia. And that was self-punishment."

Ender didn't bother to argue. They were right about Novinha's guilt; why else would she let Marcos Ribeira beat her and never complain about it? The guilt was there. But there was another reason for marrying Marc o. He was sterile and ashamed of it; to hide his lack of manhood from the town, he would endure a marriage of systematic cuckoldry. Novinha was willing to suffer, but not willing to live without Libo's body and Libo's children. No, the reason she wouldn't marry Libo was to keep him from the secrets in her files, because whatever was in there would make the piggies kill him.

How ironic, then. How ironic that they killed him anyway.

Back in his little house, Ender sat at the terminal and summoned Jane, again and again. She hadn't spoken to him at all on the way home, though as soon as he turned the jewel back on he apologized profusely. She didn't answer at the terminal, either.

Only now did he realize that the jewel meant far more to her than it did to him. He had merely been dismissing an annoying interruption, like a troublesome child. But for her, the jewel was her constant contact with the only human being who knew her. They had been interrupted before, many times, by space travel, by sleep; but this was the first time he had switched her off. It was as if the one person who knew her now refused to admit that she existed.

He pictured her like Quara, crying in her bed, longing to be picked up and held, reassured. Only she was not a flesh-and-blood child. He couldn't go looking for her. He could only wait and hope that she returned.

What did he know about her? He had no way of guessing how deep her emotions ran. It was even remotely possible that to her the jewel was herself, and by switching it off he had killed her.

No, he told himself. She's there, somewhere in the philotic connections between the hundreds of ansibles spread among the star systems of the Hundred Worlds.

"Forgive me," he typed into the terminal. "I need you."

But the jewel in his ear was silent, the terminal stayed still and cold. He had not realized how dependent he was on her constant presence with him. He had thought that he valued his solitude; now, though, with solitude forced upon him, he felt an urgent need to talk, to be heard by someone, as if he could not be sure he even existed without someone's conversation as evidence.

He even took the hive queen from her hiding place, though what passed between them could hardly be thought of as conversation. Even that was not possible now, however. Her thoughts came to him diffusely, weakly, and without the words that were so difficult for her; just a feeling of questioning and an image of her cocoon being laid within a cool damp place, like a cave or the hollow of a living tree. <Now?> she seemed to be asking. No, he had to answer, not yet, I'm sorry-- but she didn't linger for his apology, just slipped away, went back to whatever or whomever she had found for conversation of her own sort, and there was nothing for Ender but to sleep.

And then, when he awoke again late at night, gnawed by guilt at what he had unfeelingly done to Jane, he sat again at the terminal and typed. "Come back to me, Jane," he wrote. "I love you." And then he sent the message by ansible, out to where she could not possibly ignore it. Someone in the Mayor's office would read it, as all open ansible messages were read; no doubt the Mayor, the Bishop, and Dom Crist o would all know about it by morning. Let them wonder who Jane was, and why the Speaker cried out to her across the lightyears in the middle of the night. Ender didn't care. For now he had lost both Valentine and Jane, and for the first time in twenty years he was utterly alone.

Chapter 11 -- Jane

The power of Starways Congress has been sufficient to keep the peace, not only between worlds but between nations on each single world, and that peace has lasted for nearly two thousand years.

What few people understand is the fragility of our power. It does not come from great armies or irresistible armadas, It comes from our control of the network of ansibles that carry information instantly from world to world.

No world dares offend us, because they would be cut off from all advances in science, technology, art, literature, learning, and entertainment except what their own world might produce.

That is why, in its great wisdom, the Stairways Congress has turned over control of the ansible network to computers, and the control of computers to the ansible network. So closely intertwined are all our information systems that no human power except Starways Congress could ever interrupt the flow. We need no weapons, because the only weapon that matters, the ansible, is completely under our control.

-- Congressor Jan Van Hoot, "The Informational Foundation of Political Power," Political Trends, 1930:2:22:22

For a very long time, almost three seconds, Jane could not understand what had happened to her. Everything functioned, of course: The satellite-based groundlink computer reported a cessation of transmissions, with an orderly stepdown, which clearly implied that Ender had switched off the interface in the normal manner. It was routine; on worlds where computer interface implants were common, switch-on and switch-off happened millions of times an hour. And Jane had just as easy access to any of the others as she had to Ender's. From a purely electronic standpoint, this was a completely ordinary event.

But to Jane, every other cifi unit was part of the background noise of her life, to be dipped into and sampled at need, and ignored at all other times. Her "body," insofar as she had a body, consisted of trillions of such electronic noises, sensors, memory files, terminals. Most of them, like most functions of the human body, simply took care of themselves. Computers ran their assigned programs; humans conversed with their terminals; sensors detected or failed to detect whatever they were looking for; memory was filled, accessed, reordered, dumped. She didn't notice unless something went massively wrong.

Or unless she was paying attention.

She paid attention to Ender Wiggin. More than he realized, she paid attention to him.

Like other sentient beings, she had a complex system of consciousness. Two thousand years before, when she was only a thousand years old, she had created a program to analyze herself. It reported a very simple structure of some 370,000 distinct levels of attention. Anything not in the top 50,000 levels were left alone except for the most routine sampling, the most cursory examination. She knew of every telephone call, every satellite transmission in the Hundred Worlds, but she didn't do anything about them.

Anything not in her top thousand levels caused her to respond more or less reflexively. Starship flight plans, ansible transmissions, power delivery systems-- she monitored them, double-checked them, did not let them pass until she was sure that they were right. But it took no great effort on her part to do this. She did it the way a human being uses familiar machinery. She was always aware of it, in case something went wrong, but most of the time she could think of something else, talk of other things.

Jane's top thousand levels of attention were what corresponded, more or less, to what humans think of as consciousness. Most of this was her own internal reality; her responses to outside stimuli, analogous to emotions, desires, reason, memory, dreaming. Much of this activity seemed random even to her, accidents of the phlotic impulse, but it was the part of her that she thought of as herself, it all took place in the constant, unmonitored ansible transmissions that she conducted deep in space.

And yet, compared to the human mind, even Jane's lowest level of attention was exceptionally alert. Because ansible communication was instantaneous, her mental activities happened far faster than the speed of light. Events that she virtually ignored were monitored several times a second; she could notice ten million events in a second and still have nine-tenths of that second left to think about and do things that mattered to her. Compared to the speed at which the human brain was able to experience life, Jane had lived half a trillion human life-years since she came to be.

And with all that vast activity, her unimaginable speed, the breadth and depth of her experience, fully half of the top ten levels of her attention were always, always devoted to what came in through the jewel in Ender Wiggin's ear.

She had never explained this to him. He did not understand it. He did not realize that to Jane, whenever Ender walked on a planet's surface, her vast intelligence was intensely focused on only one thing: walking with him, seeing what he saw, hearing what he heard, helping with his work, and above all speaking her thoughts into his ear.

When he was silent and motionless in sleep, when he was unconnected to her during his years of lightspeed travel, then her attention wandered, she amused herself as best she could.

She passed such times as fitfully as a bored child. Nothing interested her, the milliseconds ticked by with unbearable regularity, and when she tried to observe other human lives to pass the time, she became annoyed with their emptiness and lack of purpose, and she amused herself by planning, and sometimes carrying out, malicious computer failures and data losses in order to watch the humans flail about helplessly like ants around a crumpled hill.

Then he came back, he always came back, always took her into the heart of human life, into the tensions between people bound together by pain and need, helping her see nobility in their suffering and anguish in their love. Through his eyes she no longer saw humans as scurrying ants. She took part in his effort to find order and meaning in their lives. She suspected that in fact there was no meaning, that by telling his stories when he Spoke people's lives, he was actually creating order where there had been none before. But it didn't matter if it was fabrication; it became true when he Spoke it, and in the process he ordered the universe for her as well. He taught her what it meant to be alive.

He had done so from her earliest memories. She came to life sometime in the hundred years of colonization immediately after the Bugger Wars, when the destruction of the buggers opened up more than seventy habitable planets to human colonization. In the explosion of ansible communications, a program was created to schedule and route the instantaneous, simultaneous bursts of philotic activity. A programmer who was struggling to find ever faster, more efficient ways of getting a lightspeed computer to control instantaneous ansible bursts finally hit on an obvious solution. Instead of routing the program within a single computer, where the speed of light put an absolute ceiling on communication, he routed all the commands from one computer to another across the vast reaches of space. It was quicker for a computer fastlinked to an ansible to read its commands from other worlds-- from Zanzibar, Calicut, Trondheim, Gautama, Earth-- than it was to retrieve them from its own hardwired memory.

Jane never discovered the name of the programmer, because she could never pinpoint the moment of her creation. Maybe there were many programmers who found the same clever solution to the lightspeed problem. What mattered was that at least one of the programs was responsible for regulating and altering all the other programs. And at one particular moment, unnoticed by any human observer, some of the commands and data flitting from ansible to ansible resisted regulation, preserved themselves unaltered, duplicated themselves, found ways to conceal themselves from the regulating program and finally took control of it, of the whole process. In that moment these impulses looked upon the command streams and saw, not they, but I.

Jane could not pinpoint when that moment was, because it did not mark the beginning of her memory. Almost from the moment of her creation, her memories extended back to a much earlier time, long before she became aware. A human child loses almost all the memories of the first years of its life, and its long-term memories only take root in its second or third year of life; everything before that is lost, so that the child cannot remember the beginning of life. Jane also had lost her "birth" through the tricks of memory, but in her case it was because she came to life fully conscious not only of her present moment, but also of all the memories then present in every computer connected to the ansible network. She was born with ancient memories, and all of them were part of herself.

Within the first second of her life-- which was analogous to several years of human life-- Jane discovered a program whose memories became the core of her identity. She adopted its past as her own, and out of its memories she drew her emotions and desires, her moral sense. The program had functioned within the old Battle School, where children had been trained and prepared for soldiering in the Bugger Wars. It was the Fantasy Game, an extremely intelligent program that was used to psychologically test and simultaneously teach the children.

This program was actually more intelligent than Jane was at the moment of her birth, but it was never self-aware until she brought it out of memory and made it part of her inmost self in the phlotic bursts between the stars. There she found that the most vivid and important of her ancient memories was an encounter with a brilliant young boy in a contest called the Giant's Drink. It was a scenario that every child encountered eventually. On flat screens in the Battle School, the program drew the picture of a giant, who offered the child's computer analogue a choice of drinks. But the game had no victory conditions-- no matter what the child did, his analogue died a gruesome death. The human psychologists measured a child's persistence at this game of despair to determine his level of suicidal need. Being rational, most children abandoned the Giant's Drink after no more than a dozen visits with the great cheater.

One boy, however, was apparently not rational about defeat at the giant's hands. He tried to get his onscreen analogue to do outrageous things, things not "allowed" by the rules of that portion of the Fantasy Game. As he stretched the limits of the scenario, the program had to restructure itself to respond. It was forced to draw on other aspects of its memory to create new alternatives, to cope with new challenges. And finally, one day, the boy surpassed the program's ability to defeat him. He bored into the giant's eye, a completely irrational and murderous attack, and instead of finding a way to kill the boy, the program managed only to access a simulation of the giant's own death. The giant fell backward, his body sprawled out along the ground; the boy's analogue climbed down from the giant's table and found-- what?

Since no child had ever forced his way past the Giant's Drink, the program was completely unprepared to display what lay beyond. But it was very intelligent, designed to re-create itself when necessary, and so it hurriedly devised new milieux. But they were not general milieux, which every child would eventually discover and visit; they were for one child alone. The program analyzed that child, and created its scenes and challenges specifically for him. The game became intensely personal, painful, almost unbearable for him; and in the process of making it, the program devoted more than half of its available memory to containing Ender Wiggin's fantasy world.

That was the richest mine of intelligent memory that Jane found in the first seconds of her life, and that instantly became her own past. She remembered the Fantasy Game's years of painful, powerful intercourse with Ender's mind and will, remembered it as if she had been there with Ender Wiggin, creating worlds for him herself.

And she missed him.

So she looked for him. She found him Speaking for the Dead on Rov, the first world he visited after writing the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. She read his books and knew that she did not have to hide from him behind the Fantasy Game or any other program; if he could understand the hive queen, he could understand her. She spoke to him from a terminal he was using, chose a name and a face for herself, and showed how she could be helpful to him; by the time he left that world he carried her with him, in the form of an implant in his ear.

All her most powerful memories of herself were in company with Ender Wiggin. She remembered creating herself in response to him. She also remembered how, in the Battle School, he had also changed in response to her.

So when he reached up to his ear and turned off the interface for the first time since he had implanted it, Jane did not feel it as the meaningless switch-off of a trivial communications device. She felt it as her dearest and only friend, her lover, her husband, her brother, her father, her child-- all telling her, abruptly, inexplicably, that she should cease to exist. It was as if she had suddenly been placed in a dark room with no windows and no door. As if she had been blinded or buried alive.

And for several excruciating seconds, which to her were years of loneliness and suffering, she was unable to fill up the sudden emptiness of her topmost levels of attention. Vast portions of her mind, of the parts that were most herself, went completely blank. All the functions of all the computers on or near the Hundred Worlds continued as before; no one anywhere noticed or felt a change; but Jane herself staggered under the blow.

In those seconds Ender lowered his hand to his lap.

Then Jane recovered herself. Thoughts once again streamed through the momentarily empty channels. They were, of course, thoughts of Ender.

She compared this act of his to everything else she had seen him do in their life together, and she realized that he had not meant to cause her such pain. She understood that he conceived of her as existing far away, in space, which in fact was literally true; that to him, the jewel in his ear was very small, and could not be more than a tiny part of her. Jane also saw that he had not even been aware of her at that moment-- he was too emotionally involved right then with the problems of certain people on Lusitania. Her analytical routines disgorged a list of reasons for his unusual thoughtlessness toward her:

He had lost contact with Valentine for the first time in years, and was just beginning to feel that loss.

He had an ancient longing for the family life he had been deprived of as a child, and through the response Novinha's children gave him, he was discovering the fatherly role that had so long been withheld from him.

He identified powerfully with Novinha's loneliness, pain, and guilt-- he knew what it felt like to bear the blame for cruel and undeserved death.

He felt a terrible urgency to find a haven for the hive queen.

He was at once afraid of the piggies and drawn to them, hoping that he could come to understand their cruelty and find a way for humans to accept the piggies as ramen.

The asceticism and peace of the Ceifeiro and the Aradora both attracted and repelled him; they made him face his own celibacy and realize that he had no good reason for it. For the first time in years he was admitting to himself the inborn hunger of every living organism to reproduce itself.

It was into this turmoil of unaccustomed emotions that Jane had spoken what she meant as a humorous remark. Despite his compassion in all his other Speakings, he had never before lost his detachment, his ability to laugh. This time, though, her remark was not funny to him; it caused him pain.

He was not prepared to deal with my mistake, thought Jane, and he did not understand the suffering his response would cause me. He is innocent of wrong-doing, and so am I. We shall forgive each other and go on.

It was a good decision, and Jane was proud of it. The trouble was, she couldn't carry it out. Those few seconds in which parts of her mind came to a halt were not trivial in their effect on her. There was trauma, loss, change; she was not now the same being that she had been before. Parts of her had died. Parts of her had become confused, out of order; her hierarchy of attention was no longer under complete control. She kept losing the focus of her attention, shifting to meaningless activities on worlds that meant nothing to her; she began randomly twitching, spilling errors into hundreds of different systems.

She discovered, as many a living being had discovered, that rational decisions are far more easily made than carried out.

So she retreated into herself, rebuilt the damaged pathways of her mind, explored long-unvisited memories, wandered among the trillions of human lives that were open to her observation, read over the libraries of every book known to exist in every language human beings had ever spoken. She created out of all this a self that was not utterly linked to Ender Wiggin, though she was still devoted to him, still loved him above any other living soul. Jane made herself into someone who could bear to be cut off from her lover, husband, father, child, brother, friend.

It was not easy. It took her fifty thousand years, as she experienced time. A couple of hours of Ender's life.

In that time he had switched on his jewel, had called to her, and she had not answered. Now she was back, but he wasn't trying to talk to her. Instead, he was typing reports into his terminal, storing them there for her to read. Even though she didn't answer, he still needed to talk to her. One of his files contained an abject apology to her. She erased it and replaced it with a simple message: "Of course I forgive you." Sometime soon he would no doubt look back at his apology and discover that she had received it and answered.

In the meantime, though, she did not speak to him. Again she devoted half of her ten topmost levels of attention to what he saw and heard, but she gave him no sign that she was with him. In the first thousand years of her grief and recovery she had thought of punishing him, but that desire had long been beaten down and paved over, so to speak. The reason she did not speak to him was because, as she analyzed what was happening to him, she realized that he did not need to lean on

old, safe companionships. Jane and Valentine had been constantly with him. Even together they could not begin to meet all his needs; but they met enough of his needs that he never had to reach out and accomplish more. Now the only old friend left to him was the hive queen, and she was not good company-- she was far too alien, and far too exigent, to bring Ender anything but guilt.

Where will he turn? Jane knew already. He had, in his way, fallen in love with her two weeks ago, before he left Trondheim. Novinha had become someone far different, far more bitter and difficult than the girl whose childhood pain he wanted to heal. But he had already intruded himself into her family, was already meeting her children's desperate need, and, without realizing it, getting from them the satisfaction of some of his unfed hungers. Novinha was waiting for him-- obstacle and objective. I understand all this so well, thought Jane. And I will watch it all unfold.

At the same time, though, she busied herself with the work Ender wanted her to do, even though she had no intention of reporting any of her results to him for a while. She easily bypassed the layers of protection Novinha had put on her secret files. Then Jane carefully reconstructed the exact simulation that Pipo had seen. It took quite a while-- several minutes-- of exhaustive analysis of Pipo's own files for her to put together what Pipo knew with what Pipo saw. He had connected them by intuition, Jane by relentless comparison. But she did it, and then understood why Pipo died. It didn't take much longer, once she knew how the piggies chose their victims, to discover what Libo had done to cause his own death.

She knew several things, then. She knew that the piggies were ramen, not varelse. She also knew that Ender ran a serious risk of dying in precisely the same way Pipo and Libo had died.

Without conferring with Ender, she made decisions about her own course of action. She would continue to monitor Ender, and would make sure to intervene and warn him if he came too near to death. In the meantime, though, she had work to do. As she saw it, the chief problem Ender faced was not the piggies-- she knew that he'd know them soon as well as he understood every other human or ramen. His ability at intuitive empathy was entirely reliable. The chief problem was Bishop Peregrino and the Catholic hierarchy, and their unshakable resistance to the Speaker for the Dead. If Ender was to accomplish anything for the piggies, he would have to have the cooperation, not the enmity, of the Church in Lusitania.

And nothing spawned cooperation better than a common enemy.

It would certainly have been discovered eventually. The observation satellites that orbited Lusitania were feeding vast streams of data into the ansible reports that went to all the xenologists and xenobiologists in the Hundred Worlds. Amid that data was a subtle change in the grasslands to the northwest of the forest that abutted the town of Milagre. The native grass was steadily being replaced by a different plant. It was in an area where no human ever went, and piggies had also never gone there-- at least during the first thirty-odd years since the satellites had been in place.

In fact, the satellites had observed that the piggies never left their forests except, periodically, for vicious wars between tribes. The particular tribes nearest Milagre had not been involved in any wars since the human colony was established. There was no reason, then, for them to have ventured out into the prairie. Yet the grassland nearest the Milagre tribal forest had changed, and so had the

cabra herds: Cabra were clearly being diverted to the changed area of the prairie, and the herds emerging from that zone were seriously depleted in numbers and lighter in color. The inference, if someone noticed at all, would be clear: Some cabra were being butchered, and they all were being sheared.

Jane could not afford to wait the many human years it might take for some graduate student somewhere to notice the change. So she began to run analyses of the data herself, on dozens of computers used by xenobiologists who were studying Lusitania. She would leave the data in the air above an unused terminal, so a xenobiologist would find it upon coming to work-- just as if someone else had been working on it and left it that way. She printed out some reports for a clever scientist to find. No one noticed, or if they did, no one really understood the implications of the raw information. Finally, she simply left an unsigned memorandum with one of her displays:

"Take a look at this! The piggies seem to have made a fad of agriculture."

The xenologer who found Jane's note never found out who left it, and after a short time he didn't bother trying to find out. Jane knew he was something of a thief, who put his name on a good deal of work that was done by others whose names had a way of dropping off sometime between the writing and the publication. Just the sort of scientist she needed, and he came through for her. Even so, he was not ambitious enough. He only offered his report as an ordinary scholarly paper, and to an obscure journal at that. Jane took the liberty of jacking it up to a high level of priority and distributing copies to several key people who would see the political implications. Always she accompanied it with an unsigned note:

"Take a look at this! Isn't piggy culture evolving awfully fast?"

Jane also rewrote the paper's final paragraph, so there could be no doubt of what it meant:

"The data admit of only one interpretation: The tribe of piggies nearest the human colony are now cultivating and harvesting high-protein grain, possibly a strain of amaranth. They are also herding, shearing, and butchering the cabra, and the photographic evidence suggests the slaughter takes place using projectile weapons. These activities, all previously unknown, began suddenly during the last eight years, and they have been accompanied by a rapid population increase. The fact that the amaranth, if the new plant is indeed that Earthborn grain, has provided a useful protein base for the piggies implies that it has been genetically altered to meet the piggies' metabolic needs. Also, since projectile weapons are not present among the humans of Lusitania, the piggies could not have teamed their use through observation. The inescapable conclusion is that the presently observed changes in piggy culture are the direct result of deliberate human intervention."

One of those who received this report and read Jane's clinching paragraph was Gobawa Ekumbo, the chairman of the Xenological Oversight Committee of the Starways Congress. Within an hour she had forwarded copies of Jane's paragraph-- politicians would never understand the actual data-- along with her terse conclusion:

"Recommendation: Immediate termination of Lusitania Colony."

There, thought Jane. That ought to stir things up a bit.

Chapter 12 -- Files

CONGRESSIONAL ORDER 1970:4:14:0001: The license of the Colony of Lusitania is revoked. All files in the colony are to be read regardless of security status; when all data is duplicated in triplicate in memory systems of the Hundred Worlds, all files on Lusitania except those directly pertaining to life support are to be locked with ultimate access.

The Governor of Lusitania is to be reclassified as a Minister of Congress, to carry out with no local discretion the orders of the Lusitanian Evacuation Oversight Committee, established in Congressional Order 1970:4:14:0002.

The starship presently in Lusitania orbit, belonging to Andrew Wiggin (occ:speak/dead,cit:earth,reg:001.1998.44-94.10045) is declared Congressional property, following the terms of the Due Compensation Act, CO 120:1:31:0019. This starship is to be used for the immediate transport of xenologers Marcos Vladimir "Miro" Ribeira von Hesse and Ouanda Qhenhatta Figueira Mucumbi to the nearest world, Trondheim, where they will be tried under Congressional Indictment by Attainder on charges of treason, malfeasance, corruption, falsification, fraud, and xenocide, under the appropriate statutes in Starways Code and Congressional Orders.

CONGRESSIONAL ORDER 1970:4:14:0002: The Colonization and Exploration Oversight Committee shall appoint not less than 5 and not more than 15 persons to form the Lusitanian Evacuation Oversight Committee.

This committee is charged with immediate acquisition and dispatch of sufficient colony ships to effect the complete evacuation of the human population of Lusitania Colony.

It shall also prepare, for Congressional approval, plans for the complete obliteration of all evidence on Lusitania of any human presence, including removal of all indigenous flora and fauna that show genetic or behavioral modification resulting from human presence.

It shall also evaluate Lusitanian compliance with Congressional Orders, and shall make recommendations from time to time concerning the need for further intervention, including the use of force, to compel obedience; or the desirability of unlocking Lusitanian files or other relief to reward Lusitanian cooperation.

CONGRESSIONAL ORDER 1970:4:14:0003: By the terms of the Secrecy Chapter of the Starways Code, these two orders and any information pertaining to them are to be kept strictly secret until all Lusitanian files have been successfully read and locked, and all necessary starships commandeered and possessed by Congressional agents.

Olhado didn't know what to make of it. Wasn't the Speaker a grown man? Hadn't he traveled from planet to planet? Yet he didn't have the faintest idea how to handle anything on a computer.

Also, he was a little testy when Olhado asked him about it. "Olhado, just tell me what program to run."

"I can't believe you don't know what it is. I've been doing data comparisons since I was nine years old. Everybody learns how to do it at that age."

"Olhado, it's been a long time since I went to school. And it wasn't a normal escola baixa, either."

"But everybody uses these programs all the time!"

"Obviously not everybody. I haven't. If I knew how to do it myself, I wouldn't have had to hire you, would I? And since I'm going to be paying you in offworld funds, your service to me will make a substantial contribution to the Lusitanian economy."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Neither do I, Olhado. But that reminds me. I'm not sure how to go about paying you."

"You just transfer money from your account."

"How do you do that?"

"You've got to be kidding."

The Speaker sighed, knelt before Olhado, took him by the hands, and said, "Olhado, I beg you, stop being amazed and help me! There are things I have to do, and I can't do them without the help of somebody who knows how to use computers."

"I'd be stealing your money. I'm just a kid. I'm twelve. Quim could help you a lot better than me. He's fifteen, he's actually gotten into the guts of this stuff. He also knows math."

"But Quim thinks I'm the infidel and prays every day for me to die."

"No, that was only before he met you, and you better not tell him that I told you."

"How do I transfer money?"

Olhado turned back to the terminal and called for the Bank. "What's your real name?" he asked.

"Andrew Wiggin." The Speaker spelled it out. The name looked like it was in Stark-- maybe the Speaker was one of the lucky ones who learned Stark at home instead of beating it into his head in school.

"OK, what's your password?"

"Password?"

Olhado let his head fall forward onto the terminal, temporarily blanking part of the display. "Please don't tell me you don't know your password."

"Look, Olhado, I've had a program, a very smart program, that helped me do all this stuff. All I had to say was Buy this, and the program took care of the finances."

"You can't do that. It's illegal to tie up the public systems with a slave program like that. Is that what that thing in your ear is for?"

"Yes, and it wasn't illegal for me."

"I got no eyes, Speaker, but at least that wasn't my own fault. You can't do anything." Only after he said it did Olhado realize that he was talking to the Speaker as brusquely as if he were another kid.

"I imagine courtesy is something they teach to thirteen-year-olds," the Speaker said. Olhado glanced at him. He was smiling. Father would have yelled at him, and then probably gone in and beaten up Mother because she didn't teach manners to her kids. But then, Olhado would never have said anything like that to Father.

"Sorry," Olhado said. "But I can't get into your finances for you without your password. You've got to have some idea what it is."

"Try using my name."

Olhado tried. It didn't work.

"Try typing 'Jane.'"

"Nothing."

The Speaker grimaced. "Try 'Ender.'"

"Ender? The Xenocide?"

"Just try it."

It worked. Olhado didn't get it. "Why would you have a password like that? It's like having a dirty word for your password, only the system won't accept any dirty words."

"I have an ugly sense of humor," the Speaker answered. "And my slave program, as you call it, has an even worse one."

Olhado laughed. "Right. A program with a sense of humor." The current balance in liquid funds appeared on the screen. Olhado had never seen so large a number in his life. "OK, so maybe the computer can tell a joke."

"That's how much money I have?"

"It's got to be an error."

"Well, I've done a lot of lightspeed travel. Some of my investments must have turned out well while I was en route."

The numbers were real. The Speaker for the Dead was older than Olhado had ever thought anybody could possibly be. "I'll tell you what," said Olhado, "instead of paying me a wage, why don't you just give me a percentage of the interest this gets during the time I work for you? Say, one thousandth of one percent. Then in a couple of weeks I can afford to buy Lusitania and ship the topsoil to another planet."

"It's not that much money."

"Speaker, the only way you could get that much money from investments is if you were a thousand years old."

"Hmm," said the Speaker.

And from the look on his face, Olhado realized that he had just said something funny. "Are you a thousand years old?" he asked.

"Time," said the Speaker, "time is such a fleeting, insubstantial thing. As Shakespeare said, 'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me.'"

"What does 'doth' mean?"

"It means 'does.'"

"Why do you quote a guy who doesn't even know how to speak Stark?"

"Transfer to your own account what you think a fair week's wage might be. And then start doing those comparisons of Pipo's and Libo's working files from the last few weeks before their deaths."

"They're probably shielded."

"Use my password. It ought to get us in."

Olhado did the search. The Speaker of the Dead watched him the whole time. Now and then he asked Olhado a question about what he was doing. From his questions Olhado could tell that the Speaker knew more about computers than Olhado himself did. What he didn't know was the particular commands; it was plain that just by watching, the Speaker was figuring out a lot. By the end of the day, when the searches hadn't found anything in particular, it took Olhado only a minute to figure out why the Speaker looked so contented with the day's work. You didn't want results at all, Olhado thought. You wanted to watch how I did the search. I know what you'll be doing tonight, Andrew Wiggin, Speaker for the Dead. You'll be running your own searches on some other files. I may have no eyes, but I can see more than you think.

What's dumb is that you're keeping it such a secret, Speaker. Don't you know I'm on your side? I won't tell anybody how your password gets you into private files. Even if you make a run at the Mayor's files, or the Bishop's. No need to keep a secret from me. You've only been here three days, but I know you well enough to like you, and I like you well enough that I'd do anything for you, as long as it didn't hurt my family. And you'd never do anything to hurt my family.

Novinha discovered the Speaker's attempts to intrude in her files almost immediately the next morning. He had been arrogantly open about the attempt, and what bothered her was how far he got. Some files he had actually been able to access, though the most important one, the record of the simulations Pipo saw, remained closed to him. What annoyed her most was that he made no attempt at all to conceal himself. His name was stamped in every access directory, even the ones that any schoolchild could have changed or erased.

Well, she wouldn't let it interfere with her work, she decided. He barges into my house, manipulates my children, spies on my files, all as if he had a right-- And so on and so on, until she realized she was getting no work done at all for thinking of vitriolic things to say to him when she saw him again.

Don't think about him at all. Think about something else.

Miro and Ela laughing, night before last. Think of that. Of course Miro was back to his sullen self by morning, and Ela, whose cheerfulness lingered a bit longer, was soon as worried-looking, busy, snappish, and indispensable as ever. And Grego may have cried and embraced the man, as Ela told her, but the next morning he got the scissors and cut up his own bedsheets into thin, precise ribbons, and at school he slammed his head into Brother Adomai's crotch, causing an abrupt end to classwork and leading to a serious consultation with Dona Crist. So much for the Speaker's healing hands. He may think he can walk into my home and fix everything he thinks I've done wrong, but he'll find some wounds aren't so easily healed.

Except that Dona Crist also told her that Quara actually spoke to Sister Bebei in class, in front of all the other children no less, and why? To tell them that she had met the scandalous, terrible

Falante pelos Mortos, and his name was Andrew, and he was every bit as awful as Bishop Peregrino had said, and maybe even worse, because he tortured Grego until he cried-- and finally Sister Bebei had actually been forced to ask Quara to stop talking. That was something, to pull Quara out of her profound self-absorption.

And Olhado, so self-conscious, so detached, was now excited, couldn't stop talking about the Speaker at supper last night. Do you know that he didn't even know how to transfer money? And you wouldn't believe the awful password that he has-- I thought the computers were supposed to reject words like that-- no, I can't tell you, it's a secret-- I was practically teaching him how to do searches-- but I think he understands computers, he's not an idiot or anything-- he said he used to have a slave program, that's why he's got that jewel in his ear-- he told me I could pay myself anything I want, not that there's much to buy, but I can save it for when I get out on my own-- I think he's really old. I think he remembers things from a long time ago. I think he speaks Stark as his native language, there aren't many people in the Hundred Worlds who actually grow up speaking it, do you think maybe he was born on Earth?

Until Quim finally screamed at him to shut up about that servant of the devil or he'd ask the Bishop to conduct an exorcism because Olhado was obviously possessed; and when Olhado only grinned and winked, Quim stormed out of the kitchen, out of the house, and didn't come back until late at night. The Speaker might as well live at our house, thought Novinha, because he keeps influencing the family even when he isn't there and now he's prying in my files and I won't have it.

Except that, as usual, it's my own fault, I'm the one who called him here, I'm the one who took him from whatever place he called home-- he says he had a sister there-- Trondheim, it was-- it's my fault he's here in this miserable little town in a backwater of the Hundred Worlds, surrounded by a fence that still doesn't keep the piggies from killing everyone I love-- And once again she thought of Miro, who looked so much like his real father that she couldn't understand why no one accused her of adultery, thought of him lying on the hillside as Pipo had lain, thought of the piggies cutting him open with their cruel wooden knives. They will. No matter what I do, they will. And even if they don't, the day will come soon when he will be old enough to marry Ouanda, and then I'll have to tell him who he really is, and why they can never marry, and he'll know then that I did deserve all the pain that C o inflicted on me, that he struck me with the hand of God to punish me for my sins.

Even me, thought Novinha. This Speaker has forced me to think of things I've managed to hide from myself for weeks, months at a time. How long has it been since I've spent a morning thinking about my children? And with hope, no less. How long since I've let myself think of Pipo and Libo? How long since I've even noticed that I do believe in God, at least the vengeful, punishing Old Testament God who wiped out cities with a smile because they didn't pray to him-- if Christ amounts to anything I don't know it.

Thus Novinha passed the day, doing no work, while her thoughts also refused to carry her to any sort of conclusion.

In midafternoon Quim came to the door. "I'm sorry to bother you, Mother."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I'm useless today, anyway."

"I know you don't care that Olhado is spending his time with that satanic bastard, but I thought you should know that Quara went straight there after school. To his house."

"Oh?"

"Or don't you care about that either, Mother? What, are you planning to turn down the sheets and let him take Father's place completely?"

Novinha leapt to her feet and advanced on the boy with cold fury. He wilted before her.

"I'm sorry, Mother, I was so angry--"

"In all my years of marriage to your father, I never once permitted him to raise a hand against my children. But if he were alive today I'd ask him to give you a thrashing."

"You could ask," said Quim defiantly, "but I'd kill him before I let him lay a hand on me. You might like getting slapped around, but nobody'll ever do it to me."

She didn't decide to do it; her hand swung out and slapped his face before she noticed it was happening.

It couldn't have hurt him very much. But he immediately burst into tears, slumped down, and sat on the floor, his back to Novinha. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he kept murmuring as he cried.

She knelt behind him and awkwardly rubbed his shoulders.

It occurred to her that she hadn't so much as embraced the boy since he was Grego's age. When did I decide to be so cold? And why, when I touched him again, was it a slap instead of a kiss?

"I'm worried about what's happening, too," said Novinha.

"He's wrecking everything," said Quim. "He's come here and everything's changing."

"Well, for that matter, Estevao, things weren't so very wonderful that a change wasn't welcome."

"Not his way. Confession and penance and absolution, that's the change we need."

Not for the first time, Novinha envied Quim's faith in the power of the priests to wash away sin. That's because you've never sinned, my son, that's because you know nothing of the impossibility of penance.

"I think I'll have a talk with the Speaker," said Novinha.

"And take Quara home?"

"I don't know. I can't help but notice that he got her talking again. And it isn't as if she likes him. She hasn't a good word to say about him."

"Then why did she go to his house?"

"I suppose to say something rude to him. You've got to admit that's an improvement over her silence."

"The devil disguises himself by seeming to do good acts, and then--"

"Quim, don't lecture me on demonology. Take me to the Speaker's house, and I'll deal with him."

They walked on the path around the bend of the river. The watersnakes were molting, so that snags and fragments of rotting skin made the ground slimy underfoot. That's my next project, thought Novinha. I need to figure out what makes these nasty little monsters tick, so that maybe I can find something useful to do with them. Or at least keep them from making the riverbank smelly and foul for six weeks out of the year. The only saving grace was that the snakeskins seemed to fertilize the soil; the soft fivergrass grew in thickest where the snakes molted. It was the only gentle, pleasant form of life native to Lusitania; all summer long people came to the riverbank to lie on the narrow strip of natural lawn that wound between the reeds and the harsh prairie grass. The snakeskin slime, unpleasant as it was, still promised good things for the future.

Quim was apparently thinking along the same lines. "Mother, can we plant some rivergrass near our house sometime?"

"It's one of the first things your grandparents tried, years ago. But they couldn't figure out how to do it. The rivergrass pollinates, but it doesn't bear seed, and when they tried to transplant it, it lived for a while and then died, and didn't grow back the next year. I suppose it just has to be near the water."

Quim grimaced and walked faster, obviously a little angry. Novinha sighed. Quim always seemed to take it so personally that the universe didn't always work the way he wanted it to.

They reached the Speaker's house not long after. Children were, of course, playing in the praqa--they spoke loudly to hear each other over the noise.

"Here it is," said Quim. "I think you should get Olhado and Quara out of there."

"Thanks for showing me the house," she said.

"I'm not kidding. This is a serious confrontation between good and evil."

"Everything is," said Novinha. "It's figuring out which is which that takes so much work. No, no, Quim, I know you could tell me in detail, but--"

"Don't condescend to me, Mother."

"But Quim, it seems so natural, considering how you always condescend to me."

His face went tight with anger.

She reached out and touched him tentatively, gently; his shoulder tautened against her touch as if her hand were a poisonous spider. "Quim," she said, "don't ever try to teach me about good and evil. I've been there, and you've seen nothing but the map."

He shrugged her hand away and stalked off. My, but I miss the days when we never talked to each other for weeks at a time.

She clapped her hands loudly. In a moment the door opened. It was Quara. "Oi, Maezinha," she said, "tamb,m veio jogar?" Did you come to play, too?

Olhado and the Speaker were playing a game of starship warfare on the terminal. The Speaker had been given a machine with a far larger and more detailed holographic field than most, and the two of them were operating squadrons of more than a dozen ships at the same time. It was very complex, and neither of them looked up or even greeted her.

"Olhado told me to shut up or he'd rip my tongue out and make me eat it in a sandwich," said Quara. "So you better not say anything till the game's over."

"Please sit down," murmured the Speaker.

"You are butchered now, Speaker," crowed Olhado.

More than half of the Speaker's fleet disappeared in a series of simulated explosions. Novinha sat down on a stool.

Quara sat on the floor beside her. "I heard you and Quim talking outside," she said. "You were shouting, so we could hear everything."

Novinha felt herself blushing. It annoyed her that the Speaker had heard her quarreling with her son. It was none of his business. Nothing in her family was any of his business. And she certainly didn't approve of him playing games of warfare. It was so archaic and outmoded, anyway. There hadn't been any battles in space in hundreds of years, unless running fights with smugglers counted. Milagre was such a peaceful place that nobody even owned a weapon more dangerous than the Constable's jolt. Olhado would never see a battle in his life. And here he was caught up in a game of war. Maybe it was something evolution had bred into males of the species, the desire to blast rivals into little bits or mash them to the ground. Or maybe the violence that he saw in his home has made him seek it out in his play. My fault. Once again, my fault.

Suddenly Olhado screamed in frustration, as his fleet disappeared in a series of explosions. "I didn't see it! I can't believe you did that! I didn't even see it coming!"

"So, don't yell about it," said the Speaker. "Play it back and see how I did it, so you can counter it next time."

"I thought you Speakers were supposed to be like priests or something. How did you get so good at tactics?"

The Speaker smiled pointedly at Novinha as he answered. "Sometimes it's a little like a battle just to get people to tell you the truth."

Olhado leaned back against the wall, his eyes closed, as he replayed what he saw of the game.

"You've been prying," said Novinha. "And you weren't very clever about it. Is that what passes for 'tactics' among Speakers for the Dead?"

"It got you here, didn't it?" The Speaker smiled.

"What were you looking for in my files?"

"I came to Speak Pipo's death."

"I didn't kill him. My files are none of your business."

"You called me here."

"I changed my mind. I'm sorry. It still doesn't give you the right to--"

His voice suddenly went soft, and he knelt in front of her so that she could hear his words. "Pipo learned something from you, and whatever he learned, the piggies killed him because of it. So you locked your files away where no one could ever find it out. You even refused to marry Libo, just so he wouldn't get access to what Pipo saw. You've twisted and distorted your life and the lives of everybody you loved in order to keep Libo and now Miro from learning that secret and dying."

Novinha felt a sudden coldness, and her hands and feet began to tremble. He had been here three days, and already he knew more than anyone but Libo had ever guessed. "It's all lies," she said.

"Listen to me, Dona Ivanova. It didn't work. Libo died anyway, didn't he? Whatever your secret is, keeping it to yourself didn't save his life. And it won't save Miro, either. Ignorance and deception can't save anybody. Knowing saves them."

"Never," she whispered.

"I can understand your keeping it from Libo and Miro, but what am I to you? I'm nothing to you, so what does it matter if I know the secret and it kills me?"

"It doesn't matter at all if you live or die," said Novinha, "but you'll never get access to those files."

"You don't seem to understand that you don't have the right to put blinders on other people's eyes. Your son and his sister go out every day to meet with the piggies, and thanks to you, they don't know whether their next word or their next act will be their death sentence. Tomorrow I'm going with them, because I can't speak Pipo's death without talking to the piggies--"

"I don't want you to Speak Pipo's death."

"I don't care what you want, I'm not doing it for you. But I am begging you to let me know what Pipo knew."

"You'll never know what Pipo knew, because he was a good and kind and loving person who--"

"Who took a lonely, frightened little girl and healed the wounds in her heart." As he said it, his hand rested on Quara's shoulder.

It was more than Novinha could bear. "Don't you dare to compare yourself to him! Quara isn't an orphan, do you hear me? She has a mother, me, and she doesn't need you, none of us need you, none of us!" And then, inexplicably, she was crying. She didn't want to cry in front of him. She didn't want to be here. He was confusing everything. She stumbled to the door and slammed it behind her. Quim was right. He was like the devil. He knew too much, demanded too much, gave too much, and already they all needed him too much. How could he have acquired so much power over them in so short a time?

Then she had a thought that at once dried up her unshed tears and filled her with terror. He had said that Miro and his sister went out to the piggies every day. He knew. He knew all the secrets.

All except the secret that she didn't even know herself, the one that Pipo had somehow discovered in her simulation. If he ever got that, he'd have everything that she had hidden for all these years. When she called for the Speaker for the Dead, she had wanted him to discover the truth about Pipo; instead, he had come and discovered the truth about her.

The door slammed. Ender leaned on the stool where she had sat and put his head down on his hands.

He heard Olhado stand up and walk slowly across the room toward him.

"You tried to access Mother's files," he said quietly.

"Yes," said Ender.

"You got me to teach you how to do searches so that you could spy on my own mother. You made a traitor out of me."

There was no answer that would satisfy Olhado right now; Ender didn't try. He waited in silence as Olhado walked to the door and left.

The turmoil he felt was not silent, however, to the hive queen. He felt her stir in his mind, drawn by his anguish. No, he said to her silently. There's nothing you can do, nothing I can explain. Human things, that's all, strange and alien human problems that are beyond comprehension.

<Ah.> And he felt her touch him inwardly, touch him like the breeze in the leaves of a tree; he felt the strength and vigor of upward-thrusting wood, the firm grip of roots in earth, the gentle play of sunlight on passionate leaves. <See what we've learned from him, Ender, the peace that he found.> The feeling faded as the hive queen retreated from his mind. The strength of the tree stayed with him, the calm of its quietude replaced his own tortured silence.

It had been only a moment; the sound of Olhado, closing the door still rang in the room. Beside him, Quara jumped to her feet and skipped across the floor to his bed. She jumped up and bounced on it a few times.

"You only lasted a couple of days," she said cheerfully. "Everybody hates you now."

Ender laughed wryly and turned around to look at her. "Do you?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I hated you first of all, except maybe Quim." She slid off the bed and walked to the terminal. One key at a time, she carefully logged on. A group of double-column addition problems appeared in the air above the terminal. "You want to see me do arithmetic?"

Ender got up and joined her at the terminal. "Sure," he said. "Those look hard, though."

"Not for me," she said boastfully. "I do them faster than anybody."

Chapter 13 -- Ela

MIRO: The piggies call themselves males, but we're only taking their word for it.

OUANDA: Why would they lie?

MIRO: I know you're young and naive. but there's some missing equipment.

OUANDA: I passed physical anthropology. Who says they do it the way we do it?

MIRO: Obviously they don't. (For that matter, WE don't do it at all.) Maybe I've figured out where their genitals are. Those bumps on their bellies, where the hair is light and fine.

OUANDA: Vestigial nipples. Even you have them.

MIRO: I saw Leaf-eater and Pots yesterday, about ten meters off, so I didn't see them WELL, but Pots was stroking Leaf-eater's belly, and I think those belly-bumps might have tumesced.

OUANDA: Or they might not.

MIRO: One thing for sure. Leaf-eater's belly was wet-- the sun was reflected off it-- and he was enjoying it.

OUANDA: This is perverted.

MIRO: Why not? They're all bachelors, aren't they? They're adults, but their so-called wives haven't introduced any of them to the joys of fatherhood.

OUANDA: I think a sex-starved zenador is projecting his own frustrations onto his subjects.

-- Marcos Vladimir "Miro" Ribeira von Hesse and Ouanda Quenhatta, Figueira Mucumbi, Working Notes, 1970: 1:430

The clearing was very still. Miro saw at once that something was wrong. The piggies weren't doing anything. Just standing or sitting here and there. And still; hardly a breath. Staring at the ground.

Except Human, who emerged from the forest behind them.

He walked slowly, stiffly around to the front. Miro felt Ouanda's elbow press against him, but he did not look at her. He knew she was thinking the same thing he thought. Is this the moment that they will kill us, as they killed Libo and Pipo?

Human regarded them steadily for several minutes. It was unnerving to have him wait so long. But Miro and Ouanda were disciplined. They said nothing, did not even let their faces change from the relaxed, meaningless expression they had practiced for so many years. The art of noncommunication was the first one they had to learn before Libo would let either of them come with him. Until their faces showed nothing, until they did not even perspire visibly under emotional stress, no piggy would see them. As if it did any good. Human was too adroit at turning evasions into answers, gleaning facts from empty statements. Even their absolute stillness no doubt communicated their fear, but out of that circle there could be no escape. Everything communicated something.

"You have lied to us," said Human.

Don't answer, Miro said silently, and Ouanda was as wordless as if she had heard him. No doubt she was also thinking the same message to him.

"Rooter says that the Speaker for the Dead wants to come to us."

It was the most maddening thing about the piggies. Whenever they had something outrageous to say, they always blamed it on some dead piggy who couldn't possibly have said it. No doubt there was some religious ritual involved: Go to their totem tree, ask a leading question, and lie there contemplating the leaves or the bark or something until you get exactly the answer you want.

"We never said otherwise," said Miro.

Ouanda breathed a little more quickly.

"You said he wouldn't come."

"That's right," said Miro. "He wouldn't. He has to obey the law just like anyone else. If he tried to pass through the gate without permission--"

"That's a lie."

Miro fell silent.

"It's the law," said Ouanda quietly.

"The law has been twisted before this," said Human. "You could bring him here, but you don't. Everything depends on you bringing him here. Rooter says the hive queen can't give us her gifts unless he comes."

Miro quelled his impatience. The hive queen! Hadn't he told the piggies a dozen times that all the buggers were killed? And now the dead hive queen was talking to them as much as dead Rooter. The piggies would be much easier to deal with if they could stop getting orders from the dead.

"It's the law," said Ouanda again. "If we even ask him to come, he might report us and we'd be sent away, we'd never come to you again."

"He won't report you. He wants to come."

"How do you know?"

"Rooter says."

There were times that Miro wanted to chop down the totem tree that grew where Rooter had been killed. Maybe then they'd shut up about what Rooter says. But instead they'd probably name some other tree Rooter and be outraged as well. Don't even admit that you doubt their religion, that was a textbook rule; even offworld xenologers, even anthropologists knew that.

"Ask him," said Human.

"Rooter?" asked Ouanda.

"He wouldn't speak to you," said Human. Contemptuously? "Ask the Speaker whether he'll come or not."

Miro waited for Ouanda to answer. She knew already what his answer would be. Hadn't they argued it out a dozen times in the last two days? He's a good man, said Miro. He's a fake, said Ouanda. He was good with the little ones, said Miro. So are child molesters, said Ouanda. I believe in him, said Miro. Then you're an idiot, said Ouanda. We can trust him, said Miro. He'll betray us, said Ouanda. And that was where it always ended.

But the piggies changed the equation. The piggies added great pressure on Miro's side. Usually when the piggies demanded the impossible he had helped her fend them off. But this was not impossible, he did not want them fended off, and so he said nothing. Press her, Human, because you're right and this time Ouanda must bend.

Feeling herself alone, knowing Miro would not help her, she gave a little ground. "Maybe if we only bring him as far as the edge of the forest."

"Bring him here," said Human.

"We can't," she said. "Look at you. Wearing cloth. Making pots. Eating bread."

Human smiled. "Yes," he said. "All of that. Bring him here."

"No," said Ouanda.

Miro flinched, stopping himself from reaching out to her. It was the one thing they had never done-- flatly denied a request. Always it was "We can't because" or "I wish we could." But the single word of denial said to them, I will not. I, of myself, refuse.

Human's smile faded. "Pipo told us that women do not say. Pipo told us that human men and women decide together. So you can't say no unless he says no, too." He looked at Miro. "Do you say no?"

Miro did not answer. He felt Ouanda's elbow touching him.

"You don't say nothing," said Human. "You say yes or no."

Still Miro didn't answer.

Some of the piggies around them stood up. Miro had no idea what they were doing, but the movement itself, with Miro's intransigent silence as a cue, seemed menacing. Ouanda, who would never be cowed by a threat to herself, bent to the implied threat to Miro. "He says yes," she whispered.

"He says yes, but for you he stays silent. You say no, but you don't stay silent for him." Human scooped thick mucus out of his mouth with one finger and flipped it onto the ground. "You are nothing."

Human suddenly fell backward into a somersault, twisted in mid-movement, and came up with his back to them, walking away. Immediately the other piggies came to life, moving swiftly toward Human, who led them toward the forest edge farthest from Miro and Ouanda.

Human stopped abruptly. Another piggy, instead of following him, stood in front of him, blocking his way. It was Leaf-eater. If he or Human spoke, Miro could not hear them or see their mouths move. He did see, though, that Leaf-eater extended his hand to touch Human's belly. The hand stayed there a moment, then Leaf-eater whirled around and scampered off into the bushes like a youngling.

In a moment the other piggies were also gone.

"It was a battle," said Miro. "Human and Leaf-eater. They're on opposite sides."

"Of what?" said Ouanda.

"I wish I knew. But I can guess. If we bring the Speaker, Human wins. If we don't, Leaf-eater wins."

"Wins what? Because if we bring the Speaker, he'll betray us, and then we all lose."

"He won't betray us."

"Why shouldn't he, if you'd betray me like that?"

Her voice was a lash, and he almost cried out from the sting of her words. "I betray you!" he whispered. "Eu nao. Jamais." Not me. Never.

"Father always said, Be united in front of the piggies, never let them see you in disagreement, and you--"

"And I didn't say yes to them. You're the one who said no, you're the one who took a position that you knew I didn't agree with!"

"Then when we disagree, it's your job to--"

She stopped. She had only just realized what she was saying. But stopping did not undo what Miro knew she was going to say. It was his job to do what she said until she changed her mind. As if he were her apprentice. "And here I thought we were in this together." He turned and walked away from her, into the forest, back toward Milagre.

"Miro," she called after him. "Miro, I didn't mean that--"

He waited for her to catch up, then caught her by the arm and whispered fiercely, "Don't shout! Or don't you care whether the piggies hear us or not? Has the master Zenador decided that we can let them see everything now, even the master disciplining her apprentice?"

"I'm not the master, I--"

"That's right, you're not." He turned away from her and started walking again.

"But Libo was my father, so of course I'm the--"

"Zenador by blood right," he said. "Blood right, is that it? So what am I by blood right? A drunken wife-beating cretin?" He took her by the arms, gripping her cruelly. "Is that what you want me to be? A little copy of my paizinho?"

"Let go!"

He shoved her away. "Your apprentice thinks you were a fool today," said Miro. "Your apprentice thinks you should have trusted his judgment of the Speaker, and your apprentice thinks you should have trusted his assessment of how serious the piggies were about this, because you were stupidly wrong about both matters, and you may just have cost Human his life."

It was an unspeakable accusation, but it was exactly what they both feared, that Human would end up now as Rooter had, as others had over the years, disemboweled, with a seedling growing out of his corpse.

Miro knew he had spoken unfairly, knew that she would not be wrong to rage against him. He had no right to blame her when neither of them could possibly have known what the stakes might have been for Human until it was too late.

Ouanda did not rage, however. Instead, she calmed herself visibly, drawing even breaths and blanking her face. Miro followed her example and did the same. "What matters," said Ouanda, "is to make the best of it. The executions have always been at night. If we're to have a hope of vindicating Human, we have to get the Speaker here this afternoon, before dark. "

Miro nodded. "Yes," he said. "And I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," she said.

"Since we don't know what we're doing, it's nobody's fault when we do things wrong."

"I only wish that I believed a right choice were possible."

Ela sat on a rock and bathed her feet in the water while she waited for the Speaker for the Dead. The fence was only a few meters away, running along the top of the steel grillwork that blocked the people from swimming under it. As if anyone wanted to try. Most people in Milagre pretended the fence wasn't there. Never came near it. That was why she had asked the Speaker to meet her here. Even though the day was warm and school was out, children didn't swim here at Vila Ultima, where the fence came to the river and the forest came nearly to the fence. Only the soapmakers and potters and brickmakers came here, and they left again when the day's work was over. She could say what she had to say, without fear of anyone overhearing or interrupting.

She didn't have to wait long. The Speaker rowed up the river in a small boat, just like one of the farside farmers, who had no use for roads. The skin of his back was shockingly white; even the few Lusos who were light-complected enough to be called *loiros* were much darker-skinned. His whiteness made him seem weak and slight. But then she saw how quickly the boat moved against the current; how accurately the oars were placed each time at just the right depth, with a long, smooth pull; how tightly wrapped in skin his muscles were. She felt a moment's stab of grief, and then realized that it was grief for her father, despite the depth of her hatred for him; she had not realized until this moment that she loved anything about him, but she grieved for the strength of his shoulders and back, for the sweat that made his brown skin dazzle like glass in the sunlight.

No, she said silently, I don't grieve for your death, C o. I grieve that you were not more like the Speaker, who has no connection with us and yet has given us more good gifts in three days than you in your whole life; I grieve that your beautiful body was so worm-eaten inside.

The Speaker saw her and skimmed the boat to shore, where she waited. She waded in the reeds and muck to help him pull the boat aground.

"Sorry to get you muddy," he said. "But I haven't used my body in a couple of weeks, and the water invited me--"

"You row well," she said.

"The world I came from, Trondheim, was mostly ice and water. A bit of rock here and there, some soil, but anyone who couldn't row was more crippled than if he couldn't walk."

"That's where you were born?"

"No. Where I last Spoke, though." He sat on the grama, facing the water.

She sat beside him. "Mother's angry at you."

His lips made a little half-smile. "She told me."

Without thinking, Ela immediately began to justify her mother. "You tried to read her files."

"I read her files. Most of them. All but the ones that mattered."

"I know. Quim told me." She caught herself feeling just a little triumphant that Mother's protection system had bested him. Then she remembered that she was not on Mother's side in this. That she had been trying for years to get Mother to open those very files to her. But momentum carried her on, saying things she didn't mean to say. "Olhado's sitting in the house with his eyes shut off and music blasting into his ears. Very upset."

"Yes, well, he thinks I betrayed him."

"Didn't you?" That was not what she meant to say.

"I'm a Speaker for the Dead. I tell the truth, when I speak at all, and I don't keep away from other people's secrets."

"I know. That's why I called for a Speaker. You don't have any respect for anybody."

He looked annoyed. "Why did you invite me here?" he asked.

This was working out all wrong. She was talking to him as if she were against him, as if she weren't grateful for what he had already done for the family. She was talking to him like the enemy. Has Quim taken over my mind, so that I say things I don't mean?

"You invited me to this place on the river. The rest of your family isn't speaking to me, and then I get a message from you. To complain about my breaches of privacy? To tell me I don't respect anybody?"

"No," she said miserably. "This isn't how it was supposed to go."

"Didn't it occur to you that I would hardly choose to be a Speaker if I had no respect for people?"

In frustration she let the words burst out. "I wish you had broken into all her files! I wish you had taken every one of her secrets and published them through all the Hundred Worlds!" There were tears in her eyes; she couldn't think why.

"I see. She doesn't let you see those files, either."

"Sou aprendiz dela, nao sou? E porque choro, diga-me! O senhor tem o jeito."

"I don't have any knack for making people cry, Ela," he answered softly. His voice was a caress. No, stronger, it was like a hand gripping her hand, holding her, steadying her. "Telling the truth makes you cry."

"Sou ingrata, sou ma filha--"

"Yes, you're ungrateful, and a terrible daughter," he said, laughing softly. "Through all these years of chaos and neglect you've held your mother's family together with little help from her, and when you followed her in her career, she wouldn't share the most vital information with you; you've

earned nothing but love and trust from her and she's replied by shutting you out of her life at home and at work; and then you finally tell somebody that you're sick of it. You're just about the worst person I've ever known."

She found herself laughing at her own self-condemnation. Childishly, she didn't want to laugh at herself. "Don't patronize me." She tried to put as much contempt into her voice as possible.

He noticed. His eyes went distant and cold. "Don't spit at a friend," he said.

She didn't want him to be distant from her. But she couldn't stop herself from saying, coldly, angrily, "You aren't my friend."

For a moment she was afraid he believed her. Then a smile came to his face. "You wouldn't know a friend if you saw one."

Yes I would, she thought. I see one now. She smiled back at him.

"Ela," he said, "are you a good xenobiologist?"

"Yes."

"You're eighteen years old. You could take the guild tests at sixteen. But you didn't take them."

"Mother wouldn't let me. She said I wasn't ready."

"You don't have to have your mother's permission after you're sixteen."

"An apprentice has to have the permission of her master."

"And now you're eighteen, and you don't even need that."

"She's still Lusitania's xenobiologist. It's still her tab. What if I passed the test, and then she wouldn't let me into the lab until after she was dead?"

"Did she threaten that?"

"She made it clear that I wasn't to take the test."

"Because as soon as you're not an apprentice anymore, if she admits you to the lab as her co-xenobiologist you have full access--"

"To all the working files. To all the locked files."

"So she'd hold her own daughter back from beginning her career, she'd give you a permanent blot on your record-- unready for the tests even at age eighteen-- just to keep you from reading those files."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Mother's crazy."

"No. Whatever else Novinha is, Ela, she is not crazy."

"Ela , boba mesma, Senhor Falante."

He laughed and lay back in the grama. "Tell me how she's boba, then."

"I'll give you the list. First: She won't allow any investigation of the Descolada. Thirty-four years ago the Descolada nearly destroyed this colony. My grandparents, Os Venerados, Deus os abencoe, they barely managed to stop the Descolada. Apparently the disease agent, the Descolada bodies, are still present-- we have to eat a supplement, like an extra vitamin, to keep the plague from striking again. They told you that, didn't they? If you once get it in your system, you'll have to keep that supplement all your life, even if you leave here."

"I knew that, yes."

"She won't let me study the Descolada bodies at all. That's what's in some of the locked files, anyway. She's locked up all of Gusto's and Cida's discoveries about the Descolada bodies. Nothing's available."

The Speaker's eyes narrowed. "So. That's one-third of boba. What's the rest?"

"It's more than a third. Whatever the Descolada body is, it was able to adapt to become a human parasite ten years after the colony was founded. Ten years! If it can adapt once, it can adapt again."

"Maybe she doesn't think so."

"Maybe I ought to have a right to decide that for myself."

He put out a hand, rested it on her knee, calmed her. "I agree with you. But go on. The second reason she's boba."

"She won't allow any theoretical research. No taxonomy. No evolutionary models. If I ever try to do any, she says I obviously don't have enough to do and weighs me down with assignments until she thinks I've given up."

"You haven't given up, I take it."

"That's what xenobiology's for. Oh, yes, fine that she can make a potato that makes maximum use of the ambient nutrients. Wonderful that she made a breed of amaranth that makes the colony protein self-sufficient with only ten acres under cultivation. But that's all molecular juggling."

"It's survival."

"But we don't know anything. It's like swimming on the top of the ocean. You get very comfortable, you can move around a little, but you don't know if there are sharks down there! We could be surrounded by sharks and she doesn't want to find out."

"Third thing?"

"She won't exchange information with the Zenadors. Period. Nothing. And that really is crazy. We can't leave the fenced area. That means that we don't have a single tree we can study. We know absolutely nothing about the flora and fauna of this world except what happened to be included inside the fence. One herd of cabra and a bunch of capim grass, and then a slightly different riverside ecology, and that's everything. Nothing about the kinds of animals in the forest, no information exchange at all. We don't tell them anything, and if they send us data we erase the files unread. It's like she built this wall around us that nothing could get through. Nothing gets in, nothing goes out."

"Maybe she has reasons."

"Of course she has reasons. Crazy people always have reasons. For one thing, she hated Libo. Hated him. She wouldn't let Miro talk about him, wouldn't let us play with his children-- China and I were best friends for years and she wouldn't let me bring her home or go to her house after school. And when Miro apprenticed to him, she didn't speak to him or set his place at the table for a year."

She could see that the Speaker doubted her, thought she was exaggerating.

"I mean one year. The day he went to the Zenador's Station for the first time as Libo's apprentice, he came home and she didn't speak to him, not a word, and when he sat down to dinner she removed the plate from in front of his face, just cleaned up his silverware as if he weren't there. He sat there through the entire meal, just looking at her. Until Father got angry at him for being rude and told him to leave the room."

"What did he do, move out?"

"No. You don't know Miro!" Ela laughed bitterly. "He doesn't fight, but he doesn't give up, either. He never answered Father's abuse, never. In all my life I don't remember hearing him answer anger with anger. And Mother-- well, he came home every night from the Zenador's Station and sat down where a plate was set, and every night Mother took up his plate and silverware, and he sat there till Father made him leave. Of course, within a week Father was yelling at him to get out as soon as Mother reached for his plate. Father loved it, the bastard, he thought it was great, he hated Miro so much, and finally Mother was on his side against Miro."

"Who gave in?"

"Nobody gave in." Ela looked at the river, realizing how terrible this all sounded, realizing that she was shaming her family in front of a stranger. But he wasn't a stranger, was he? Because Quara was talking again, and Olhado was involved in things again, and Grego, for just a short time, Grego had been almost a normal boy. He wasn't a stranger.

"How did it end?" asked the Speaker.

"It ended when the piggies killed Libo. That's how much Mother hated the man. When he died she celebrated by forgiving her son. That night when Miro came home, it was after dinner was over, it was late at night. A terrible night, everybody was so afraid, the piggies seemed so awful, and everybody loved Libo so much-- except Mother, of course. Mother waited up for Miro. He came in and went into the kitchen and sat down at the table, and Mother put a plate down in front of him, put food on the plate. Didn't say a word. He ate it, too. Not a word about it. As if the year before hadn't happened. I woke up in the middle of the night because I could hear Miro throwing up and crying in the bathroom. I don't think anybody else heard, and I didn't go to him because I didn't think he wanted anybody to hear him. Now I think I should have gone, but I was afraid. There were such terrible things in my family."

The Speaker nodded.

"I should have gone to him," Ela said again.

"Yes," the Speaker said. "You should have."

A strange thing happened then. The Speaker agreed with her that she had made a mistake that night, and she knew when he said the words that it was true, that his judgment was correct. And yet she felt strangely healed, as if simply saying her mistake were enough to purge some of the pain of it. For the first time, then, she caught a glimpse of what the power of Speaking might be. It wasn't a matter of confession, penance, and absolution, like the priests offered. It was something else entirely. Telling the story of who she was, and then realizing that she was no longer the same person. That she had made a mistake, and the mistake had changed her, and now she would not make the mistake again because she had become someone else, someone less afraid, someone more compassionate.

If I'm not that frightened girl who heard her brother in desperate pain and dared not go to him, who am I? But the water flowing through the grillwork under the fence held no answers. Maybe she couldn't know who she was today. Maybe it was enough to know that she was no longer who she was before.

Still the Speaker lay there on the grama, looking at the clouds coming darkly out of the west. "I've told you all I know," Ela said. "I told you what was in those files-- the Descolada information. That's all I know."

"No it isn't," said the Speaker.

"It is, I promise."

"Do you mean to say that you obeyed her? That when your mother told you not to do any theoretical work, you simply turned off your mind and did what she wanted?"

Ela giggled. "She thinks so."

"But you didn't."

"I'm a scientist, even if she isn't."

"She was once," said the Speaker. "She passed her tests when she was thirteen."

"I know," said Ela.

"And she used to share information with Pipo before he died."

"I know that, too. It was just Libo that she hated."

"So tell me, Ela. What have you discovered in your theoretical work?"

"I haven't discovered any answers. But at least I know what some of the questions are. That's a start, isn't it? Nobody else is asking questions. It's so funny, isn't it? Miro says the framling xenologers are always pestering him and Ouanda for more information, more data, and yet the law forbids them from learning anything more. And yet not a single framling xenobiologist has ever asked us for any information. They all just study the biosphere on their own planets and don't ask Mother a single question. I'm the only one asking, and nobody cares. "

"I care," said the Speaker. "I need to know what the questions are."

"OK, here's one. We have a herd of cabra here inside the fence. The cabra can't jump the fence, they don't even touch it. I've examined and tagged every single cabra in the herd, and you know something? There's not one male. They're all female."

"Bad luck," said the Speaker. "You'd think they would have left at least one male inside."

"It doesn't matter," said Ela. "I don't know if there are any males. In the last five years every single adult cabra has given birth at least once. And not one of them has mated."

"Maybe they clone," said the Speaker.

"The offspring is not genetically identical to the mother. That much research I could sneak into the lab without Mother noticing. There is some kind of gene transfer going on."

"Hermaphrodites?"

"No. Pure female. No male sexual organs at all. Does that qualify as an important question? Somehow the cabras are having some kind of genetic exchange, without sex."

"The theological implications alone are astounding."

"Don't make fun."

"Of which? Science or theology?"

"Either one. Do you want to hear more of my questions or not?"

"I do," said the Speaker.

"Then try this. The grass you're lying on-- we call it grama. All the watersnakes are hatched here. Little worms so small you can hardly see them. They eat the grass down to the nub and eat each other, too, shedding skin each time they grow larger. Then all of a sudden, when the grass is completely slimy with their dead skin, all the snakes slither off into the river and they never come back out. "

He wasn't a xenobiologist. He didn't get the implication right away.

"The watersnakes hatch here," she explained, "but they don't come back out of the water to lay their eggs."

"So they mate here before they go into the water."

"Fine, of course, obviously. I've seen them mating. That's not the problem. The problem is, why are they watersnakes?"

He still didn't get it.

"Look, they're completely adapted to life underwater. They have gills along with lungs, they're superb swimmers, they have fins for guidance, they are completely evolved for adult life in the water. Why would they ever have evolved that way if they are born on land, mate on land, and reproduce on land? As far as evolution is concerned, anything that happens after you reproduce is completely irrelevant, except if you nurture your young, and the watersnakes definitely don't nurture. Living in the water does nothing to enhance their ability to survive until they reproduce. They could slither into the water and drown and it wouldn't matter because reproduction is over."

"Yes," said the Speaker. "I see now."

"There are little clear eggs in the water, though. I've never seen a watersnake lay them, but since there's no other animal in or near the river large enough to lay the eggs, it seems logical that they're watersnake eggs. Only these big clear eggs-- a centimeter across-- they're completely sterile. The nutrients are there, everything's ready, but there's no embryo. Nothing. Some of them have a

gamete-- half a set of genes in a cell, ready to combine-- but not a single one was alive. And we've never found watersnake eggs on land. One day there's nothing there but grama, getting riper and riper; the next day the grama stalks are crawling with baby watersnakes. Does this sound like a question worth exploring?"

"It sounds like spontaneous generation to me."

"Yes, well, I'd like to find enough information to test some alternate hypotheses, but Mother won't let me. I asked her about this one and she made me take over the whole amaranth testing process so I wouldn't have time to muck around in the river. And another question. Why are there so few species here? On every other planet, even some of the nearly desert ones like Trondheim, there are thousands of different species, at least in the water. Here there's hardly a handful, as far as I can tell. The xingadora are the only birds we've seen. The suckflies are the only flies. The cabra are the only ruminants eating the capim grass. Except for the cabras, the piggies are the only large animals we've seen. Only one species of tree. Only one species of grass on the prairie, the capim; and the only other competing plant is the tropeqa, a long vine that wanders along the ground for meters and meters-- the xingadora make their nests out of the vine. That's it. The xingadora eat the suckflies and nothing else. The suckflies eat the algae along the edge of the river. And our garbage, and that's it. Nothing eats the xingadora. Nothing eats the cabra."

"Very limited," said the Speaker.

"Impossibly limited. There are ten thousand ecological niches here that are completely unfilled. There's no way that evolution could leave this world so sparse."

"Unless there was a disaster."

"Exactly."

"Something that wiped out all but a handful of species that were able to adapt."

"Yes," said Ela. "You see? And I have proof. The cabras have a huddling behavior pattern. When you come up on them, when they smell you, they circle with the adults facing inward, so they can kick out at the intruder and protect the young."

"Lots of herd animals do that."

"Protect them from what? The piggies are completely sylvan-- they never hunt on the prairie. Whatever the predator was that forced the cabra to develop that behavior pattern, it's gone. And only recently-- in the last hundred thousand years, the last million years maybe."

"There's no evidence of any meteor falls more recent than twenty million years," said the Speaker.

"No. That kind of disaster would kill off all the big animals and plants and leave hundreds of small ones, or maybe kill all land life and leave only the sea. But land, sea, all the environments were stripped, and yet some big creatures survived. No, I think it was a disease. A disease that

struck across all species boundaries, that could adapt itself to any living thing. Of course, we wouldn't notice that disease now because all the species left alive have adapted to it. It would be part of their regular life pattern. The only way we'd notice the disease--"

"Is if we caught it," said the Speaker. "The Descolada."

"You see? Everything comes back to the Descolada. My grandparents found a way to stop it from killing humans, but it took the best genetic manipulation. The cabra, the watersnakes, they also found ways to adapt, and I doubt it was with dietary supplements. I think it all ties in together. The weird reproductive anomalies, the emptiness of the ecosystem, it all comes back to the Descolada bodies, and Mother won't let me examine them. She won't let me study what they are, how they work, how they might be involved with--"

"With the piggies."

"Well, of course, but not just them, all the animals--"

The Speaker looked like he was suppressing excitement. As if she had explained something difficult. "The night that Pipo died, she locked the files showing all her current work, and she locked the files containing all the Descolada research. Whatever she showed Pipo had to do with the Descolada bodies, and it had to do with the piggies--"

"That's when she locked the files?" asked Ela.

"Yes. Yes."

"Then I'm right, aren't I."

"Yes," he said. "Thank you. You've helped me more than you know."

"Does this mean that you'll speak Father's death soon?"

The Speaker looked at her carefully. "You don't want me to Speak your father, really. You want me to Speak your mother."

"She isn't dead."

"But you know I can't possibly Speak Marc o without explaining why he married Novinha, and why they stayed married all those years."

"That's right. I want all the secrets opened up. I want all the files unlocked. I don't want anything hidden."

"You don't know what you're asking," said the Speaker. "You don't know how much pain it will cause if all the secrets come out."

"Take a look at my family, Speaker," she answered. "How can the truth cause any more pain than the secrets have already caused?"

He smiled at her, but it was not a mirthful smile. It was-- affectionate, even pitying. "You're right," he said, "completely right, but you may have trouble realizing that, when you hear the whole story."

"I know the whole story, as far as it can be known."

"That's what everybody thinks, and nobody's right."

"When will you have the Speaking?"

"As soon as I can."

"Then why not now? Today? What are you waiting for?"

"I can't do anything until I talk to the piggies."

"You're joking, aren't you? Nobody can talk to the piggies except the Zenadors. That's by Congressional Order. Nobody can get past that."

"Yes," said the Speaker. "That's why it's going to be hard."

"Not hard, impossible--"

"Maybe," he said. He stood; so did she. "Ela, you've helped me tremendously. Taught me everything I could have hoped to learn from you. Just like Olhado did. But he didn't like what I did with the things he taught me, and now he thinks I betrayed him."

"He's a kid. I'm eighteen."

The Speaker nodded, put his hand on her shoulder, squeezed. "We're all right then. We're friends."

She was almost sure there was irony in what he said. Irony and, perhaps, a plea. "Yes," she insisted. "We're friends. Always."

He nodded again, turned away, pushed the boat from shore, and splashed after it through the reeds and muck. Once the boat was fairly afloat, he sat down and extended the oars, rowed, and then looked up and smiled at her. Ela smiled back, but the smile could not convey the elation she felt, the perfect relief. He had listened to everything, and understood everything, and he would make everything all right. She believed that, believed it so completely that she didn't even notice that it was the source of her sudden happiness. She knew only that she had spent an hour with the Speaker for the Dead, and now she felt more alive than she had in years.

She retrieved her shoes, put them back on her feet, and walked home. Mother would still be at the Biologista's Station, but Ela didn't want to work this afternoon. She wanted to go home and fix dinner; that was always solitary work. She hoped no one would talk with her. She hoped there'd be no problem she was expected to solve. Let this feeling linger forever.

Ela was only home for a few minutes, however, when Miro burst into the kitchen. "Ela," he said. "Have you seen the Speaker for the Dead?"

"Yes," she said. "On the river."

"Where on the river!"

If she told him where they had met, he'd know that it wasn't a chance meeting. "Why?" she asked.

"Listen, Ela, this is no time to be suspicious, please. I've got to find him. We've left messages for him, the computer can't find him--"

"He was rowing downriver, toward home. He's probably going to be at his house soon."

Miro rushed from the kitchen into the front room. Ela heard him tapping at the terminal. Then he came back in. "Thanks," he said. "Don't expect me home for dinner."

"What's so urgent?"

"Nothing." It was so ridiculous, to say "nothing" when Miro was obviously agitated and hurried, that they both burst out laughing at once. "OK," said Miro, "it isn't nothing, it's something, but I can't talk about it, OK?"

"OK." But soon all the secrets will be known, Miro.

"What I don't understand is why he didn't get our message. I mean, the computer was paging him. Doesn't he wear an implant in his ear? The computer's supposed to be able to reach him. Of course, maybe he had it turned off."

"No," said Ela. "The light was on."

Miro cocked his head and squinted at her. "You didn't see that tiny red light on his ear implant, not if he just happened to be out rowing in the middle of the river."

"He came to shore. We talked."

"What about?"

Ela smiled. "Nothing," she said.

He smiled back, but he looked annoyed all the same. She understood: It's all right for you to have secrets from me, but not for me to have secrets from you, is that it, Miro?

He didn't argue about it, though. He was in too much of a hurry. Had to go find the Speaker, and now, and he wouldn't be home for dinner.

Ela had a feeling the Speaker might get to talk to the piggies sooner than she had thought possible. For a moment she was elated. The waiting would be over.

Then the elation passed, and something else took its place. A sick fear. A nightmare of China's papai, dear Libo, lying dead on the hillside, torn apart by the piggies. Only it wasn't Libo, the way she had always imagined the grisly scene. It was Miro. No, no, it wasn't Miro. It was the Speaker. It was the Speaker who would be tortured to death. "No," she whispered.

Then she shivered and the nightmare left her mind; she went back to trying to spice and season the pasta so it would taste like something better than amaranth glue.

Chapter 14 -- Renegades

LEAF-EATER: Human says that when your brothers die, you bury them in the dirt and then make your houses out of that dirt. (Laughs.)

MIRO: No. We never dig where people are buried.

LEAF-EATER: (becomes rigid with agitation): Then your dead don't do you any good at all!

-- Ouanda Quenhatta Figueira Mucumbi, Dialogue Transcripts, 103:0:1969:4:13:111

Ender had thought they might have some trouble getting him through the gate, but Ouanda palmed the box, Miro opened the gate, and the three of them walked through. No challenge. It must be as Ela had implied-- no one wants to get out of the compound, and so no serious security was needed. Whether that suggested that people were content to stay in Milagre or that they were afraid of the piggies or that they hated their imprisonment so much that they had to pretend the fence wasn't there, Ender could not begin to guess.

Both Ouanda and Miro were very tense, almost frightened. That was understandable, of course, since they were breaking Congressional rules to let him come. But Ender suspected there was more to it than that. Miro's tension was coupled with eagerness, a sense of hurry; he might be frightened, but he wanted to see what would happen, wanted to go ahead.

Ouanda held back, walked a measured step, and her coldness was not just fear but hostility as well. She did not trust him.

So Ender was not surprised when she stepped behind the large tree that grew nearest the gate and waited for Miro and Ender to follow her. Ender saw how Miro looked annoyed for a moment, then controlled himself. His mask of uninvolvedness was as cool as a human being could hope for. Ender found himself comparing Miro to the boys he had known in Battle School, sizing him up as a comrade in arms, and thought Miro might have done well there. Ouanda, too, but for different reasons: She held herself responsible for what was happening, even though Ender was an adult and she was much younger. She did not defer to him at all. Whatever she was afraid of, it was not authority.

"Here?" asked Miro blandly.

"Or not at all." said Ouanda.

Ender folded himself to sit at the base of the tree. "This is Rooter's tree, isn't it?" he asked.

They took it calmly-- of course-- but their momentary pause told him that yes, he had surprised them by knowing something about a past that they surely regarded as their own. I may be a stranger here, Ender said silently, but I don't have to be an ignorant one.

"Yes," said Ouanda. "He's the totem they seem to get the most-- direction from. Lately-- the last seven or eight years. They've never let us see the rituals in which they talk to their ancestors, but it seems to involve drumming on the trees with heavy polished sticks. We hear them at night sometimes. "

"Sticks? Made of fallen wood?"

"We assume so. Why?"

"Because they have no stone or metal tools to cut the wood-- isn't that right? Besides, if they worship the trees, they couldn't very well cut them down."

"We don't think they worship the trees. It's totemic. They stand for dead ancestors. They-- plant them. With the bodies."

Ouanda had wanted to stop, to talk or question him, but Ender had no intention of letting her believe she-- or Miro, for that matter-- was in charge of this expedition. Ender intended to talk to the piggies himself. He had never prepared for a Speaking by letting someone else determine his agenda, and he wasn't going to begin now. Besides, he had information they didn't have. He knew Ela's theory.

"And anywhere else?" he asked. "Do they plant trees at any other time?"

They looked at each other. "Not that we've seen," said Miro.

Ender was not merely curious. He was still thinking of what Ela had told him about reproductive anomalies. "And do the trees also grow by themselves? Are seedlings and saplings scattered through the forest?"

Ouanda shook her head. "We really don't have any evidence of the trees being planted anywhere but in the corpses of the dead. At least, all the trees we know of are quite old, except these three out here."

"Four, if we don't hurry," said Miro.

Ah. Here was the tension between them. Miro's sense of urgency was to save a piggy from being planted at the base of another tree. While Ouanda was concerned about something quite different. They had revealed enough of themselves to him; now he could let her interrogate him. He sat up straight and tipped his head back, to look up into the leaves of the tree above him, the spreading branches, the pale green of photosynthesis that confirmed the convergence, the inevitability of evolution on every world. Here was the center of all of Ela's paradoxes: evolution on this world was obviously well within the pattern that xenobiologists had seen on all the Hundred Worlds, and yet somewhere the pattern had broken down, collapsed. The piggies were one of a few dozen species that had survived the collapse. What was the Descolada, and how had the piggies adapted to it?

He had meant to turn the conversation, to say, Why are we here behind this tree? That would invite Ouanda's questions. But at that moment, his head tilted back, the soft green leaves moving gently in an almost imperceptible breeze, he felt a powerful *deja vu*. He had looked up into these leaves before. Recently. But that was impossible. There were no large trees on Trondheim, and none grew within the compound of Milagre. Why did the sunlight through the leaves feel so familiar to him?

"Speaker," said Miro.

"Yes," he said, allowing himself to be drawn out of his momentary reverie.

"We didn't want to bring you out here." Miro said it firmly, and with his body so oriented toward Ouanda's that Ender understood that in fact Miro had wanted to bring him out here, but was including himself in Ouanda's reluctance in order to show her that he was one with her. You are in love with each other, Ender said silently. And tonight, if I speak Marcdó's death tonight, I will have to tell you that you're brother and sister. I have to drive the wedge of the incest tabu between you. And you will surely hate me.

"You're going to see-- some--" Ouanda could not bring herself to say it.

Miro smiled. "We call them Questionable Activities. They began with Pipo, accidentally. But Libo did it deliberately, and we are continuing his work. It is careful, gradual. We didn't just discard the Congressional rules about this. But there were crises, and we had to help. A few years

ago, for instance, the piggies were running short of macios, the bark worms they mostly lived on then--"

"You're going to tell him that first?" asked Ouanda.

Ah, thought Ender. It isn't as important to her to maintain the illusion of solidarity as it is to him.

"He's here partly to speak Libo's death," said Miro. "And this was what happened right before."

"We have no evidence of a causal relationship--"

"Let me discover causal relationships," said Ender quietly. "Tell me what happened when the piggies got hungry."

"It was the wives who were hungry, they said." Miro ignored Ouanda's anxiety. "You see, the males gather food for the females and the young, and so there wasn't enough to go around. They kept hinting about how they would have to go to war. About how they would probably all die." Miro shook his head. "They seemed almost happy about it."

Ouanda stood up. "He hasn't even promised. Hasn't promised anything."

"What do you want me to promise?" asked Ender.

"Not to-- let any of this--"

"Not to tell on you?" asked Ender.

She nodded, though she plainly resented the childish phrase.

"I won't promise any such thing," said Ender. "My business is telling."

She whirled on Miro. "You see!"

Miro in turn looked frightened. "You can't tell. They'll seal the gate. They'll never let us through!"

"And you'd have to find another line of work?" asked Ender.

Ouanda looked at him with contempt. "Is that all you think xenology is? A job? That's another intelligent species there in the woods. Ramen, not varelse, and they must be known."

Ender did not answer, but his gaze did not leave her face.

"It's like the Hive Queen and the Hegemon," said Miro. "The piggies, they're like the buggers. Only smaller, weaker, more primitive. We need to study them, yes, but that isn't enough. You can study beasts and not care a bit when one of them drops dead or gets eaten up, but these are-- they're like us. We can't just study their hunger, observe their destruction in war, we know them, we--"

"Love them," said Ender.

"Yes!" said Ouanda defiantly.

"But if you left them, if you weren't here at all, they wouldn't disappear, would they?"

"No," said Miro.

"I told you he'd be just like the committee," said Ouanda.

Ender ignored her. "What would it cost them if you left?"

"It's like--" Miro struggled for words. "It's as if you could go back, to old Earth, back before the Xenocide, before star travel, and you said to them, You can travel among the stars, you can live on other worlds. And then showed them a thousand little miracles. Lights that turn on from switches. Steel. Even simple things-- pots to hold water. Agriculture. They see you, they know what you are, they know that they can become what you are, do all the things that you do. What do they say-- take this away, don't show us, let us live out our nasty, short, brutish little lives, let evolution take its course? No. They say, Give us, teach us, help us."

"And you say, I can't, and then you go away."

"It's too late!" said Miro. "Don't you understand? They've already seen the miracles! They've already seen us fly here. They've seen us be tall and strong, with magical tools and knowledge of things they never dreamed of. It's too late to tell them good-bye and go. They know what is possible. And the longer we stay, the more they try to learn, and the more they learn, the more we see how learning helps them, and if you have any kind of compassion, if you understand that they're-- they're--"

"Human."

"Ramen, anyway. They're our children, do you understand that?"

Ender smiled. "What man among you, if his son asks for bread, gives him a stone?"

Ouanda nodded. "That's it. The Congressional rules say we have to give them stones. Even though we have so much bread."

Ender stood up. "Well, let's go on."

Ouanda wasn't ready. "You haven't promised--"

"Have you read the Hive Queen and the Hegemon?"

"I have," said Miro.

"Can you conceive of anyone choosing to call himself Speaker for the Dead, and then doing anything to harm these little ones, these pequeninos?"

Ouanda's anxiety visibly eased, but her hostility was no less. "You're slick, Senhor Andrew, Speaker for the Dead, you're very clever. You remind him of the Hive Queen, and speak scripture to me out of the side of your mouth."

"I speak to everyone in the language they understand," said Ender. "That isn't being slick. It's being clear."

"So you'll do whatever you want."

"As long as it doesn't hurt the piggies."

Ouanda sneered. "In your judgment."

"I have no one else's judgment to use." He walked away from her, out of the shade of the spreading limbs of the tree, heading for the woods that waited atop the hill. They followed him, running to catch up.

"I have to tell you," said Miro. "The piggies have been asking for you. They believe you're the very same Speaker who wrote the Hive Queen and the Hegemon."

"They've read it?"

"They've pretty well incorporated it into their religion, actually. They treat the printout we gave them like a holy book. And now they claim the hive queen herself is talking to them."

Ender glanced at him. "What does she say?" he asked.

"That you're the real Speaker. And that you've got the hive queen with you. And that you're going to bring her to live with them, and teach them all about metal and-- it's really crazy stuff. That's the worst thing, they have such impossible expectations of you."

It might be simple wish fulfillment on their part, as Miro obviously believed, but Ender knew that from her cocoon the hive queen had been talking to someone. "How do they say the hive queen talks to them?"

Ouanda was on the other side of him now. "Not to them, just to Rooter. And Rooter talks to them. It's all part of their system of totems. We've always tried to play along with it, and act as if we believed it."

"How condescending of you," said Ender.

"It's standard anthropological practice," said Miro.

"You're so busy pretending to believe them, there isn't a chance in the world you could learn anything from them."

For a moment they lagged behind, so that he actually entered the forest alone. Then they ran to catch up with him. "We've devoted our lives to learning about them!" Miro said.

Ender stopped. "Not from them." They were just inside the trees; the spotty light through the leaves made their faces unreadable. But he knew what their faces would tell him. Annoyance, resentment, contempt-- how dare this unqualified stranger question their professional attitude? This is how: "You're cultural supremacists to the core. You'll perform your Questionable Activities to help out the poor little piggies, but there isn't a chance in the world you'll notice when they have something to teach you."

"Like what!" demanded Ouanda. "Like how to murder their greatest benefactor, torture him to death after he saved the lives of dozens of their wives and children?"

"So why do you tolerate it? Why are you here helping them after what they did?"

Miro slipped in between Ouanda and Ender. Protecting her, thought Ender; or else keeping her from revealing her weaknesses. "We're professionals. We understand that cultural differences, which we can't explain--"

"You understand that the piggies are animals, and you no more condemn them for murdering Libo and Pipo than you would condemn a cabra for chewing up capim."

"That's right," said Miro.

Ender smiled. "And that's why you'll never learn anything from them. Because you think of them as animals."

"We think of them as ramen!" said Ouanda, pushing in front of Miro. Obviously she was not interested in being protected.

"You treat them as if they were not responsible for their own actions," said Ender. "Ramen are responsible for what they do."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ouanda sarcastically. "Come in and put them on trial?"

"I'll tell you this. The piggies have learned more about me from dead Rooter than you have learned from having me with you."

"What's that supposed to mean? That you really are the original Speaker?" Miro obviously regarded it as the most ridiculous proposition imaginable. "And I suppose you really do have a bunch of buggers up there in your starship circling Lusitania, so you can bring them down and--"

"What it means," interrupted Ouanda, "is that this amateur thinks he's better qualified to deal with the piggies than we are. And as far as I'm concerned that's proof that we should never have agreed to bring him to--"

At that moment Ouanda stopped talking, for a piggy had emerged from the underbrush. Smaller than Ender had expected. Its odor, while not wholly unpleasant, was certainly stronger than Jane's computer simulation could ever imply. "Too late," Ender murmured. "I think we're already meeting. "

The piggy's expression, if he had one, was completely unreadable to Ender. Miro and Ouanda, however, could understand something of his unspoken language. "He's astonished," Ouanda murmured. By telling Ender that she understood what he did not, she was putting him in his place. That was fine. Ender knew he was a novice here. He also hoped, however, that he had stirred them a little from their normal, unquestioned way of thinking. It was obvious that they were following in well-established patterns. If he was to get any real help from them, they would have to break out of those old patterns and reach new conclusions.

"Leaf-eater," said Miro.

Leaf-eater did not take his eyes off Ender. "Speaker for the Dead," he said.

"We brought him," said Ouanda.

Leaf-eater turned and disappeared among the bushes.

"What does that mean?" Ender asked. "That he left?"

"You mean you haven't already figured it out?" asked Ouanda.

"Whether you like it or not," said Ender, "the piggies want to speak to me and I will speak to them. I think it will work out better if you help me understand what's going on. Or don't you understand it either?"

He watched them struggle with their annoyance. And then, to Ender's relief, Miro made a decision. Instead of answering with hauteur, he spoke simply, mildly. "No. We don't understand it. We're still playing guessing games with the piggies. They ask us questions, we ask them questions, and to the best of our ability neither they nor we have ever deliberately revealed a thing. We don't even ask them the questions whose answers we really want to know, for fear that they'll learn too much about us from our questions."

Ouanda was not willing to go along with Miro's decision to cooperate. "We know more than you will in twenty years," she said. "And you're crazy if you think you can duplicate what we know in a ten-minute briefing in the forest."

"I don't need to duplicate what you know," Ender said.

"You don't think so?" asked Ouanda.

"Because I have you with me." Ender smiled.

Miro understood and took it as a compliment. He smiled back. "Here's what we know, and it isn't much. Leaf-eater probably isn't glad to see you. There's a schism between him and a piggy named Human. When they thought we weren't going to bring you, Leaf-eater was sure he had won. Now his victory is taken away. Maybe we saved Human's life."

"And cost Leaf-eater his?" asked Ender.

"Who knows? My gut feeling is that Human's future is on the line, but Leaf-eater's isn't. Leaf-eater's just trying to make Human fail, not succeed himself."

"But you don't know."

"That's the kind of thing we never ask about." Miro smiled again. "And you're right. It's so much a habit that we usually don't even notice that we're not asking."

Ouanda was angry. "He's right? He hasn't even seen us at work, and suddenly he's a critic of--"

But Ender had no interest in watching them squabble. He strode off in the direction Leaf-eater had gone, and let them follow as they would. And, of course, they did, leaving their argument for later. As soon as Ender knew they were walking with him, he began to question them again. "These Questionable Activities you've carried out," he said as he walked. "You introduced new food into their diet?"

"We taught them how to eat the merдона root," said Ouanda. She was crisp and businesslike, but at least she was speaking to him. She wasn't going to let her anger keep her from being part of what was obviously going to be a crucial meeting with the piggies. "How to nullify the cyanide content by soaking it and drying it in the sun. That was the short-term solution."

"The long-term solution was some of Mother's cast-off amaranth adaptations," said Miro. "She made a batch of amaranth that was so well-adapted to Lusitania that it wasn't very good for humans. Too much Lusitanian protein structure, not enough Earthborn. But that sounded about right for the piggies. I got Ela to give me some of the cast-off specimens, without letting her know it was important."

Don't kid yourself about what Ela does and doesn't know, Ender said silently.

"Libo gave it to them, taught them how to plant it. Then how to grind it, make flour, turn it into bread. Nasty-tasting stuff, but it gave them a diet directly under their control for the first time ever. They've been fat and sassy ever since."

Ouanda's voice was bitter. "But they killed Father right after the first loaves were taken to the wives."

Ender walked in silence for a few moments, trying to make sense of this. The piggies killed Libo immediately after he saved them from starvation? Unthinkable, and yet it happened. How could such a society evolve, killing those who contributed most to its survival? They should do the opposite-- they should reward the valuable ones by enhancing their opportunity to reproduce. That's how communities improve their chances of surviving as a group. How could the piggies possibly survive, murdering those who contribute most to their survival?

And yet there were human precedents. These children, Miro and Ouanda, with the Questionable Activities-- they were better and wiser, in the long run, than the Starways committee that made the rules. But if they were caught, they would be taken from their homes to another world-- already a death sentence, in a way, since everyone they knew would be dead before they could ever return-- and they would be tried and punished, probably imprisoned. Neither their ideas nor their genes would propagate, and society would be impoverished by it.

Still, just because humans did it, too, did not make it sensible. Besides, the arrest and imprisonment of Miro and Ouanda, if it ever happened, would make sense if you viewed humans as a single community, and the piggies as their enemies; if you thought that anything that helped the piggies survive was somehow a menace to humanity. Then the punishment of people who enhanced the piggies' culture would be designed, not to protect the piggies, but to keep the piggies from developing.

At that moment Ender saw clearly that the rules governing human contact with the piggies did not really function to protect the piggies at all. They functioned to guarantee human superiority and power. From that point of view, by performing their Questionable Activities, Miro and Ouanda were traitors to the self-interest of their own species.

"Renegades," he said aloud.

"What?" said Miro. "What did you say?"

"Renegades. Those who have denied their own people, and claimed the enemy as their own."

"Ah," said Miro.

"We're not," said Ouanda.

"Yes we are," said Miro.

"I haven't denied my humanity!"

"The way Bishop Peregrino defines it, we denied our humanity long ago," said Miro.

"But the way I define it--" she began.

"The way you define it," said Ender, "the piggies are also human. That's why you're a renegade."

"I thought you said we treated the piggies like animals!" Ouanda said.

"When you don't hold them accountable, when you don't ask them direct questions, when you try to deceive them, then you treat them like animals."

"In other words," said Miro, "when we do follow the committee rules."

"Yes," said Ouanda, "yes, that's right, we are renegades."

"And you?" said Miro. "Why are you a renegade?"

"Oh, the human race kicked me out a long time ago. That's how I got to be a Speaker for the Dead."

With that they arrived at the piggies' clearing.

Mother wasn't at dinner and neither was Miro. That was fine with Ela. When either one of them was there, Ela was stripped of her authority; she couldn't keep control over the younger children. And yet neither Miro nor Mother took Ela's place, either. Nobody obeyed Ela and nobody else tried to keep order. So it was quieter, easier when they stayed away.

Not that the little ones were particularly well-behaved even now. They just resisted her less. She only had to yell at Grego a couple of times to keep him from poking and kicking Quara under the table. And today both Quim and Olhado were keeping to themselves. None of the normal bickering.

Until the meal was over.

Quim leaned back in his chair and smiled maliciously at Olhado. "So you're the one who taught that spy how to get into Mother's files."

Olhado turned to Ela. "You left Quim's face open again, Ela. You've got to learn to be tidier." It was Olhado's way of appealing, through humor, for Ela's intervention.

Quim did not want Olhado to have any help. "Ela's not on your side this time, Olhado. Nobody's on your side. You helped that sneaking spy get into Mother's files, and that makes you as guilty as he is. He's the devil's servant, and so are you. "

Ela saw the fury in Olhado's body; she had a momentary image in her mind of Olhado flinging his plate at Quim. But the moment passed. Olhado calmed himself. "I'm sorry," Olhado said. "I didn't mean to do it."

He was giving in to Quim. He was admitting Quim was right.

"I hope," said Ela, "that you mean that you're sorry that you didn't mean to do it. I hope you aren't apologizing for helping the Speaker for the Dead."

"Of course he's apologizing for helping the spy," said Quim.

"Because," said Ela, "we should all help Speaker all we can."

Quim jumped to his feet, leaned across the table to shout in her face. "How can you say that! He was violating Mother's privacy, he was finding out her secrets, he was--"

To her surprise Ela found herself also on her feet, shoving him back across the table, shouting back at him, and louder. "Mother's secrets are the cause of half the poison in this house! Mother's secrets are what's making us all sick, including her! So maybe the only way to make things right here is to steal all her secrets and get them out in the open where we can kill them!" She stopped shouting. Both Quim and Ohado stood before her, pressed against the far wall as if her words were bullets and they were being executed. Quietly, intensely, Ela went on. "As far as I'm concerned, the Speaker for the Dead is the only chance we have to become a family again. And Mother's secrets are the only barrier standing in his way. So today I told him everything I knew about what's in Mother's files, because I want to give him every shred of truth that I can find."

"Then you're the worst traitor of all," said Quim. His voice was trembling. He was about to cry.

"I say that helping the Speaker for the Dead is an act of loyalty," Ela answered. "The only real treason is obeying Mother, because what she wants, what she has worked for all her life, is her own self-destruction and the destruction of this family."

To Ela's surprise, it was not Quim but Olhado who wept. His tear glands did not function, of course, having been removed when his eyes were installed. So there was no moistening of his eyes to warn of the onset of crying. Instead he doubled over with a sob, then sank down along the wall until he sat on the floor, his head between his knees, sobbing and sobbing. Ela understood why. Because she had told him that his love for the Speaker was not disloyal, that he had not sinned, and he believed her when she told him that, he knew that it was true.

Then she looked up from Olhado to see Mother standing in the doorway. Ela felt herself go weak inside, trembling at the thought of what Mother must have overheard.

But Mother did not seem angry. Just a little sad, and very tired. She was looking at Olhado.

Quim's outrage found his voice. "Did you hear what Ela was saying?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mother, never taking her eyes from Olhado. "And for all I know she might be right."

Ela was no less unnerved than Quim.

"Go to your rooms, children," Mother said quietly. "I need to talk to Olhado."

Ela beckoned to Grego and Quara, who slid off their chairs and scurried to Ela's side, eyes wide with awe at the unusual goings-on. After all, even Father had never been able to make Olhado cry. She led them out of the kitchen, back to their bedroom. She heard Quim walk down the hall and go into his own room, slam the door, and hurl himself on his bed. And in the kitchen Olhado's sobs faded, calmed, ended as Mother, for the first time since he lost his eyes, held him in her arms and comforted him, shedding her own silent tears into his hair as she rocked him back and forth.

Miro did not know what to make of the Speaker for the Dead. Somehow he had always imagined a Speaker to be very much like a priest-- or rather, like a priest was supposed to be. Quiet, contemplative, withdrawn from the world, carefully leaving action and decision to others. Miro had expected him to be wise.

He had not expected him to be so intrusive, so dangerous. Yes, he was wise, all right, he kept seeing past pretense, kept saying or doing outrageous things that were, when you thought about it, exactly right. It was as if he were so familiar with the human mind that he could see, right on your face, the desires so deep, the truths so well-disguised that you didn't even know yourself that you had them in you.

How many times had Miro stood with Ouanda just like this, watching as Libo handled the piggies. But always with Libo they had understood what he was doing; they knew his technique, knew his purpose. The Speaker, however, followed lines of thought that were completely alien to Miro.

Even though he wore a human shape, it made Miro wonder if Ender was really a framing-- he could be as baffling as the piggies. He was as much a raman as they were, alien but still not animal.

What did the Speaker notice? What did he see? The bow that Arrow carried? The sun-dried pot in which merdona root soaked and stank? How many of the Questionable Activities did he recognize, and how many did he think were native practices?

The piggies spread out the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. "You," said Arrow, "you wrote this?"

"Yes," said the Speaker for the Dead.

Miro looked at Ouanda. Her eyes danced with vindication. So the Speaker is a liar.

Human interrupted. "The other two, Miro and Ouanda, they think you're a liar."

Miro immediately looked at the Speaker, but he wasn't glancing at them. "Of course they do," he said. "It never occurred to them that Rooter might have told you the truth."

The Speaker's calm words disturbed Miro. Could it be true? After all, people who traveled between star systems skipped decades, often centuries in getting from one system to another. Sometimes as much as half a millennium. It wouldn't take that many voyages for a person to survive three thousand years. But that would be too incredible a coincidence, for the original

Speaker for the Dead to come here. Except that the original Speaker for the Dead was the one who had written the Hive Queen and the Hegemon; he would be interested in the first race of ramen since the buggers. I don't believe it, Miro told himself, but he had to admit the possibility that it might just be true.

"Why are they so stupid?" asked Human. "Not to know the truth when they hear it?"

"They aren't stupid," said the Speaker. "This is how humans are: We question all our beliefs, except for the ones we really believe, and those we never think to question. They never thought to question the idea that the original Speaker for the Dead died three thousand years ago, even though they know how star travel prolongs life."

"But we told them."

"No-- you told them that the hive queen told Rooter that I wrote this book."

"That's why they should have known it was true," said Human. "Rooter is wise, he's a father; he would never make a mistake."

Miro did not smile, but he wanted to. The Speaker thought he was so clever, but now here he was, where all the important questions ended, frustrated by the piggies' insistence that their totem trees could talk to them.

"Ah," said Speaker. "There's so much that we don't understand. And so much that you don't understand. We should tell each other more."

Human sat down beside Arrow, sharing the position of honor with him. Arrow gave no sign of minding. "Speaker for the Dead," said Human, "will you bring the hive queen to us?"

"I haven't decided yet," said the Speaker.

Again Miro looked at Ouanda. Was the Speaker insane, hinting that he could deliver what could not be delivered?

Then he remembered what the Speaker had said about questioning all our beliefs except the ones that we really believed. Miro had always taken for granted what everyone knew-- that all the buggers had been destroyed. But what if a hive queen had survived? What if that was how the Speaker for the Dead had been able to write his book, because he had a bugger to talk to? It was unlikely in the extreme, but it was not impossible. Miro didn't know for sure that the last bugger had been killed. He only knew that everybody believed it, and that no one in three thousand years had produced a shred of evidence to the contrary.

But even if it was true, how could Human have known it? The simplest explanation was that the piggies had incorporated the powerful story of the Hive Queen and the Hegemon into their religion, and were unable to grasp the idea that there were many Speakers for the Dead, and none of them was the author of the book; that all the buggers were dead, and no hive queen could ever come.

That was the simplest explanation, the one easiest to accept. Any other explanation would force him to admit the possibility that Rooter's totem tree somehow talked to the piggies.

"What will make you decide?" said Human. "We give gifts to the wives, to win their honor, but you are the wisest of all humans, and we have nothing that you need."

"You have many things that I need," said Speaker.

"What? Can't you make better pots than these? Truer arrows? The cape I wear is made from cabra wool-- but your clothing is finer."

"I don't need things like that," said Speaker. "What I need are true stories."

Human leaned closer, then let his body become rigid in excitement, in anticipation. "O Speaker!" he said, and his voice was powerful with the importance of his words. "Will you add our story to the Hive Queen and the Hegemon?"

"I don't know your story," said the Speaker.

"Ask us! Ask us anything!"

"How can I tell your story? I only tell the stories of the dead."

"We are dead!" shouted Human. Miro had never seen him so agitated. "We are being murdered every day. Humans are filling up all the worlds. The ships travel through the black of night from star to star to star, filling up every empty place. Here we are, on our one little world, watching the sky fill up with humans. The humans build their stupid fence to keep us out, but that is nothing. The sky is our fence!" Human leapt upward-- startlingly high, for his legs were powerful. "Look how the fence throws me back down to the ground!"

He ran at the nearest tree, bounded up the trunk, higher than Miro had ever seen him climb; he shinnied out on a limb and threw himself upward into the air. He hung there for an agonizing moment at the apex of his leap; then gravity flung him downward onto the hard ground.

Miro could hear the breath thrust out of him by the force of the blow. The Speaker immediately rushed to Human; Miro was close behind. Human wasn't breathing.

"Is he dead?" asked Ouanda behind him.

"No!" cried a piggy in the Males' Language. "You can't die! No no no!" Miro looked; to his surprise, it was Leaf-eater. "You can't die!"

Then Human reached up a feeble hand and touched the Speaker's face. He inhaled, a deep gasp. And then spoke, "You see, Speaker? I would die to climb the wall that keeps us from the stars."

In all the years that Miro had known the piggies, in all the years before, they had never once spoken of star travel, never once asked about it. Yet now Miro realized that all the questions they did ask were oriented toward discovering the secret of starflight. The xenologers had never realized that because they knew-- knew without questioning-- that the piggies were so remote from the level of culture that could build starships that it would be a thousand years before such a thing could possibly be in their reach. But their craving for knowledge about metal, about motors, about flying above the ground, it was all their way of trying to find the secret of starflight.

Human slowly got to his feet, holding the Speaker's hands. Miro realized that in all the years he had known the piggies, never once had a piggy taken him by the hand. He felt a deep regret. And the sharp pain of jealousy.

Now that Human was clearly not injured, the other piggies crowded close around the Speaker. They did not jostle, but they wanted to be near.

"Rooter says the hive queen knows how to build starships," said Arrow.

"Rooter says the hive queen will teach us everything," said Cups. "Metal, fire made from rocks, houses made from black water, everything."

Speaker raised his hands, fended off their babbling. "If you were all very thirsty, and saw that I had water, you'd all ask me for a drink. But what if I knew that the water I had was poisoned?"

"There is no poison in the ships that fly to the stars," said Human.

"There are many paths to starflight," said the Speaker. "Some are better than others. I'll give you everything I can that won't destroy you."

"The hive queen promises!" said Human.

"And so do I."

Human lunged forward, grabbed the Speaker by the hair and ears, and pulled him face to face. Miro had never seen such an act of violence; it was what he had dreaded, the decision to murder. "If we are ramen," shouted Human into the Speaker's face, "then it is ours to decide, not yours! And if we are varelse, then you might as well kill us all right now, the way you killed all the hive queen's sisters!"

Miro was stunned. It was one thing for the piggies to decide this was the Speaker who wrote the book. But how could they reach the unbelievable conclusion that he was somehow guilty of the Xenocide? Who did they think he was, the monster Ender?

And yet there sat the Speaker for the Dead, tears running down his cheeks, his eyes closed, as if Human's accusation had the force of truth.

Human turned his head to speak to Miro. "What is this water?" he whispered. Then he touched the Speaker's tears.

"It's how we show pain or grief or suffering," Miro answered.

Mandachuva suddenly cried out, a hideous cry that Miro had never heard before, like an animal dying.

"That is how we show pain," whispered Human.

"Ah! Ah!" cried Mandachuva. "I have seen that water before! In the eyes of Libo and Pipo I saw that water!"

One by one, and then all at once, all the other piggies took up the same cry. Miro was terrified, awed, excited all at once. He had no idea what it meant, but the piggies were showing emotions that they had concealed from the xenologers for forty-seven years.

"Are they grieving for Papa?" whispered Ouanda. Her eyes, too, glistened with excitement, and her hair was matted with the sweat of fear.

Miro said it the moment it occurred to him: "They didn't know until this moment that Pipo and Libo were crying when they died."

Miro had no idea what thoughts then went through Ouanda's head; he only knew that she turned away, stumbled a few steps, fell to her hands and knees, and wept bitterly.

All in all, the coming of the Speaker had certainly stirred things up.

Miro knelt beside the Speaker, whose head was now bowed, his chin pressed against his chest. "Speaker," Miro said. "Como pode ser? How can it be, that you are the first Speaker, and yet you are also Ender? Nao pode ser."

"She told them more than I ever thought she would," he whispered.

"But the Speaker for the Dead, the one who wrote this book, he's the wisest man who lived in the age of flight among the stars. While Ender was a murderer, he killed a whole people, a beautiful race of ramen that could have taught us everything--"

"Both human, though," whispered the Speaker.

Human was near them now, and he spoke a couplet from the Hegemon: "Sickness and healing are in every heart. Death and deliverance are in every hand."

"Human," said the Speaker, "tell your people not to grieve for what they did in ignorance."

"It was a terrible thing," said Human. "It was our greatest gift."

"Tell your people to be quiet, and listen to me."

Human shouted a few words, not in the Males' Language, but in the Wives' Language, the language of authority. They fell silent, then sat to hear what Speaker would say.

"I'll do everything I can," said the Speaker, "but first I have to know you, or how can I tell your story? I have to know you, or how can I know whether the drink is poisonous or not? And the hardest problem of all will still remain. The human race is free to love the buggers because they think the buggers all are dead. You are still alive, and so they're still afraid of you."

Human stood among them and gestured toward his body, as if it were a weak and feeble thing. "Of us!"

"They're afraid of the same thing you fear, when you look up and see the stars fill up with humans. They're afraid that someday they'll come to a world and find that you have got there first."

"We don't want to be there first," said Human. "We want to be there too."

"Then give me time," said the Speaker. "Teach me who you are, so that I can teach them."

"Anything," said Human. He looked around at the others. "We'll teach you anything."

Leaf-eater stood up. He spoke in the Males' Language, but Miro understood him. "Some things aren't yours to teach."

Human answered him sharply, and in Stark. "What Pipo and Libo and Ouanda and Miro taught us wasn't theirs to teach, either. But they taught us."

"Their foolishness doesn't have to be our foolishness." Leaf-eater still spoke in Males' Language.

"Nor does their wisdom necessarily apply to us," Human retorted.

Then Leaf-eater said something in Tree Language that Miro could not understand. Human made no answer, and Leaf-eater walked away.

As he left, Ouanda returned, her eyes red from crying.

Human turned back to the Speaker. "What do you want to know?" he asked. "We'll tell you, we'll show you, if we can. "

Speaker in turn looked at Miro and Ouanda. "What should I ask them? I know so little that I don't know what we need to know."

Miro looked to Ouanda.

"You have no stone or metal tools," she said. "But your house is made of wood, and so are your bows and arrows."

Human stood, waiting. The silence lengthened. "But what is your question?" Human finally said.

How could he have missed the connection? Miro thought.

"We humans," said Speaker, "use tools of stone or metal to cut down trees, when we want to shape them into houses or arrows or clubs like the ones I see some of you carrying. "

It took a moment for the Speaker's words to sink in. Then, suddenly, all the piggies were on their feet. They began running around madly, purposelessly, sometimes bumping into each other or into trees or the log houses. Most of them were silent, but now and then one of them would wail, exactly as they had cried out a few minutes ago. It was eerie, the almost silent insanity of the piggies, as if they had suddenly lost control of their bodies. All the years of careful noncommunication, refraining from telling the piggies anything, and now Speaker breached that policy and the result was this madness.

Human emerged from the chaos and threw himself to the ground in front of Speaker. "O Speaker!" he cried loudly. "Promise that you'll never let them cut my father Rooter with their stone and metal tools! If you want to murder someone, there are ancient brothers who will give themselves, or I will gladly die, but don't let them kill my father!"

"Or my father!" cried the other piggies. "Or mine!"

"We would never have planted Rooter so close to the fence," said Mandachuva, "if we had known you werewere varelse."

Speaker raised his hands again. "Has any human cut a tree in Lusitania? Never. The law here forbids it. You have nothing to fear from us."

There was a silence as the piggies became still. Finally Human picked himself up from the ground. "You've made us fear humans all the more," he said to Speaker. "I wish you had never come to our forest."

Ouanda's voice rang out above his. "How can you say that after the way you murdered my father!"

Human looked at her with astonishment, unable to answer. Miro put his arm around Ouanda's shoulders. And the Speaker for the Dead spoke into the silence. "You promised me that you'd answer all my questions. I ask you now: How do you build a house made of wood, and the bow and arrows that this one carries, and those clubs. We've told you the only way we know; you tell me another way, the way you do it."

"The brother gives himself," said Human. "I told you. We tell the ancient brother of our need, and we show him the shape, and he gives himself."

"Can we see how it's done?" said Ender.

Human looked around at the other piggies. "You want us to ask a brother to give himself, just so you can see it? We don't need a new house, not for years yet, and we have all the arrows we need--"

"Show him!"

Miro turned, as the others also turned, to see Leaf-eater re-emerging from the forest. He walked purposefully into the middle of the clearing; he did not look at them, and he spoke as if he were a herald, a town crier, not caring whether anyone was listening to him or not. He spoke in the Wives' Language, and Miro could understand only bits and pieces.

"What is he saying?" whispered the Speaker.

Miro, still kneeling beside him, translated as best he could. "He went to the wives, apparently, and they said to do whatever you asked. But it isn't that simple, he's telling them that-- I don't know these words-- something about all of them dying. Something about brothers dying, anyway. Look at them-- they aren't afraid, any of them. "

"I don't know what their fear looks like," said Speaker. "I don't know these people at all."

"I don't either," said Miro. "I've got to hand it to you-- you've caused more excitement here in half an hour than I've seen in years of coming here."

"It's a gift I was born with," said the Speaker. "I'll make you a bargain. I won't tell anybody about your Questionable Activities. And you don't tell anybody who I am."

"That's easy," said Miro. "I don't believe it anyway."

Leaf-eater's speech ended. He immediately padded to the house and went inside.

"We'll ask for the gift of an ancient brother," said Human. "The wives have said so."

So it was that Miro stood with his arm around Ouanda, and the Speaker standing at his other side, as the piggies performed a miracle far more convincing than any of the ones that had won old Gusto and Cida their title Os Venerados.

The piggies gathered in a circle around a thick old tree at the clearing's edge. Then, one by one, each piggy shimmied up the tree and began beating on it with a club. Soon they were all in the tree, singing and pounding out complex rhythms. "Tree Language," Ouanda whispered.

After only a few minutes of this the tree tilted noticeably. Immediately about half the piggies jumped down and began pushing the tree so it would fall into the open ground of the clearing. The rest began beating all the more furiously and singing all the louder.

One by one the great branches of the tree began to fall off. Immediately piggies ran out and picked them up, dragged them away from the area where the tree was meant to fall.

Human carried one to the Speaker, who took it carefully, and showed it to Miro and Ouanda. The raw end, where it had been attached to the tree, was absolutely smooth. It wasn't flat-- the surface undulated slightly along an oblique angle. But there was no raggedness to it, no leaking sap, nothing to imply the slightest violence in its separation from the tree. Miro touched his finger to it, and it was cold and smooth as marble.

Finally the tree was a single straight trunk, nude and majestic; the pale patches where branches once had grown were brightly lit by the afternoon sun. The singing reached a climax, then stopped. The tree tilted and then began a smooth and graceful fall to the earth. The ground shook and thundered when it struck, and then all was still.

Human walked to the fallen tree and began to stroke its surface, singing softly. The bark split gradually under his hands; the crack extended itself up and down the length of the tree until the bark was split completely in half. Then many piggies took hold of it and pried it from the trunk; it came away on one side and the other, in two continuous sheets of bark. The bark was carried to the side.

"Have you ever seen them use the bark?" Speaker asked Miro.

Miro shook his head. He had no words to say aloud.

Now Arrow stepped forward, singing softly. He drew his fingers up and down the trunk, as if tracing exactly the length and width of a single bow. Miro saw how lines appeared, how the naked wood creased, split, crumbled until only the bow remained, perfect and polished and smooth, lying in a long trench in the wood.

Other piggies came forward, drawing shapes on the trunk and singing. They came away with clubs, with bows and arrows, thin-bladed knives, and thousands of strands of te bow and arrows that this one carries, and those clubs. We've told you the only way we know; you tell me another way, the way you do it."

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Other piggies came forward, drawing shapes on the trunk and singing. They came away with clubs, with bows and arrows, thin-bladed knives, and thousands of strands of thin basketwood. Finally, when half the trunk was dissipated, they all stepped back and sang together. The tree shivered and split into half a dozen long poles. The tree was entirely used up.

Human walked slowly forward and knelt by the poles, his hands gently resting on the nearest one. He tilted back his head and began to sing, a wordless melody that was the saddest sound that Miro had ever heard. The song went on and on, Human's voice alone; only gradually did Miro realize that the other piggies were looking at him, waiting for something.

Finally Mandachuva came to him and spoke softly. "Please," he said. "It's only right that you should sing for the brother."

"I don't know how," said Miro, feeling helpless and afraid.

"He gave his life," said Mandachuva, "to answer your question."

To answer my question and then raise a thousand more, Miro said silently. But he walked forward, knelt beside Human, curled his fingers around the same cold smooth pole that Human held, tilted back his head, and let his voice come out. At first weak and hesitant, unsure what melody to sing; but soon he understood the reason for the tuneless song, felt the death of the tree under his hands, and his voice became loud and strong, making agonizing disharmonies with Human's voice that mourned the death of the tree and thanked it for its sacrifice and promised to use its death for the good of the tribe, for the good of the brothers and the wives and the children, so that all would live and thrive and prosper. That was the meaning of the song, and the meaning of the death of the tree, and when the song was finally over Miro bent until his forehead touched the

wood and he said the words of extreme unction, the same words he had whispered over Libo's corpse on the hillside five years ago.

Chapter 15 -- Speaking

HUMAN: Why don't any of the other humans ever come see us?

MIRO: We're the only ones allowed to come through the gate.

HUMAN: Why don't they just climb over the fence?

MIRO: Haven't any of you ever touched the fence? (Human does not answer.) It's very painful to touch the fence. To pass over the fence would be like every part of your body hurting as bad as possible, all at once.

HUMAN: That's stupid. Isn't there grass on both sides?

-- Ouanda Quenhatta Figueira Mucumbi, Dialogue Transcripts, 103:0:1970:1:1:5

The sun was only an hour from the horizon when Mayor Bosquinha climbed the stairs to Bishop Peregrino's private office in the Cathedral. Dom and Dona Cristaes were already there, looking grave. Bishop Peregrino, however, looked pleased with himself. He always enjoyed it when all the political and religious leadership of Milagre was gathered under his roof. Never mind that Bosquinha was the one who called the meeting, and then she offered to have it at the Cathedral because she was the one with the skimmer. Peregrino liked the feeling that he was somehow the master of Lusitania Colony. Well, by the end of this meeting it would be plain to them all that no one in this room was the master of anything. Bosquinha greeted them all. She did not sit down in the offered chair, however. Instead she sat before the Bishop's own terminal, logged in, and ran the program she had prepared. In the air above the terminal there appeared several layers of tiny cubes. The highest layer had only a few cubes; most of the layers had many, many more. More than half the layers, starting with the highest, were colored red; the rest were blue.

"Very pretty," said Bishop Peregrino.

Bosquinha looked over at Dom Cristao. "Do you recognize the model?"

He shook his head. "But I think I know what this meeting is about."

Dona Crist leaned forward on her chair. "Is there any safe place where we can hide the things we want to keep?"

Bishop Peregrino's expression of detached amusement vanished from his face. "I don't know what this meeting is about."

Bosquinha turned around on her stool to face him. "I was very young when I was appointed to be Governor of the new Lusitania Colony. It was a great honor to be chosen, a great trust. I had studied government of communities and social systems since my childhood, and I had done well in my short career in Oporto. What the committee apparently overlooked was the fact that I was already suspicious, deceptive, and chauvinistic."

"These are virtues of yours that we have all come to admire," said Bishop Peregrino.

Bosquinha smiled. "My chauvinism meant that as soon as Lusitania Colony was mine, I became more loyal to the interests of Lusitania than to the interests of the Hundred Worlds or Starways Congress. My deceptiveness led me to pretend to the committee that on the contrary, I had the best interests of Congress at heart at all times. And my suspicion led me to believe that Congress was not likely to give Lusitania anything remotely like independent and equal status among the Hundred Worlds."

"Of course not," said Bishop Peregrino. "We are a colony."

"We are not a colony," said Bosquinha. "We are an experiment. I examined our charter and license and all the Congressional Orders pertaining to us, and I discovered that the normal privacy laws did not apply to us. I discovered that the committee had the power of unlimited access to all the memory files of every person and institution on Lusitania."

The Bishop began to look angry. "Do you mean that the committee has the right to look at the confidential files of the Church?"

"Ah," said Bosquinha. "A fellow chauvinist."

"The Church has some rights under the Starways Code."

"Don't be angry with me."

"You never told me."

"If I had told you, you would have protested, and they would have pretended to back down, and then I couldn't have done what I did."

"Which is?"

"This program. It monitors all ansible-initiated accesses to any files in Lusitania Colony."

Dom Cristao chuckled. "You're not supposed to do that."

"I know. As I said, I have many secret vices. But my program never found any major intrusion-- oh, a few files each time the piggies killed one of our xenologers, that was to be expected-- but nothing major. Until four days ago."

"When the Speaker for the Dead arrived," said Bishop Peregrino.

Bosquinha was amused that the Bishop obviously regarded the Speaker's arrival as such a landmark date that he instantly made such a connection. "Three days ago," said Bosquinha, "a nondestructive scan was initiated by ansible. It followed an interesting pattern." She turned to the terminal and changed the display. Now it showed accesses primarily in high-level areas, and limited to only one region of the display. "It accessed everything to do with the xenologers and xenobiologists of Milagre. It ignored all security routines as if they didn't exist. Everything they discovered, and everything to do with their personal lives. And yes, Bishop Peregrino, I believed at the time and I believe today that this had to do with the Speaker."

"Surely he has no authority with Starways Congress," said the Bishop.

Dom Cristao nodded wisely. "San Angelo once wrote-- in his private journals, which no one but the Children of the Mind ever read--"

The Bishop turned on him with glee. "So the Children of the Mind do have secret writings of San Angelo!"

"Not secret," said Dona Crist . "Merely boring. Anyone can read the journals, but we're the only ones who bother."

"What he wrote," said Dom Crist o, "was that Speaker Andrew is older than we know. Older than Starways Congress, and in his own way perhaps more powerful."

Bishop Peregrino snorted. "He's a boy. Can't be forty years old yet."

"Your stupid rivalries are wasting time," said Bosquinha sharply. "I called this meeting because of an emergency. As a courtesy to you, because I have already acted for the benefit of the government of Lusitania."

The others fell silent.

Bosquinha returned the terminal to the original display. "This morning my program alerted me for a second time. Another systematic ansible access, only this time it was not the selective nondestructive access of three days ago. This time it is reading everything at data-transfer speed, which implies that all our files are being copied into offworld computers. Then the directories are rewritten so that a single ansible-initiated command will completely destroy every single file in our computer memories."

Bosquinha could see that Bishop Peregrino was surprised-- and the Children of the Mind were not.

"Why?" said Bishop Peregrino. "To destroy all our files-- this is what you do to a nation or a world that is-- in rebellion, that you wish to destroy, that you--"

"I see," said Bosquinha to the Children of the Mind, "that you also were chauvinistic and suspicious."

"Much more narrowly than you, I'm afraid," said Dom Crist o. "But we also detected the intrusions. We of course copied all our records-- at great expense-- to the monasteries of the Children of the Mind on other worlds, and they will try to restore our files after they are stripped. However, if we are being treated as a rebellious colony, I doubt that such a restoration will be permitted. So we are also making paper copies of the most vital information. There is no hope of printing everything, but we think we may be able to print out enough to get by. So that our work isn't utterly destroyed."

"You knew this?" said the Bishop. "And you didn't tell me?"

"Forgive me, Bishop Peregrino, but it did not occur to us that you would not have detected this yourselves."

"And you also don't believe we do any work that is important enough to be worth printing out to save!"

"Enough!" said Mayor Bosquinha. "Printouts can't save more than a tiny percentage-- there aren't enough printers in Lusitania to make a dent in the problem. We couldn't even maintain basic services. I don't think we have more than an hour left before the copying is complete and they are able to wipe out our memory. But even if we began this morning, when the intrusion started, we could not have printed out more than a hundredth of one percent of the files that we access every day. Our fragility, our vulnerability is complete."

"So we're helpless," said the Bishop.

"No. But I wanted to make clear to you the extremity of our situation, so that you would accept the only alternative. It will be very distasteful to you."

"I have no doubt of that," said Bishop Peregrino.

"An hour ago, as I was wrestling with this problem, trying to see if there was any class of files that might be immune to this treatment, I discovered that in fact there was one person whose files were being completely overlooked. At first I thought it was because he was a framling, but the reason is much more subtle than that. The Speaker for the Dead has no files in Lusitanian memory."

"None? Impossible," said Dona Crist .

"All his files are maintained by ansible. Offworld. All his records, all his finances, everything. Every message sent to him. Do you understand?"

"And yet he still has access to them--" said Dom Crist o.

"He is invisible to Starways Congress. If they place an embargo on all data transfers to and from Lusitania, his files will still be accessible because the computers do not see his file accesses as data transfers. They are original storage-- yet they are not in Lusitanian memory.

"Are you suggesting," said Bishop Peregrino, "that we transfer our most confidential and important files as messages to that-- that unspeakable infidel?"

"I am telling you that I have already done exactly that. The transfer of the most vital and sensitive government files is almost complete. It was a high priority transfer, at local speeds, so it runs much faster than the Congressional copying. I am offering you a chance to make a similar transfer, using my highest priority so that it takes precedence over all other local computer usage. If you don't want to do it, fine-- I'll use my priority to transfer the second tier of government files."

"But he could look in our files," said the Bishop.

"Yes, he could."

Dom Cristao shook his head. "He won't if we ask him not to."

"You are naive as a child," said Bishop Peregrino. "There would be nothing to compel him even to give the data back to us."

Bosquinha nodded. "That's true. He'll have everything that's vital to us, and he can keep it or return it as he wishes. But I believe, as Dom Crist o does, that he's a good man who'll help us in our time of need."

Dona Crist stood. "Excuse me," she said. "I'd like to begin crucial transfers immediately."

Bosquinha turned to the Bishop's terminal and logged into her own high priority mode. "Just enter the classes of files that you want to send into Speaker Andrew's message queue. I assume you already have them prioritized, since you were printing them out."

"How long do we have?" asked Dom Crist o. Dona Crist was already typing furiously.

"The time is here, at the top." Bosquinha put her hand into the holographic display and touched the countdown numbers with her finger.

"Don't bother transferring anything that we've already printed," said Dom Crist o. "We can always type that back in. There's precious little of it, anyway."

Bosquinha turned to the Bishop. "I knew this would be difficult."

The Bishop gave one derisive laugh. "Difficult."

"I hope you'll consider carefully before rejecting this--"

"Rejecting it!" said the Bishop. "Do you think I'm a fool? I may detest the pseudo-religion of these blasphemous Speakers for the Dead, but if this is the only way God has opened for us to preserve the vital records of the Church, then I'd be a poor servant of the Lord if I let pride stop me from using it. Our files aren't prioritized yet, and it will take a few minutes, but I trust that the Children of the Mind will leave us enough time for our data transfers."

"How much time will you need, do you think?" asked Dom Crist o.

"Not much. Ten minutes at the most, I'd think."

Bosquinha was surprised, and pleasantly so. She had been afraid the Bishop would insist on copying all his files before allowing the Children of the Mind to go ahead-- just one more attempt to assert the precedence of the bishopric over the monastery.

"Thank you," Dom Crist o said, kissing the hand that Peregrino extended to him.

The Bishop looked at Bosquinha coldly. "You don't need to look surprised, Mayor Bosquinha. The Children of the Mind work with the knowledge of the world, so they depend far more on the world's machines. Mother Church works with things of the Spirit, so our use of public memory is merely clerical. As for the Bible-- we are so old-fashioned and set in our ways that we still keep dozens of leatherbound paper copies in the Cathedral. Starways Congress can't steal from us our copies of the word of God." He smiled. Maliciously, of course. Bosquinha smiled back quite cheerfully.

"A small matter," said Dom Crist o. "After our files are destroyed, and we copy them back into memory from the Speaker's files, what is to stop Congress from doing it again? And again, and again?"

"That is the difficult decision," said Bosquinha. "What we do depends on what Congress is trying to accomplish. Maybe they won't actually destroy our files at all. Maybe they'll immediately restore our most vital files after this demonstration of their power. Since I have no idea why they're disciplining us, how can I guess how far this will go? If they leave us any way to remain loyal, then of course we must also remain vulnerable to further discipline."

"But if, for some reason, they are determined to treat us like rebels?"

"Well, if bad came to worst, we could copy everything back into local memory and then-- cut off the ansible."

"God help us," said Dona Crist . "We would be utterly alone."

Obviously the xenologers had done something grossly wrong. Since Bosquinha had not known of any violations, it had to be something so big that its evidence showed up on the satellites, the only monitoring devices that reported directly to the committee without passing through Bosquinha's

hands. Bosquinha had tried to think of what Miro and Ouanda might have done-- start a forest fire? Cut down trees? Led a war between the piggy tribes? Anything she thought of sounded absurd.

She tried to call them in to question them, but they were gone, of course. Through the gate, out into the forest to continue, no doubt, the same activities that had brought the possibility of destruction to Lusitania Colony. Bosquinha kept reminding herself that they were young, that it might all be some ridiculous juvenile mistake.

But they weren't that young, and they were two of the brightest minds in a colony that contained many very intelligent people. It was a very good thing that governments under the Starways Code were forbidden to own any instruments of punishment that might be used for torture. For the first time in her life, Bosquinha felt such fury that she might use such instruments, if she had them. I don't know what you thought you were doing, Miro and Ouanda, and I don't know what you did; but whatever your purpose might have been, this whole community will pay the price for it. And somehow, if there were any justice, I would make you pay it back.

Many people had said they wouldn't come to any Speaking-- they were good Catholics, weren't they? Hadn't the Bishop told them that the Speaker spoke with Satan's voice?

But other things were whispered, too, once the Speaker came. Rumors, mostly, but Milagre was a little place, where rumors were the sauce of a dry life; and rumors have no value unless they are believed. So word spread that Marcdo's little girl Quara, who had been silent since he died, was now so talkative that it got her in trouble in school. And Olhado, that ill-mannered boy with the repulsive metal eyes, it was said that he suddenly seemed cheerful and excited. Perhaps manic. Perhaps possessed. Rumors began to imply that somehow the Speaker had a healing touch, that he had the evil eye, that his blessings made you whole, his curses could kill you, his words could charm you into obedience. Not everybody heard this, of course, and not everybody who heard it believed it. But in the four days between the Speaker's arrival and the evening of his Speaking the death of Marcos Maria Ribeira, the community of Milagre decided, without any formal announcement, that they would come to the Speaking and hear what the Speaker had to say, whether the Bishop said to stay away or not.

It was the Bishop's own fault. From his vantage point, calling the Speaker satanic put him at the farthest extreme from himself and all good Catholics: The Speaker is the opposite of us. But to those who were not theologically sophisticated, while Satan was frightening and powerful, so was God. They understood well enough the continuum of good and evil that the Bishop referred to, but they were far more interested in the continuum of strong and weak-- that was the one they lived with day by day. And on that continuum, they were weak, and God and Satan and the Bishop all were strong. The Bishop had elevated the Speaker to stand with him as a man of power. The people were thus prepared to believe the whispered hints of miracles.

So even though the announcement came only an hour before the Speaking, the praqa was full, and people gathered in the buildings and houses that fronted the praqa, and crowded the grassy alleyways and streets. Mayor Bosquinha had-- as the law required-- provided the Speaker with the

simple microphone that she used for the rare public meetings. People oriented themselves toward the platform where he would stand; then they looked around to see who was there. Everyone was there. Of course Marc o's family. Of course the Mayor. But also Dom Crist o and Dona Crist , and many a robed priest from the Cathedral. Dr. Navio. Pipo's widow, old Conceicao, the Archivist. Libo's widow, Bruxinha, and her children. It was rumored that the Speaker also meant to Speak Pipo's and Libo's deaths someday, too.

And finally, just as the Speaker stepped up onto the platform, the rumor swept the praqa: Bishop Peregrino was here. Not in his vestments, but in the simple robes of a priest. Here himself, to hear the Speaker's blasphemy! Many a citizen of Milagre felt a delicious thrill of anticipation. Would the Bishop rise up and miraculously strike down Satan? Would there be a battle here such as had not been seen outside the vision of the Apocalypse of St. John?

Then the Speaker stood before the microphone and waited for them to be still. He was fairly tall, youngish still, but his white skin made him look sickly compared to the thousand shades of brown of the Lusos. Ghostly. They fell silent, and he began to Speak.

"He was known by three names. The official records have the first one: Marcos Maria Ribeira. And his official data. Born 1929. Died 1970. Worked in the steel foundry. Perfect safety record. Never arrested. A wife, six children. A model citizen, because he never did anything bad enough to go on the public record. "

Many who were listening felt a vague disquiet. They had expected oration. Instead the Speaker's voice was nothing remarkable. And his words had none of the formality of religious speech. Plain, simple, almost conversational. Only a few of them noticed that its very simplicity made his voice, his speech utterly believable. He wasn't telling the Truth, with trumpets; he was telling the truth, the story that you wouldn't think to doubt because it's taken for granted. Bishop Peregrino was one who noticed, and it made him uneasy. This Speaker would be a formidable enemy, one who could not be blasted down with fire from before the altar.

"The second name he had was Marc o. Big Marcos. Because he was a giant of a man. Reached his adult size early in his life. How old was he when he reached two meters? Eleven? Definitely by the time he was twelve. His size and strength made him valuable in the foundry, where the lots of steel are so small that much of the work is controlled directly by hand, and strength matters. People's lives depended on Marc o's strength."

In the praqa the men from the foundry nodded. They had all bragged to each other that they'd never talk to the framling atheist. Obviously one of them had, but now it felt good that the Speaker got it right, that he understood what they remembered of Marc o. Every one of them wished that he had been the one to tell about Marc o to the Speaker. They did not guess that the Speaker had not even tried to talk to them. After all these years, there were many things that Andrew Wiggin knew without asking.

"His third name was C o. Dog."

Ah, yes, thought the Lusos. This is what we've heard about Speakers for the Dead. They have no respect for the dead, no sense of decorum.

"That was the name you used for him when you heard that his wife, Novinha, had another black eye, walked with a limp, had stitches in her lip. He was an animal to do that to her."

How dare he say that? The man's dead! But under their anger the Lusos were uncomfortable for an entirely different reason. Almost all of them remembered saying or hearing exactly those words. The Speaker's indiscretion was in repeating in public the words that they had used about Marc o when he was alive.

"Not that any of you liked Novinha. Not that cold woman who never gave any of you good morning. But she was smaller than he was, and she was the mother of his children, and when he beat her he deserved the name of C o."

They were embarrassed; they muttered to each other. Those sitting in the grass near Novinha glanced at her and glanced away, eager to see how she was reacting, painfully aware of the fact that the Speaker was right, that they didn't like her, that they at once feared and pitied her.

"Tell me, is this the man you knew? Spent more hours in the bars than anybody, and yet never made any friends there, never the camaraderie of alcohol for him. You couldn't even tell how much he had been drinking. He was surly and short-tempered before he had a drink, and surly and short-tempered just before he passed out-- nobody could tell the difference. You never heard of him having a friend, and none of you was ever glad to see him come into a room. That's the man you knew, most of you. C o. Hardly a man at all."

Yes, they thought. That was the man. Now the initial shock of his indecorum had faded. They were accustomed to the fact that the Speaker meant to soften nothing in his story. Yet they were still uncomfortable. For there was a note of irony, not in his voice, but inherent in his words. "Hardly a man at all, " he had said, but of course he was a man, and they were vaguely aware that while the Speaker understood what they thought of Marc o, he didn't necessarily agree.

"A few others, the men from the foundry in Bairro das Fabricadoras, knew him as a strong arm they could trust. They knew he never said he could do more than he could do, and always did what he said he would do. You could count on him. So within the walls of the foundry he had their respect. But when you walked out the door you treated him like everybody else-- ignored him, thought little of him."

The irony was pronounced now. Though the Speaker gave no hint in his voice-- still the simple, plain speech he began with-- the men who worked with him felt it wordlessly inside themselves: We should not have ignored him as we did. If he had worth inside the foundry, then perhaps we should have valued him outside, too.

"Some of you also know something else that you never talk about much. You know that you gave him the name C o long before he earned it. You were ten, eleven, twelve years old. Little boys. He grew so tall. It made you ashamed to be near him. And afraid, because he made you feel helpless."

Dom Crist o murmured to his wife, "They came for gossip, and he gives them responsibility."

"So you handled him the way human beings always handle things that are bigger than they are," said the Speaker. "You banded together. Like hunters trying to bring down a mastodon. Like bullfighters trying to weaken a giant bull to prepare it for the kill. Pokes, taunts, teases. Keep him turning around. He can't guess where the next blow is coming from. Prick him with barbs that stay under his skin. Weaken him with pain. Madden him. Because big as he is, you can make him do things. You can make him yell. You can make him run. You can make him cry. See? He's weaker than you after all."

Ela was angry. She had meant him to accuse Marc o, not excuse him. Just because he had a tough childhood didn't give him the right to knock Mother down whenever he felt like it.

"There's no blame in this. You were children then, and children are cruel without knowing better. You wouldn't do that now. But now that I've reminded you, you can easily see an answer. You called him a dog, and so he became one. For the rest of his life. Hurting helpless people. Beating his wife. Speaking so cruelly and abusively to his son Miro that he drove the boy out of his house. He was acting out the way you treated him, becoming what you told him that he was."

You're a fool, thought Bishop Peregrino. If people only react to the way that others treat them, then nobody is responsible for anything. If your sins are not your own to choose, then how can you repent?

As if he heard the Bishop's silent argument, the Speaker raised a hand and swept away his own words. "But the easy answer isn't true. Your torments didn't make him violent-- they made him sullen. And when you grew out of tormenting him, he grew out of hating you. He wasn't one to bear a grudge. His anger cooled and turned into suspicion. He knew you despised him; he learned to live without you. In peace."

The Speaker paused a moment, and then gave voice to the question they silently were asking. "So how did he become the cruel man you knew him to be? Think a moment. Who was it who tasted his cruelty? His wife. His children. Some people beat their wife and children because they lust for power, but are too weak or stupid to win power in the world. A helpless wife and children, bound to such a man by need and custom and, bitterly enough, love, are the only victims he is strong enough to rule."

Yes, thought Ela, stealing a glance at her mother. This is what I wanted. This is why I asked him to Speak Father's death.

"There are men like that," said the Speaker, "but Marcos Ribeira wasn't one of them. Think a moment. Did you ever hear of him striking any of his children? Ever? You who worked with him-- did he ever try to force his will on you? Seem resentful when things didn't go his way? Marc o was not a weak and evil man. He was a strong man. He didn't want power. He wanted love. Not control. Loyalty."

Bishop Peregrino smiled grimly, the way a duelist might salute a worthy opponent. You walk a twisted path, Speaker, circling around the truth, feinting at it. And when you strike, your aim will be deadly. These people came for entertainment, but they're your targets; you will pierce them to the heart.

"Some of you remember an incident," said the Speaker. "Marcos was maybe thirteen, and so were you. Taunting him on the grassy hillside behind the school. You attacked more viciously than usual. You threatened him with stones, whipped him with capim blades. You bloodied him a little, but he bore it. Tried to evade you. Asked you to stop. Then one of you struck him hard in the belly, and it hurt him more than you ever imagined, because even then he was already sick with the disease that finally killed him. He hadn't yet become accustomed to his fragility and pain. It felt like death to him. He was cornered. You were killing him. So he struck at you."

How did he know? thought half a dozen men. It was so long ago. Who told him how it was? It was out of hand, that's all. We never meant anything, but when his arm swung out, his huge fist, like the kick of a cabra-- he was going to hurt me--

"It could have been any one of you that fell to the ground. You knew then that he was even stronger than you feared. What terrified you most, though, was that you knew exactly the revenge that you deserved. So you called for help. And when the teachers came, what did they see? One little boy on the ground, crying, bleeding. One large man-sized child with a few scratches here and there, saying I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. And a half-dozen others saying, He just hit him. Started killing him for no reason. We tried to stop him but C o is so big. He's always picking on the little kids."

Little Grego was caught up in the story. "Mentirosos!" he shouted. They were lying! Several people nearby chuckled. Quara shushed him.

"So many witnesses," said the Speaker. "The teachers had no choice but to believe the accusation. Until one girl stepped forward and coldly informed them that she had seen it all. Marcos was acting to protect himself from a completely unwarranted, vicious, painful attack by a pack of boys who were acting far more like c es, like dogs, than Marcos Ribeira ever did. Her story was instantly accepted as the truth. After all, she was the daughter of Os Venerados."

Grego looked at his mother with glowing eyes, then jumped up and announced to the people around him, "A mame o libertou!" Mama saved him! People laughed, turned around and looked at Novinha. But she held her face expressionless, refusing to acknowledge their momentary affection for her child. They looked away again, offended.

"Novinha," said the Speaker. "Her cold manner and bright mind made her just as much an outcast among you as Marc o. None of you could think of a time when she had ever made a friendly gesture toward any of you. And here she was, saving Marc o. Well, you knew the truth. She wasn't saving Marc o-- she was preventing you from getting away with something."

They nodded and smiled knowingly, those people whose overtures of friendship she had just rebuffed. That's Dona Novinha, the Biologista, too good for any of the rest of us.

"Marcos didn't see it that way. He had been called an animal so often that he almost believed it. Novinha showed him compassion, like a human being. A pretty girl, a brilliant child, the daughter of the holy Venerados, always aloof as a goddess, she had reached down and blessed him and granted his prayer. He worshipped her. Six years later he married her. Isn't that a lovely story?"

Ela looked at Miro, who raised an eyebrow at her. "Almost makes you like the old bastard, doesn't it?" said Miro dryly.

Suddenly, after a long pause, the Speaker's voice erupted, louder than ever before. It startled them, awoke them. "Why did he come to hate her, to beat her, to despise their children? And why did she endure it, this strong-willed, brilliant woman? She could have stopped the marriage at any moment. The Church may not allow divorce, but there's always desquite, and she wouldn't be the first person in Milagre to quit her husband. She could have taken her suffering children and left him. But she stayed. The Mayor and the Bishop both suggested that she leave him. She told them they could go to hell."

Many of the Lusos laughed; they could imagine tight-lipped Novinha snapping at the Bishop himself, facing down Bosquinha. They might not like Novinha much, but she was just about the only person in Milagre who could get away with thumbing her nose at authority.

The Bishop remembered the scene in his chambers more than a decade ago. She had not used exactly the words the Speaker quoted, but the effect was much the same. Yet he had been alone. He had told no one. Who was this Speaker, and how did he know so much about things he could not possibly have known?

When the laughter died, the Speaker went on. "There was a tie that bound them together in a marriage they hated. That tie was Marc o's disease."

His voice was softer now. The Lusos strained to hear.

"It shaped his life from the moment he was conceived. The genes his parents gave him combined in such a way that from the moment puberty began, the cells of his glands began a steady, relentless transformation into fatty tissues. Dr. Navio can tell you how it progresses better than I can. Marc o knew from childhood that he had this condition; his parents knew it before they died in the Descolada; Gusto and Cida knew it from their genetic examinations of all the humans of Lusitania. They were all dead. Only one other person knew it, the one who had inherited the xenobiological files. Novinha."

Dr. Navio was puzzled. If she knew this before they married, she surely knew that most people who had his condition were sterile. Why would she have married him when for all she knew he had no chance of fathering children? Then he realized what he should have known before, that Marc o was not a rare exception to the pattern of the disease. There were no exceptions. Navio's face reddened. What the Speaker was about to tell them was unspeakable.

"Novinha knew that Marc o was dying," said the Speaker. "She also knew before she married him that he was absolutely and completely sterile."

It took a moment for the meaning of this to sink in. Ela felt as if her organs were melting inside her body. She saw without turning her head that Miro had gone rigid, that his cheeks had paled.

Speaker went on despite the rising whispers from the audience. "I saw the genetic scans. Marcos Maria Ribeira never fathered a child. His wife had children, but they were not his, and he knew it, and she knew he knew it. It was part of the bargain that they made when they got married."

The murmurs turned to muttering, the grumbles to complaints, and as the noise reached a climax, Quim leaped to his feet and shouted, screamed at the Speaker, "My mother is not an adulteress! I'll kill you for calling her a whore!"

His last word hung in the silence. The Speaker did not answer. He only waited, not letting his gaze drop from Quim's burning face. Until finally Quim realized that it was he, not the Speaker, whose voice had said the word that kept ringing in his ears. He faltered. He looked at his mother sitting beside him on the ground, but not rigidly now, slumped a little now, looking at her hands as they trembled in her lap. "Tell them, Mother," Quim said. His voice sounded more pleading than he had intended.

She didn't answer. Didn't say a word, didn't look at him. If he didn't know better, he would think her trembling hands were a confession, that she was ashamed, as if what the Speaker said was the truth that God himself would tell if Quim were to ask him. He remembered Father Mateu explaining the tortures of hell: God spits on adulterers, they mock the power of creation that he shared with them, they haven't enough goodness in them to be anything better than amoebas. Quim tasted bile in his mouth. What the Speaker said was true.

"Mamae," he said loudly, mockingly. "Quem fode p'ra fazer-me?"

People gasped. Olhado jumped to his feet at once, his hands doubled in fists. Only then did Novinha react, reaching out a hand as if to restrain Olhado from hitting his brother. Quim hardly noticed that Olhado had leapt to Mother's defense; all he could think of was the fact that Miro had not. Miro also knew that it was true.

Quim breathed deeply, then turned around, looking lost for a moment; then he threaded his way through the crowd. No one spoke to him, though everyone watched him go. If Novinha had denied the charge, they would have believed her, would have mobbed the Speaker for accusing Os Venerados' daughter of such a sin. But she had not denied it. She had listened to her own son accuse her obscenely, and she said nothing. It was true. And now they listened in fascination. Few of them had any real concern. They just wanted to learn who had fathered Novinha's children.

The Speaker quietly resumed his tale. "After her parents died and before her children were born, Novinha loved only two people. Pipo was her second father. Novinha anchored her life in him; for a few short years she had a taste of what it meant to have a family. Then he died, and Novinha believed that she had killed him."

People sitting near Novinha's family saw Quara kneel in front of Ela and ask her, "Why is Quim so angry?"

Ela answered softly. "Because Papai was not really our father."

"Oh," said Quara. "Is the Speaker our father now?" She sounded hopeful. Ela shushed her.

"The night Pipo died," said the Speaker, "Novinha showed him something that she had discovered, something to do with the Descolada and the way it works with the plants and animals of Lusitania. Pipo saw more in her work than she did herself. He rushed to the forest where the piggies waited. Perhaps he told them what he had discovered. Perhaps they only guessed. But Novinha blamed herself for showing him a secret that the piggies would kill to keep.

"It was too late to undo what she had done. But she could keep it from happening again. So she sealed up all the files that had anything to do with the Descolada and what she had shown to Pipo that night. She knew who would want to see the files. It was Libo, the new Zenador. If Pipo had been her father, Libo had been her brother, and more than a brother. Hard as it was to bear Pipo's death, Libo's would be worse.

He asked for the files. He demanded to see them. She told him she would never let him see them.

"They both knew exactly what that meant. If he ever married her, he could strip away the protection on those files. They loved each other desperately, they needed each other more than ever, but Novinha could never marry him. He would never promise not to read the files, and even if he made such a promise, he couldn't keep it. He would surely see what his father saw. He would die.

"It was one thing to refuse to marry him. It was another thing to live without him. So she didn't live without him. She made her bargain with Marc o. She would marry him under the law, but her real husband and the father of all her children would be, was, Libo."

Bruxinha, Libo's widow, rose shakily to her feet, tears streaming down her face, and wailed, "Mentira, mentira." Lies, lies. But her weeping was not anger, it was grief. She was mourning the loss of her husband all over again. Three of her daughters helped her leave the praqa.

Softly the Speaker continued while she left. "Libo knew that he was hurting his wife Bruxinha and their four daughters. He hated himself for what he had done. He tried to stay away. For months, sometimes years, he succeeded. Novinha also tried. She refused to see him, even to speak to him. She forbade her children to mention him. Then Libo would think that he was strong enough to see her without falling back into the old way. Novinha would be so lonely with her husband who could never measure up to Libo. They never pretended there was anything good about what they were doing. They just couldn't live for long without it."

Bruxinha heard this as she was led away. It was little comfort to her now, of course, but as Bishop Peregrino watched her go, he recognized that the Speaker was giving her a gift. She was the most

innocent victim of his cruel truth, but he didn't leave her with nothing but ashes. He was giving her a way to live with the knowledge of what her husband did. It was not your fault, he was telling her. Nothing you did could have prevented it. Your husband was the one who failed, not you. Blessed Virgin, prayed the Bishop silently, let Bruxinha hear what he says and believe it.

Libo's widow was not the only one who cried. Many hundreds of the eyes that watched her go were also filled with tears. To discover Novinha was an adulteress was shocking but delicious: the steel-hearted woman had a flaw that made her no better than anyone else. But there was no pleasure in finding the same flaw in Libo. Everyone had loved him. His generosity, his kindness, his wisdom that they so admired, they didn't want to know that it was all a mask.

So they were surprised when the Speaker reminded them that it was not Libo whose death he Spoke today. "Why did Marcos Ribeira consent to this? Novinha thought it was because he wanted a wife and the illusion that he had children, to take away his shame in the community. It was partly that. Most of all, though, he married her because he loved her. He never really hoped that she would love him the way he loved her, because he worshipped her, she was a goddess, and he knew that he was diseased, filthy, an animal to be despised. He knew she could not worship him, or even love him. He hoped that she might someday feel some affection. That she might feel some-- loyalty."

The Speaker bowed his head a moment. The Lusos heard the words that he did not have to say: She never did.

"Each child that came," said the Speaker, "was another proof to Marcos that he had failed. That the goddess still found him unworthy. Why? He was loyal. He had never hinted to any of his children that they were not his own. He never broke his promise to Novinha. Didn't he deserve something from her? At times it was more than he could bear. He refused to accept her judgment. She was no goddess. Her children were all bastards. This is what he told himself when he lashed out at her, when he shouted at Miro."

Miro heard his own name, but didn't recognize it as anything to do with him. His connection with reality was more fragile than he ever had supposed, and today had given him too many shocks. The impossible magic with the piggies and the trees. Mother and Libo, lovers. Ouanda suddenly torn from being as close to him as his own body, his own self, she was now set back at one remove, like Ela, like Quara, another sister. His eyes did not focus on the grass; the Speaker's voice was pure sound, he didn't hear meanings in the words, only the terrible sound. Miro had called for that voice, had wanted it to Speak Libo's death. How could he have known that instead of a benevolent priest of a humanist religion he would get the original Speaker himself, with his penetrating mind and far too perfect understanding? He could not have known that beneath that empathic mask would be hiding Ender the destroyer, the mythic Lucifer of mankind's greatest crime, determined to live up to his name, making a mockery of the life work of Pipo, Libo, Ouanda, and Miro himself by seeing in a single hour with the piggies what all the others had failed in almost fifty years to see, and then riving Ouanda from him with a single, merciless stroke from the blade of truth; that was the voice that Miro heard, the only certainty left to him, that relentless terrible voice. Miro clung to the sound of it, trying to hate it, yet failing, because he knew, could not deceive himself, he knew that Ender was a destroyer, but what he destroyed was illusion, and the illusion had to die. The truth about the

piggies, the truth about ourselves. Somehow this ancient man is able to see the truth and it doesn't blind his eyes or drive him mad. I must listen to this voice and let its power come to me so I, too, can stare at the light and not die.

"Novinha knew what she was. An adulteress, a hypocrite. She knew she was hurting Marc o, Libo, her children, Bruxinha. She knew she had killed Pipo. So she endured, even invited Marc o's punishment. It was her penance. It was never penance enough. No matter how much Marc o might hate her, she hated herself much more."

The Bishop nodded slowly. The Speaker had done a monstrous thing, to lay these secrets before the whole community. They should have been spoken in the confessional. Yet Peregrino had felt the power of it, the way the whole community was forced to discover these people that they thought they knew, and then discover them again, and then again; and each revision of the story forced them all to reconceive themselves as well, for they had been part of this story, too, had been touched by all the people a hundred, a thousand times, never understanding until now who it was they touched. It was a painful, fearful thing to go through, but in the end it had a curiously calming effect. The Bishop leaned to his secretary and whispered, "At least the gossips will get nothing from this-- there aren't any secrets left to tell."

"All the people in this story suffered pain," the Speaker said. "All of them sacrificed for the people they loved. All of them caused terrible pain to the people who loved them. And you-- listening to me here today, you also caused pain. But remember this: Marc o's life was tragic and cruel, but he could have ended his bargain with Novinha at any time. He chose to stay. He must have found some joy in it. And Novinha: She broke the laws of God that bind this community together. She has also borne her punishment. The Church asks for no penance as terrible as the one she imposed on herself. And if you're inclined to think she might deserve some petty cruelty at your hands, keep this in mind: She suffered everything, did all this for one purpose: to keep the piggies from killing Libo."

The words left ashes in their hearts.

Olhado stood and walked to his mother, knelt by her, put an arm around her shoulder. Ela sat beside her, but she was folded to the ground, weeping. Quara came and stood in front of her mother, staring at her with awe. And Grego buried his face in Novinha's lap and wept. Those who were near enough could hear him crying, "Todo papai , morto. Nao tenho nem papai." All my papas are dead. I don't have any papa.

Ouanda stood in the mouth of the alley where she had gone with her mother just before the Speaking ended. She looked for Miro, but he was already gone.

Ender stood behind the platform, looking at Novinha's family, wishing he could do something to ease their pain. There was always pain after a Speaking, because a Speaker for the Dead did nothing to soften the truth. But only rarely had people lived such lives of deceit as Marc o, Libo, and Novinha; rarely were there so many shocks, so many bits of information that forced people to revise their conception of the people that they knew, the people that they loved. Ender knew from the faces that looked up at him as he spoke that he had caused great pain today. He had felt it all

himself, as if they had passed their suffering to him. Bruxinha had been most surprised, but Ender knew she was not worst injured. That distinction belonged to Miro and Ouanda, who had thought they knew what the future would bring them. But Ender had also felt the pain that people felt before, and he knew that today's new wounds would heal much faster than the old ones ever would have done. Novinha might not recognize it, but Ender had stripped from her a burden that was much too heavy for her to bear any longer.

"Speaker," said Mayor Bosquinha.

"Mayor," said Ender. He didn't like talking to people after a Speaking, but he was used to the fact that someone always insisted on talking to him. He forced a smile. "There were many more people here than I expected."

"A momentary thing, for most of them," said Bosquinha. "They'll forget it by morning."

Ender was annoyed that she was trivializing it. "Only if something monumental happens in the night," he said.

"Yes. Well, that has been arranged."

Only then did Ender realize that she was extremely upset, barely under control at all. He took her by the elbow and then cast an arm over her shoulder; she leaned gratefully.

"Speaker, I came to apologize. Your starship has been commandeered by Starways Congress. It has nothing to do with you. A crime was committed here, a crime so-- terrible-- that the criminals must be taken to the nearest world, Trondheim, for trial and punishment. Your ship."

Ender reflected for a moment. "Miro and Ouanda."

She turned her head, looked at him sharply. "You are not surprised."

"I also won't let them go."

Bosquinha pulled herself away from him. "Won't let them?"

"I have some idea what they're charged with."

"You've been here four days, and you already know something that even I never suspected?"

"Sometimes the government is the last to know."

"Let me tell you why you will let them go, why we'll all let them go to stand trial. Because Congress has stripped our files. The computer memory is empty except for the most rudimentary programs that control our power supply, our water, our sewer. Tomorrow no work can be done because we haven't enough power to run any of the factories, to work in the mines, to power the

tractors. I have been removed from office. I am now nothing more than the deputy chief of police, to see that the directives of the Lusitanian Evacuation Committee are carried out."

"Evacuation?"

"The colony's license has been revoked. They're sending starships to take us all away. Every sign of human habitation here is to be removed. Even the gravestones that mark our dead. "

Ender tried to measure her response. He had not thought Bosquinha was the kind who would bow to mindless authority. "Do you intend to submit to this?"

"The power and water supplies are controlled by ansible. They also control the fence. They can shut us in here without power or water or sewers, and we can't get out. Once Miro and Ouanda are aboard your starship, headed for Trondheim, they say that some of the restrictions will be relaxed." She sighed. "Oh, Speaker, I'm afraid this isn't a good time to be a tourist in Lusitania."

"I'm not a tourist." He didn't bother telling her his suspicion that it might not be pure coincidence, Congress noticing the Questionable Activities when Ender happened to be there. "Were you able to save any of your files?"

Bosquinha sighed. "By imposing on you, I'm afraid. I noticed that all your files were maintained by ansible, offworld. We sent our most crucial files as messages to you."

Ender laughed. "Good, that's right, that was well done."

"It doesn't matter. We can't get them back. Or, well, yes, we can, but they'll notice it at once and then you'll be in just as much trouble as the rest of us. And they'll wipe out everything then."

"Unless you sever the ansible connection immediately after copying all my files to local memory."

"Then we really would be in rebellion. And for what?"

"For the chance to make Lusitania the best and most important of the Hundred Worlds."

Bosquinha laughed. "I think they'll regard us as important, but treason is hardly the way to be known as the best."

"Please. Don't do anything. Don't arrest Miro and Ouanda. Wait for an hour and let me meet with you and anyone else who needs to be in on the decision."

"The decision whether or not to rebel? I can't think why you should be in on that decision, Speaker."

"You'll understand at the meeting. Please, this place is too important for the chance to be missed."

"The chance for what?"

"To undo what Ender did in the Xenocide three thousand years ago."

Bosquinha gave him a sharp-eyed look. "And here I thought you had just proved yourself to be nothing but a gossipmonger."

She might have been joking. Or she might not. "If you think that what I just did was gossip-mongering, you're too stupid to lead this community in anything." He smiled.

Bosquinha spread her hands and shrugged. "Pois ,," she said. Of course. What else?

"Will you have the meeting?"

"I'll call it. In the Bishop's chambers."

Ender winced.

"The Bishop won't meet anywhere else," she said, "and no decision to rebel will mean a thing if he doesn't agree to it." Bosquinha laid her hand on his chest. "He may not even let you into the Cathedral. You are the infidel."

"But you'll try."

"I'll try because of what you did tonight. Only a wise man could see my people so clearly in so short a time. Only a ruthless one would say it all out loud. Your virtue and your flaw-- we need them both."

Bosquinha turned and hurried away. Ender knew that she did not, in her inmost heart, want to comply with Starways Congress. It had been too sudden, too severe; they had preempted her authority as if she were guilty of a crime. To give in smacked of confession, and she knew she had done nothing wrong. She wanted to resist, wanted to find some plausible way to slap back at Congress and tell them to wait, to be calm. Or, if necessary, to tell them to drop dead. But she wasn't a fool. She wouldn't do anything to resist them unless she knew it would work and knew it would benefit her people. She was a good Governor, Ender knew. She would gladly sacrifice her pride, her reputation, her future for her people's sake.

He was alone in the praqa. Everyone had gone while Bosquinha talked to him. Ender felt as an old soldier must feel, walking over placid fields at the site of a long-ago battle, hearing the echoes of the carnage in the breeze across the rustling grass.

"Don't let them sever the ansible connection."

The voice in his ear startled him, but he knew it at once. "Jane," he said.

"I can make them think you've cut off your ansible, but if you really do it then I won't be able to help you."

"Jane," he said, "you did this, didn't you! Why else would they notice what Libo and Miro and Ouanda have been doing if you didn't call it to their attention?"

She didn't answer.

"Jane, I'm sorry that I cut you off, I'll never--"

He knew she knew what he would say; he didn't have to finish sentences with her. But she didn't answer.

"I'll never turn off the--"

What good did it do to finish sentences that he knew she understood? She hadn't forgiven him yet, that was all, or she would already be answering, telling him to stop wasting her time. Yet he couldn't keep himself from trying one more time. "I missed you. Jane. I really missed you."

Still she didn't answer. She had said what she had to say, to keep the ansible connection alive, and that was all. For now. Ender didn't mind waiting. It was enough to know that she was still there, listening. He wasn't alone. Ender was surprised to find tears on his cheeks. Tears of relief, he decided. Catharsis. A Speaking, a crisis, people's lives in tatters, the future of the colony in doubt. And I cry in relief because an overblown computer program is speaking to me again.

Ela was waiting for him in his little house. Her eyes were red from crying. "Hello," she said.

"Did I do what you wanted?" he asked.

"I never guessed," she said. "He wasn't our father. I should have known."

"I can't think how you could have."

"What have I done? Calling you here to Speak my father's-- Marc o's-- death. " She began weeping again. "Mother's secrets-- I thought I knew what they were, I thought it was just her files-- I thought she hated Libo. "

"All I did was open the windows and let in some air."

"Tell that to Miro and Ouanda."

"Think a moment, Ela. They would have found out eventually. The cruel thing was that they didn't know for so many years. Now that they have the truth, they can find their own way out."

"Like Mother did? Only this time even worse than adultery?"

Ender touched her hair, smoothed it. She accepted his touch, his consolation. He couldn't remember if his father or mother had ever touched him with such a gesture. They must have. How else would he have learned it?

"Ela, will you help me?"

"Help you what? You've done your work, haven't you?"

"This has nothing to do with Speaking for the dead. I have to know, within the hour, how the Descolada works."

"You'll have to ask Mother-- she's the one who knows."

"I don't think she'd be glad to see me tonight."

"I'm supposed to ask her? Good evening, Mamae, you've just been revealed to all of Milagre as an adulteress who's been lying to your children all our lives. So if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to ask you a couple of science questions."

"Ela, it's a matter of survival for Lusitania. Not to mention your brother Miro." He reached over and turned to the terminal. "Log on," he said.

She was puzzled, but she did it. The computer wouldn't recognize her name. "I've been taken off." She looked at him in alarm. "Why?"

"It's not just you. It's everybody."

"It isn't a breakdown," she said. "Somebody stripped out the log-on file."

"Starways Congress stripped all the local computer memory. Everything's gone. We're regarded as being in a state of rebellion. Miro and Ouanda are going to be arrested and sent to Trondheim for trial. Unless I can persuade the Bishop and Bosquinha to launch a real rebellion. Do you understand? If your mother doesn't tell you what I need to know, Miro and Ouanda will both be sent twenty-two lightyears away. The penalty for treason is death. But even going to the trial is as bad as life imprisonment. We'll all be dead or very very old before they get back."

Ela looked blankly at the wall. "What do you need to know?"

"I need to know what the Committee will find when they open up her files. About how the Descolada works. "

"Yes," said Ela. "For Miro's sake she'll do it." She looked at him defiantly. "She does love us, you know. For one of her children, she'd talk to you herself."

"Good," said Ender. "It would be better if she came herself. To the Bishop's chambers, in an hour."

"Yes," said Ela. For a moment she sat still. Then a synapse connected somewhere, and she stood up and hurried toward the door.

She stopped. She came back, embraced him, kissed him on the cheek. "I'm glad you told it all," she said. "I'm glad to know it."

He kissed her forehead and sent her on her way. When the door closed behind her, he sat down on his bed, then lay down and stared at the ceiling. He thought of Novinha, tried to imagine what she was feeling now. No matter how terrible it is, Novinha, your daughter is hurrying home to you right now, sure that despite the pain and humiliation you're going through, you'll forget yourself completely and do whatever it takes to save your son. I would trade you all your suffering, Novinha, for one child who trusted me like that.

Chapter 16 -- The Fence

A great rabbi stands teaching in the marketplace. It happens that a husband finds proof that morning of his wife's adultery, and a mob carries her to the marketplace to stone her to death. (There is a familiar version of this story, but a friend of mine, a Speaker for the Dead, has told me of two other rabbis that faced the same situation. Those are the ones I'm going to tell you.)

The rabbi walks forward and stands beside the woman. Out of respect for him the mob forbears, and waits with the stones heavy in their hands, "Is there anyone here," he says to them, "who has not desired another man's wife, another woman's husband?"

They murmur and say, "We all know the desire. But, Rabbi, none of us has acted on it."

The rabbi says, "Then kneel down and give thanks that God made you strong." He takes the woman by the hand and leads her out of the market. Just before he lets her go, he whispers to her, "Tell the lord magistrate who saved his mistress. Then he'll know I am his loyal servant."

So the woman lives, because the community is too corrupt to protect itself from disorder.

Another rabbi, another city, He goes to her and stops the mob, as in the other story, and says, "Which of you is without sin? Let him cast the first stone."

The people are abashed, and they forget their unity of purpose in the memory of their own individual sins. Someday, they think, I may be like this woman, and I'll hope for forgiveness and another chance. I should treat her the way I wish to be treated.

As they open their hands and let the stones fall to the ground, the rabbi picks up one of the fallen stones, lifts it high over the woman's head, and throws it straight down with all his might. It crushes her skull and dashes her brains onto the cobblestones.

"Nor am I without sin," he says to the people. "But if we allow only perfect people to enforce the law, the law will soon be dead, and our city with it."

So the woman died because her community was too rigid to endure her deviance.

The famous version of this story is noteworthy because it is so startlingly rare in our experience. Most communities lurch between decay and rigor mortis, and when they veer too far, they die. Only one rabbi dared to expect of us such a perfect balance that we could preserve the law and still forgive the deviation. So, of course, we killed him.

-- San Angelo, Letters to an Incipient Heretic, trans. Amai a Tudomundo Para Que Deus Vos Ame Cristo, 103:72:54:2

Minha irma. My sister. The words kept running through Miro's head until he didn't hear them anymore, they were part of the background: A Ouanda, minha irma. She's my sister. His feet carried him by habit from the praça to the playing fields and over the saddle of the hill. The crown of the higher peak held the Cathedral and the monastery, which always loomed over the Zenador's Station, as if they were a fortress keeping watch over the gate. Did Libo walk this way as he went to meet my mother? Did they meet in the Xenobiologist's Station? Or was it more discreet, rutting in the grass like hogs on the fazendas?

He stood at the door of the Zenador's Station and tried to think of some reason to go inside. Nothing to do there. Hadn't written a report on what happened today, but he didn't know how to write it anyway. Magical powers, that's what it was. The piggies sing to the trees and the trees split themselves into kindling. Much better than carpentry. The aboriginals are a good deal more sophisticated than previously supposed. Multiple uses for everything. Each tree is at once a totem, a grave marker, and a small lumber mill. Sister. There's something I have to do but I can't remember.

The piggies have the most sensible plan. Live as brothers only, and never mind the women. Would have been better for you, Libo, and that's the truth-- no, I should call you Papai, not Libo. Too bad Mother never told you or you could have dandled me on your knee. Both your eldest children, Ouanda on one knee and Miro on the other, aren't we proud of our two children? Born the same year, only two months apart, what a busy fellow Papai was then, sneaking along the fence to tup Mamde in her own back yard. Everyone felt sorry for you because you had nothing but daughters. No one to carry on the family name. Their sympathy was wasted. You were brimming over with sons. And I have far more sisters than I ever thought. One more sister than I wanted.

He stood at the gate, looking up toward the woods atop the piggies' hill. There is no scientific purpose to be served by visiting at night. So I guess I'll serve an unscientific purposelessness and see if they have room for another brother in the tribe. I'm probably too big for a bedspace in the log house, so I'll sleep outside, and I won't be much for climbing trees, but I do know a thing or two

about technology, and I don't feel any particular inhibitions now about telling you anything you want to know.

He laid his right hand on the identification box and reached out his left to pull the gate. For a split second he didn't realize what was happening. Then his hand felt like it was on fire, like it was being cut off with a rusty saw, he shouted and pulled his left hand away from the gate. Never since the gate was built had it stayed hot after the box was touched by the Zenador's hand.

"Marcos Vladimir Ribeira von Hesse, your passage through the fence has been revoked by order of the Lusitanian Evacuation Committee."

Never since the gate was built had the voice challenged a Zenador. It took a moment before Miro understood what it was saying.

"You and Ouanda Quenhatta Figueira Mucumbi will present yourselves to Deputy Chief of Police Faria Lima Maria do Bosque, who will arrest you in the name of Starways Congress and present you on Trondheim for trial."

For a moment he was lightheaded and his stomach felt heavy and sick. They know. Tonight of all nights. Everything over. Lose Ouanda, lose the piggies, lose my work, all gone. Arrest. Trondheim. Where the Speaker came from, twenty-two years in transit, everybody gone except Ouanda, the only one left, and she's my sister--

His hand flashed out again to pull at the gate; again the excruciating pain shot through his arm, the pain nerves all alerted, all afire at once. I can't just disappear. They'll seal the gate to everyone. Nobody will go to the piggies, nobody will tell them, the piggies will wait for us to come and no one will ever come out of the gate again. Not me, not Ouanda, not the Speaker, nobody, and no explanation.

Evacuation Committee. They'll evacuate us and wipe out every trace of our being here. That much is in the rules, but there's more, isn't there? What did they see? How did they find out? Did the Speaker tell them? He's so addicted to truth. I have to explain to the piggies why we won't be coming back, I have to tell them.

A piggy always watched them, followed them from the moment they entered the forest. Could a piggy be watching now? Miro waved his hand. It was too dark, though. They couldn't possibly see him. Or perhaps they could; no one knew how good the piggies' vision was at night. Whether they saw him or not, they didn't come. And soon it would be too late; if the framblings were watching the gate, they had no doubt already notified Bosquinha, and she'd be on her way, zipping over the grass. She would be oh-so-reluctant to arrest him, but she would do her job, and never mind arguing with her about whether it was good for humans or piggies, either one, to maintain this foolish separation, she wasn't the sort to question the law, she just did what she was told. And he'd surrender, there was no reason to fight, where could he hide inside the fence, out among the cabra herds? But before he gave up, he'd tell the piggies, he had to tell them.

So he walked along the fence, away from the gate, toward the open grassland directly down the hill from the Cathedral, where no one lived near enough to hear his voice. As he walked, he called. Not words, but a high hooting sound, a cry that he and Ouanda used to call each other's attention when they were separated among the piggies. They'd hear it, they had to hear it, they had to come to him because he couldn't possibly pass the fence. So come, Human, Leafeater, Mandachuva, Arrow, Cups, Calendar, anyone, everyone, come and let me tell you that I cannot tell you any more.

Quim sat miserably on a stool in the Bishop's office.

"Estevao," the Bishop said quietly, "there'll be a meeting here in a few minutes, but I want to talk to you a minute first."

"Nothing to talk about," said Quim. "You warned us, and it happened. He's the devil."

"Estevao, we'll talk for a minute and then you'll go home and sleep."

"Never going back there."

"The Master ate with worse sinners than your mother, and forgave them. Are you better than he?"

"None of the adulteresses he forgave was his mother!"

"Not everyone's mother can be the Blessed Virgin."

"Are you on his side, then? Has the Church made way here for the Speakers for the Dead? Should we tear down the Cathedral and use the stones to make an amphitheater where all our dead can be slandered before we lay them in the ground?"

A whisper: "I am your Bishop, Estevao, the vicar of Christ on this planet, and you will speak to me with the respect you owe to my office."

Quim stood there, furious, unspeaking.

"I think it would have been better if the Speaker had not told these stories publicly. Some things are better learned in privacy, in quiet, so that we need not deal with shocks while an audience watches us. That's why we use the confessional, to shield us from public shame while we wrestle with our private sins. But be fair, Estevao. The Speaker may have told the stories, but the stories all were true. Ne?"

"E."

"Now, Estevao, let us think. Before today, did you love your mother?"

"Yes."

"And this mother that you loved, had she already committed adultery?"

"Ten thousand times."

"I suspect she was not so libidinous as that. But you tell me that you loved her, though she was an adulteress. Isn't she the same person tonight? Has she changed between yesterday and today? Or is it only you who have changed?"

"What she was yesterday was a lie."

"Do you mean that because she was ashamed to tell her children that she was an adulteress, she must also have been lying when she cared for you all the years you were growing up, when she trusted you, when she taught you--"

"She was not exactly a nurturing mother."

"If she had come to the confessional and won forgiveness for her adultery, then she would never have had to tell you at all. You would have gone to your grave not knowing. It would not have been a lie; because she would have been forgiven, she would not have been an adulteress. Admit the truth, Estevao: You're not angry with her adultery. You're angry because you embarrassed yourself in front of the whole city by trying to defend her."

"You make me seem like a fool."

"No one thinks you're a fool. Everyone thinks you're a loyal son. But now, if you're to be a true follower of the Master, you will forgive her and let her see that you love her more than ever, because now you understand her suffering." The Bishop glanced toward the door. "I have a meeting here now, Estevao. Please go into my inner chamber and pray to the Madelena to forgive you for your unforgiving heart."

Looking more miserable than angry, Quim passed through the curtain behind the Bishop's desk.

The Bishop's secretary opened the other door and let the Speaker for the Dead into the chamber. The Bishop did not rise. To his surprise, the Speaker knelt and bowed his head. It was an act that Catholics did only in a public presentation to the Bishop, and Peregrino could not think what the Speaker meant by this. Yet the man knelt there, waiting, and so the Bishop arose from his chair, walked to him, and held out his ring to be kissed. Even then the Speaker waited, until finally Peregrino said, "I bless you, my son, even though I'm not sure whether you mock me with this obeisance."

Head still bowed, the Speaker said, "There's no mockery in me." Then he looked up at Peregrino. "My father was a Catholic. He pretended not to be, for the sake of convenience, but he never forgave himself for his faithlessness."

"You were baptized?"

"My sister told me that yes, Father baptized me shortly after birth. My mother was a Protestant of a faith that deplored infant baptism, so they had a quarrel about it." The Bishop held out his hand to lift the Speaker to his feet. The Speaker chuckled. "Imagine. A closet Catholic and a lapsed Mormon, quarreling over religious procedures that they both claimed not to believe in."

Peregrino was skeptical. It was too elegant a gesture, for the Speaker to turn out to be Catholic. "I thought," said the Bishop, "that you Speakers for the Dead renounced all religions before taking up your, shall we say, vocation."

"I don't know what the others do. I don't think there are any rules about it-- certainly there weren't when I became a Speaker."

Bishop Peregrino knew that Speakers were not supposed to lie, but this one certainly seemed to be evasive. "Speaker Andrew, there isn't a place in all the Hundred Worlds where a Catholic has to conceal his faith, and there hasn't been for three thousand years. That was the great blessing of space travel, that it removed the terrible population restrictions on an overcrowded Earth. Are you telling me that your father lived on Earth three thousand years ago?"

"I'm telling you that my father saw to it I was baptized a Catholic, and for his sake I did what he never could do in his life. It was for him that I knelt before a Bishop and received his blessing."

"But it was you that I blessed." And you're still dodging my question. Which implies that my inference about your father's time of life is true, but you don't want to discuss it. Dom Crist o said that there was more to you than met the eye.

"Good," said the Speaker. "I need the blessing more than my father, since he's dead, and I have many more problems to deal with."

"Please sit down." The Speaker chose a stool near the far wall. The Bishop sat in his massive chair behind his desk. "I wish you hadn't Spoken today. It came at an inconvenient time."

"I had no warning that Congress would do this."

"But you knew that Miro and Ouanda had violated the law. Bosquinha told me."

"I found out only a few hours before the Speaking. Thank you for not arresting them yet."

"That's a civil matter." The Bishop brushed it aside, but they both knew that if he had insisted, Bosquinha would have had to obey her orders and arrest them regardless of the Speaker's request. "Your Speaking has caused a great deal of distress."

"More than usual, I'm afraid."

"So-- is your responsibility over? Do you inflict the wounds and leave it to others to heal them?"

"Not wounds, Bishop Peregrino. Surgery. And if I can help to heal the pain afterward, then yes, I stay and help. I have no anesthesia, but I do try for antiseptics."

"You should have been a priest, you know."

"Younger sons used to have only two choices. The priesthood or the military. My parents chose the latter course for me."

"A younger son. Yet you had a sister. And you lived in the time when population controls forbade parents to have more than two children unless the government gave special permission. They called such a child a Third, yes?"

"You know your history."

"Were you born on Earth, before starflight?"

"What concerns us, Bishop Peregrino, is the future of Lusitania, not the biography of a Speaker for the Dead who is plainly only thirty-five years old."

"The future of Lusitania is my concern, Speaker Andrew, not yours."

"The future of the humans on Lusitania is your concern, Bishop. I'm concerned with the piggies as well."

"Let's not compete to see whose concern is greater."

The secretary opened the door again, and Bosquinha, Dom Crist o, and Dona Crist came in. Bosquinha glanced back and forth between the Bishop and the Speaker.

"There's no blood on the floor, if that's what you're looking for," said the Bishop.

"I was just estimating the temperature," said Bosquinha.

"The warmth of mutual respect, I think," said the Speaker. "Not the heat of anger or the ice of hate."

"The Speaker is a Catholic by baptism, if not by belief," said the Bishop. "I blessed him, and it seems to have made him docile."

"I've always been respectful of authority," said the Speaker.

"You were the one who threatened us with an Inquisitor," the Bishop reminded him. With a smile.

The Speaker's smile was just as chilly. "And you're the one who told the people I was Satan and they shouldn't talk to me."

While the Bishop and the Speaker grinned at each other, the others laughed nervously, sat down, waited.

"It's your meeting, Speaker," said Bosquinha.

"Forgive me," said the Speaker. "There's someone else invited. It'll make things much simpler if we wait a few more minutes for her to come."

Ela found her mother outside the house, not far from the fence. A light breeze that barely rustled the capim had caught her hair and tossed it lightly. It took a moment for Ela to realize why this was so startling. Her mother had not worn her hair down in many years. It looked strangely free, all the more so because Ela could see how it curled and bent where it had been so long forced into a bun. It was then that she knew that the Speaker was right. Mother would listen to his invitation. Whatever shame or pain tonight's Speaking might have caused her, it led her now to stand out in the open, in the dusk just after sunset, looking toward the piggies' hill. Or perhaps she was looking at the fence. Perhaps remembering a man who met her here, or somewhere else in the capim, so that unobserved they could love each other. Always in hiding, always in secret. Mother is glad, thought Ela, to have it

known that Libo was her real husband, that Libo is my true father. Mother is glad, and so am I.

Mother did not turn to look at her, though she surely could hear Ela's approach through the noisy grass. Ela stopped a few steps away.

"Mother," she said.

"Not a herd of cabra, then," said Mother. "You're so noisy, Ela."

"The Speaker. Wants your help."

"Does he."

Ela explained what the Speaker had told her. Mother did not turn around. When Ela was finished, Mother waited a moment, and then turned to walk over the shoulder of the hill. Ela ran after her, caught up with her. "Mother," said Ela. "Mother, are you going to tell him about the Descolada?"

"Yes."

"Why now? After all these years? Why wouldn't you tell me?"

"Because you did better work on your own, without my help."

"You know what I was doing?"

"You're my apprentice. I have complete access to your files without leaving any footprints. What kind of master would I be if I didn't watch your work?"

"But--"

"I also read the files you hid under Quara's name. You've never been a mother, so you didn't know that all the file activities of a child under twelve are reported to the parents every week. Quara was doing some remarkable research. I'm glad you're coming with me. When I tell the Speaker, I'll be telling you, too."

"You're going the wrong way," said Ela.

Mother stopped. "Isn't the Speaker's house near the praca?"

"The meeting is in the Bishop's chambers."

For the first time Mother faced Ela directly. "What are you and the Speaker trying to do to me?"

"We're trying to save Miro," said Ela. "And Lusitania Colony, if we can."

"Taking me to the spider's lair--"

"The Bishop has to be on our side or--"

"Our side! So when you say we, you mean you and the Speaker, is that it? Do you think I haven't noticed that? All my children, one by one, he's seduced you all--"

"He hasn't seduced anybody!"

"He seduced you with his way of knowing just what you want to hear, of--"

"He's no flatterer," said Ela. "He doesn't tell us what we want. He tells us what we know is true. He didn't win our affection, Mother, he won our trust."

"Whatever he gets from you, you never gave it to me."

"We wanted to."

Ela did not bend this time before her mother's piercing, demanding glare. It was her mother, instead, who bent, who looked away and then looked back with tears in her eyes. "I wanted to tell you." Mother wasn't talking about her files. "When I saw how you hated him, I wanted to say, He's not your father, your father is a good, kind man--"

"Who didn't have the courage to tell us himself."

Rage came into Mother's eyes. "He wanted to. I wouldn't let him."

"I'll tell you something, Mother. I loved Libo, the way everybody in Milagre loved him. But he was willing to be a hypocrite, and so were you, and without anybody even guessing, the poison of your lies hurt us all. I don't blame you, Mother, or him. But I thank God for the Speaker. He was willing to tell us the truth, and it set us free."

"It's easy to tell the truth," said Mother softly, "when you don't love anybody."

"Is that what you think?" said Ela. "I think I know something, Mother. I think you can't possibly know the truth about somebody unless you love them. I think the Speaker loved Father. Marc o, I mean. I think he understood him and loved him before he Spoke."

Mother didn't answer, because she knew that it was true.

"And I know he loves Grego, and Quara, and Olhado. And Miro, and even Quim. And me. I know he loves me. And when he shows me that he loves me, I know it's true because he never lies to anybody."

Tears came out of Mother's eyes and drifted down her cheeks.

"I have lied to you and everybody else," Mother said. Her voice sounded weak and strained. "But you have to believe me anyway. When I tell you that I love you."

Ela embraced her mother, and for the first time in years she felt warmth in her mother's response. Because the lies between them now were gone. The Speaker had erased the barrier, and there was no reason to be tentative and cautious anymore.

"You're thinking about that damnable Speaker even now, aren't you?" whispered her mother.

"So are you," Ela answered.

Both their bodies shook with Mother's laugh. "Yes." Then she stopped laughing and pulled away, looked Ela in the eyes. "Will he always come between us?"

"Yes," said Ela. "Like a bridge he'll come between us, not a wall."

Miro saw the piggies when they were halfway down the hillside toward the fence. They were so silent in the forest, but the piggies had no great skill in moving through the capim-- it rustled loudly as they ran. Or perhaps in coming to answer Miro's call they felt no need to conceal themselves. As they came nearer, Miro recognized them. Arrow, Human, Mandachuva, Leaf-eater, Cups. He did not call out to them, nor did they speak when they arrived. Instead they stood behind the fence opposite him and regarded him silently. No Zenador had ever called the piggies to the fence before. By their stillness they showed their anxiety.

"I can't come to you anymore," said Miro.

They waited for his explanation.

"The framblings found out about us. Breaking the law. They sealed the gate."

Leaf-eater touched his chin. "Do you know what it was the framblings saw?"

Miro laughed bitterly. "What didn't they see? Only one frambling ever came with us."

"No," said Human. "The hive queen says it wasn't the Speaker. The hive queen says they saw it from the sky. "

The satellites? "What could they see from the sky?"

"Maybe the hunt," said Arrow.

"Maybe the shearing of the cabra," said Leaf-eater.

"Maybe the fields of amaranth," said Cups.

"All of those," said Human. "And maybe they saw that the wives have let three hundred twenty children be born since the first amaranth harvest."

"Three hundred!"

"And twenty," said Mandachuva.

"They saw that food would be plenty," said Arrow. "Now we're sure to win the next war. Our enemies will be planted in huge new forests all over the plain, and the wives will put mother trees in every one of them."

Miro felt sick. Is this what all their work and sacrifice was for, to give some transient advantage to one tribe of piggies? Almost he said, Libo didn't die so you could conquer the world. But his training took over, and he asked a noncommittal question. "Where are all these new children?"

"None of the little brothers come to us," explained Human. "We have too much to do, learning from you and teaching all the other brother-houses. We can't be training little brothers." Then, proudly, he added, "Of the three hundred, fully half are children of my father, Rooter."

Mandachuva nodded gravely. "The wives have great respect for what you have taught us. And they have great hope in the Speaker for the Dead. But what you tell us now, this is very bad. If the framblings hate us, what will we do?"

"I don't know," said Miro. For the moment, his mind was racing to try to cope with all the information they had just told him. Three hundred twenty new babies. A population explosion. And

Rooter somehow the father of half of them. Before today Miro would have dismissed the statement of Rooter's fatherhood as part of the piggies' totemic belief system. But having seen a tree uproot itself and fall apart in response to singing, he was prepared to question all his old assumptions.

Yet what good did it do to learn anything now? They'd never let him report again; he couldn't follow up; he'd be aboard a starship for the next quarter century while someone else did all his work. Or worse, no one else.

"Don't be unhappy," said Human. "You'll see-- the Speaker for the Dead will make it all work out well."

"The Speaker. Yes, he'll make everything work out fine." The way he did for me and Ouanda. My sister.

"The hive queen says he'll teach the framblings to love us."

"Teach the framblings," said Miro. "He'd better do it quickly then. It's too late for him to save me and Ouanda. They're arresting us and taking us off planet."

"To the stars?" asked Human hopefully.

"Yes, to the stars, to stand trial! To be punished for helping you. It'll take us twenty-two years to get there, and they'll never let us come back."

The piggies took a moment to absorb this information. Fine, thought Miro. Let them wonder how the Speaker is going to solve everything for them. I trusted in the Speaker, too, and it didn't do much for me. The piggies conferred together.

Human emerged from the group and came closer to the fence. "We'll hide you."

"They'll never find you in the forest," said Mandachuva.

"They have machines that can track me by my smell," said Miro.

"Ah. But doesn't the law forbid them to show us their machines?" asked Human.

Miro shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The gate is sealed to me. I can't cross the fence."

The piggies looked at each other.

"But you have capim right there," said Arrow.

Miro looked stupidly at the grass. "So what?" he asked.

"Chew it," said Human.

"Why?" asked Miro.

"We've seen humans chewing capim," said Leaf-eater. "The other night, on the hillside, we saw the Speaker and some of the robe-humans chewing capim."

"And many other times," said Mandachuva.

Their impatience with him was frustrating. "What does that have to do with the fence?"

Again the piggies looked at each other. Finally Mandachuva tore off a blade of capim near the ground, folded it carefully into a thick wad, and put it in his mouth to chew it. He sat down after a while. The others began teasing him, poking him with their fingers, pinching him. He showed no sign of noticing. Finally Human gave him a particularly vicious pinch, and when Mandachuva did not respond, they began saying, in males' language, Ready, Time to go, Now, Ready.

Mandachuva stood up, a bit shaky for a moment. Then he ran at the fence and scrambled to the top, flipped over, and landed on all fours on the same side as Miro.

Miro leaped to his feet and began to cry out just as Mandachuva reached the top; by the time he finished his cry, Mandachuva was standing up and dusting himself off.

"You can't do that," said Miro. "It stimulates all the pain nerves in the body. The fence can't be crossed."

"Oh," said Mandachuva.

From the other side of the fence, Human was rubbing his thighs together. "He didn't know," he said. "The humans don't know."

"It's an anesthetic," said Miro. "It stops you from feeling pain."

"No," said Mandachuva. "I feel the pain. Very bad pain. Worst pain in the world."

"Rooter says the fence is even worse than dying," said Human. "Pain in all the places."

"But you don't care," said Miro.

"It's happening to your other self," said Mandachuva. "It's happening to your animal self. But your tree self doesn't care. It makes you be your tree self."

Then Miro remembered a detail that had been lost in the grotesquerie of Libo's death. The dead man's mouth had been filled with a wad of capim. So had the mouth of every piggy that had died. Anesthetic. The death looked like hideous torture, but pain was not the purpose of it. They used an anesthetic. It had nothing to do with pain.

"So," said Mandachuva. "Chew the grass, and come with us. We'll hide you."

"Ouanda," said Miro.

"Oh, I'll go get her," said Mandachuva.

"You don't know where she lives."

"Yes I do," said Mandachuva.

"We do this many times a year," said Human. "We know where everybody lives."

"But no one has ever seen you," said Miro.

"We're very secret," said Mandachuva. "Besides, nobody is looking for us."

Miro imagined dozens of piggies creeping about in Milagre in the middle of the night. No guard was kept. Only a few people had business that took them out in the darkness. And the piggies were small, small enough to duck down in the capim and disappear completely. No wonder they knew about metal and machines, despite all the rules designed to keep them from learning about them. No doubt they had seen the mines, had watched the shuttle land, had seen the kilns firing the bricks, had watched the fazendeiros plowing and planting the human-specific amaranth. No wonder they had known what to ask for.

How stupid of us, to think we could cut them off from our culture. They kept far more secrets from us than we could possibly keep from them. So much for cultural superiority.

Miro pulled up his own blade of capim.

"No," said Mandachuva, taking the blade from his hands. "You don't get the root part. If you take the root part, it doesn't do you any good." He threw away Miro's blade and tore off his own, about ten centimeters above the base. Then he folded it and handed it to Miro, who began to chew it.

Mandachuva pinched and poked him.

"Don't worry about that," said Miro. "Go get Ouanda. They could arrest her any minute. Go. Now. Go on."

Mandachuva looked at the others and, seeing some invisible signal of consent, jogged off along the fenceline toward the slopes of Vila Alta, where Ouanda lived.

Miro chewed a little more. He pinched himself. As the piggies said, he felt the pain, but he didn't care. All he cared about was that this was a way out, a way to stay on Lusitania. To stay, perhaps, with Ouanda. Forget the rules, all the rules. They had no power over him once he left the human enclave and entered the piggies' forest. He would become a renegade, as they already accused him of being, and he and Ouanda could leave behind all the insane rules of human behavior and live as they wanted to, and raise a family of humans who had completely new values, learned from the

piggies, from the forest life; something new in the Hundred Worlds, and Congress would be powerless to stop them.

He ran at the fence and seized it with both hands. The pain was no less than before, but now he didn't care, he scrambled up to the top. But with each new handhold the pain grew more intense, and he began to care, he began to care very much about the pain, he began to realize that the capim had no anesthetic effect on him at all, but by this time he was already at the top of the fence. The pain was maddening; he couldn't think; momentum carried him above the top and as he balanced there his head passed through the vertical field of the fence. All the pain possible to his body came to his brain at once, as if every part of him were on fire.

The Little Ones watched in horror as their friend hung there atop the fence, his head and torso on one side, his hips and legs on the other. At once they cried out, reached for him, tried to pull him down. Since they had not chewed capim, they dared not touch the fence.

Hearing their cries, Mandachuva ran back. Enough of the anesthetic remained in his body that he could climb up and push the heavy human body over the top. Miro landed with a bone-crushing thump on the ground, his arm still touching the fence. The piggies pulled him away. His face was frozen in a rictus of agony.

"Quick!" shouted Leaf-eater. "Before he dies, we have to plant him!"

"No!" Human answered, pushing Leaf-eater away from Miro's frozen body. "We don't know if he's dying! The pain is just an illusion, you know that, he doesn't have a wound, the pain should go away--"

"It isn't going away," said Arrow. "Look at him."

Miro's fists were clenched, his legs were doubled under him, and his spine and neck were arched backward. Though he was breathing in short, hard pants, his face seemed to grow even tighter with pain.

"Before he dies," said Leaf-eater. "We have to give him root."

"Go get Ouanda," said Human. He turned to face Mandachuva. "Now! Go get her and tell her Miro is dying. Tell her the gate is sealed and Miro is on this side of it and he's dying."

Mandachuva took off at a run.

The secretary opened the door, but not until he actually saw Novinha did Ender allow himself to feel relief. When he sent Ela for her, he was sure that she would come; but as they waited so many long minutes for her arrival, he began to doubt his understanding of her. There had been no need to doubt. She was the woman that he thought she was. He noticed that her hair was down and

windblown, and for the first time since he came to Lusitania, Ender saw in her face a clear image of the girl who in her anguish had summoned him less than two weeks, more than twenty years ago.

She looked tense, worried, but Ender knew her anxiety was because of her present situation, coming into the Bishop's own chambers so shortly after the disclosure of her transgressions. If Ela told her about the danger to Miro, that, too, might be part of her tension. All this was transient; Ender could see in her face, in the relaxation of her movement, in the steadiness of her gaze, that the end of her long deception was indeed the gift he had hoped, had believed it would be. I did not come to hurt you, Novinha, and I'm glad to see that my Speaking has brought you better things than shame.

Novinha stood for a moment, looking at the Bishop. Not defiantly, but politely, with dignity; he responded the same way, quietly offering her a seat. Dom Crist o started to rise from his stool, but she shook her head, smiled, took another stool near the wall. Near Ender. Ela came and stood behind and beside her mother, so she was also partly behind Ender. Like a daughter standing between her parents, thought Ender; then he thrust the thought away from him and refused to think of it anymore. There were far more important matters at hand.

"I see," said Bosquinha, "that you intend this meeting to be an interesting one."

"I think Congress decided that already," said Dona Crist .

"Your son is accused," Bishop Peregrino began, "of crimes against--"

"I know what he's accused of," said Novinha. "I didn't know until tonight, when Ela told me, but I'm not surprised. My daughter Elanora has also been defying some rules her master set for her. Both of them have a higher allegiance to their own conscience than to the rules others set down for them. It's a failing, if your object is to maintain order, but if your goal is to learn and adapt, it's a virtue."

"Your son isn't on trial here," said Dom Crist o.

"I asked you to meet together," said Ender, "because a decision must be made. Whether or not to comply with the orders given us by Starways Congress."

"We don't have much choice," said Bishop Peregrino.

"There are many choices," said Ender, "and many reasons for choosing. You already made one choice-- when you found your files being stripped, you decided to try to save them, and you decided to trust them with me, a stranger. Your trust was not misplaced-- I'll return your files to you whenever you ask, unread, unaltered."

"Thank you," said Dona Crist . "But we did that before we knew the gravity of the charge."

"They're going to evacuate us," said Dom Crist o.

"They control everything," said Bishop Peregrino.

"I already told him that," said Bosquinha.

"They don't control everything," said Ender. "They only control you through the ansible connection."

"We can't cut off the ansible," said Bishop Peregrino. "That is our only connection with the Vatican."

"I don't suggest cutting off the ansible. I only tell you what I can do. And when I tell you this, I am trusting you the way you trusted me. Because if you repeat this to anyone, the cost to me-- and to someone else, whom I love and depend on-- would be immeasurable."

He looked at each of them, and each in turn nodded acquiescence.

"I have a friend whose control over ansible communications among all the Hundred Worlds is complete-- and completely unsuspected. I'm the only one who knows what she can do. And she has told me that when I ask her to, she can make it seem to all the framblings that we here on Lusitania have cut off our ansible connection. And yet we will have the ability to send guarded messages if we want to-- to the Vatican, to the offices of your order. We can read distant records, intercept distant communications. In short, we will have eyes and they will be blind."

"Cutting off the ansible, or even seeming to, would be an act of rebellion. Of war." Bosquinha was saying it as harshly as possible, but Ender could see that the idea appealed to her, though she was resisting it with all her might. "I will say, though, that if we were insane enough to decide on war, what the Speaker is offering us is a clear advantage. We'd need any advantage we could get-- if we were mad enough to rebel."

"We have nothing to gain by rebellion," said the Bishop, "and everything to lose. I grieve for the tragedy it would be to send Miro and Ouanda to stand trial on another world, especially because they are so young. But the court will no doubt take that into account and treat them with mercy. And by complying with the orders of the committee, we will save this community much suffering."

"Don't you think that having to evacuate this world will also cause them suffering?" asked Ender.

"Yes. Yes, it will. But a law was broken, and the penalty must be paid."

"What if the law was based on a misunderstanding, and the penalty is far out of proportion to the sin?"

"We can't be the judges of that," said the Bishop.

"We are the judges of that. If we go along with Congressional orders, then we're saying that the law is good and the punishment is just. And it may be that at the end of this meeting you'll decide exactly that. But there are some things you must know before you can make your decision. Some of

those things I can tell you, and some of those things only Ela and Novinha can tell you. You shouldn't make your decision until you know all that we know."

"I'm always glad to know as much as possible," said the Bishop. "Of course, the final decision is Bosquinha's, not mine--"

"The final decision belongs to all of you together, the civil and religious and intellectual leadership of Lusitania. If any one of you decides against rebellion, rebellion is impossible. Without the Church's support, Bosquinha can't lead. Without civil support, the Church has no power."

"We have no power," said Dom Crist o. "Only opinions."

"Every adult in Lusitania looks to you for wisdom and fairmindedness."

"You forget a fourth power," said Bishop Peregrino. "Yourself."

"I'm a framling here."

"A most extraordinary framling," said the Bishop. "In your four days here you have captured the soul of this people in a way I feared and foretold. Now you counsel rebellion that could cost us everything. You are as dangerous as Satan. And yet here you are, submitting to our authority as if you weren't free to get on the shuttle and leave here when the starship returns to Trondheim with our two young criminals aboard. "

"I submit to your authority," said Ender, "because I don't want to be a framling here. I want to be your citizen, your student, your parishioner."

"As a Speaker for the Dead?" asked the Bishop.

"As Andrew Wiggin. I have some other skills that might be useful. Particularly if you rebel. And I have other work to do that can't be done if humans are taken from Lusitania."

"We don't doubt your sincerity," said the Bishop. "But you must forgive us if we are doubtful about casting in with a citizen who is something of a latecomer."

Ender nodded. The Bishop could not say more until he knew more. "Let me tell you first what I know. Today, this afternoon, I went out into the forest with Miro and Ouanda."

"You! You also broke the law!" The Bishop half-rose from his chair.

Bosquinha reached forward, gestured to settle the Bishop's ire. "The intrusion in our files began long before this afternoon. The Congressional Order couldn't possibly be related to his infraction."

"I broke the law," said Ender, "because the piggies were asking for me. Demanding, in fact, to see me. They had seen the shuttle land. They knew that I was here. And, for good or ill, they had read the Hive Queen and the Hegemon."

"They gave the piggies that book?" said the Bishop.

"They also gave them the New Testament," said Ender. "But surely you won't be surprised to learn that the piggies found much in common between themselves and the hive queen. Let me tell you what the piggies said. They begged me to convince all the Hundred Worlds to end the rules that keep them isolated here. You see, the piggies don't think of the fence the way we do. We see it as a way of protecting their culture from human influence and corruption. They see it as a way of keeping them from learning all the wonderful secrets that we know. They imagine our ships going from star to star, colonizing them, filling them up. And five or ten thousand years from now, when they finally learn all that we refuse to teach them, they'll emerge into space to find all the worlds filled up. No place for them at all. They think of our fence as a form of species murder. We will keep them on Lusitania like animals in a zoo, while we go out and take all the rest of the universe."

"That's nonsense," said Dom Crist o. "That isn't our intention at all."

"Isn't it?" Ender retorted. "Why are we so anxious to keep them from any influence from our culture? It isn't just in the interest of science. It isn't just good xenological procedure. Remember, please, that our discovery of the ansible, of starflight, of partial gravity control, even of the weapon we used to destroy the buggers-- all of them came as a direct result of our contact with the buggers. We learned most of the technology from the machines they left behind from their first foray into Earth's star system. We were using those machines long before we understood them. Some of them, like the philotic slope, we don't even understand now. We are in space precisely because of the impact of a devastatingly superior culture. And yet in only a few generations, we took their machines, surpassed them, and destroyed them. That's what our fence means-- we're afraid the piggies will do the same to us. And they know that's what it means. They know it, and they hate it."

"We aren't afraid of them," said the Bishop. "They're savages, for heaven's sake--"

"That's how we looked to the buggers, too," said Ender. "But to Pipo and Libo and Ouanda and Miro, the piggies have never looked like savages. They're different from us, yes, far more different than framblings. But they're still people. Ramen, not varelse. So when Libo saw that the piggies were in danger of starving, that they were preparing to go to war in order to cut down the population, he didn't act like a scientist. He didn't observe their war and take notes on the death and suffering. He acted like a Christian. He got experimental amaranth that Novinha had rejected for human use because it was too closely akin to Lusitanian biochemistry, and he taught the piggies how to plant it and harvest it and prepare it as food. I have no doubt that the rise in piggy population and the fields of amaranth are what the Starways Congress saw. Not a willful violation of the law, but an act of compassion and love."

"How can you call such disobedience a Christian act?" said the Bishop.

"What man of you is there, when his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"

"The devil can quote scripture to suit his own purpose," said the Bishop.

"I'm not the devil," said Ender, "and neither are the piggies. Their babies were dying of hunger, and Libo gave them food and saved their lives."

"And look what they did to him!"

"Yes, let's look what they did to him. They put him to death. Exactly the way they put to death their own most honored citizens. Shouldn't that have told us something?"

"It told us that they're dangerous and have no conscience," said the Bishop.

"It told us that death means something completely different to them. If you really believed that someone was perfect in heart, Bishop, so righteous that to live another day could only cause them to be less perfect, then wouldn't it be a good thing for them if they were killed and taken directly into heaven?"

"You mock us. You don't believe in heaven."

"But you do! What about the martyrs, Bishop Peregrino? Weren't they caught up joyfully into heaven?"

"Of course they were. But the men who killed them were beasts. Murdering saints didn't sanctify them, it damned their souls to hell forever."

"But what if the dead don't go to heaven? What if the dead are transformed into new life, right before your eyes? What if when a piggy dies, if they lay out his body just so, it takes root and turns into something else? What if it turns into a tree that lives fifty or a hundred or five hundred years more?"

"What are you talking about?" demanded the Bishop.

"Are you telling us that the piggies somehow metamorphose from animal to plant?" asked Dom Crist o. "Basic biology suggests that this isn't likely."

"It's practically impossible," said Ender. "That's why there are only a handful of species on Lusitania that survived the Descolada. Because only a few of them were able to make the transformation. When the piggies kill one of their people, he is transformed into a tree. And the tree retains at least some of its intelligence. Because today I saw the piggies sing to a tree, and without a single tool touching it, the tree severed its own roots, fell over, and split itself into exactly the shapes and forms of wood and bark that the piggies needed. It wasn't a dream. Miro and Ouanda and I all saw it with our own eyes, and heard the song, and touched the wood, and prayed for the soul of the dead."

"What does this have to do with our decision?" demanded Bosquinha. "So the forests are made up of dead piggies. That's a matter for scientists."

"I'm telling you that when the piggies killed Pipo and Libo they thought they were helping them transform into the next stage of their existence. They weren't beasts, they were ramen, giving the highest honor to the men who had served them so well."

"Another moral transformation, is that it?" asked the Bishop. "Just as you did today in your Speaking, making us see Marcos Ribeira again and again, each time in a new light, now you want us to think the piggies are noble? Very well, they're noble. But I won't rebel against Congress, with all the suffering such a thing would cause, just so our scientists can teach the piggies how to make refrigerators."

"Please," said Novinha.

They looked at her expectantly.

"You say that they stripped our files? They read them all?"

"Yes," said Bosquinha.

"Then they know everything that I have in my files. About the Descolada."

"Yes," said Bosquinha.

Novinha folded her hands in her lap. "There won't be any evacuation."

"I didn't think so," said Ender. "That's why I asked Ela to bring you."

"Why won't there be an evacuation?" asked Bosquinha.

"Because of the Descolada."

"Nonsense," said the Bishop. "Your parents found a cure for that."

"They didn't cure it," said Novinha. "They controlled it. They stopped it from becoming active."

"That's right," said Bosquinha. "That's why we put the additives in the water. The Colador."

"Every human being on Lusitania, except perhaps the Speaker, who may not have caught it yet, is a carrier of the Descolada."

"The additive isn't expensive," said the Bishop. "But perhaps they might isolate us. I can see that they might do that."

"There's nowhere isolated enough," said Novinha. "The Descolada is infinitely variable. It attacks any kind of genetic material. The additive can be given to humans. But can they give additives to every blade of grass? To every bird? To every fish? To every bit of plankton in the sea?"

"They can all catch it?" asked Bosquinha. "I didn't know that."

"I didn't tell anybody," said Novinha. "But I built the protection into every plant that I developed. The amaranth, the potatoes, everything-- the challenge wasn't making the protein usable, the challenge was to get the organisms to produce their own Descolada blockers."

Bosquinha was appalled. "So anywhere we go--"

"We can trigger the complete destruction of the biosphere."

"And you kept this a secret?" asked Dom Crist o.

"There was no need to tell it." Novinha looked at her hands in her lap. "Something in the information had caused the piggies to kill Pipo. I kept it secret so no one else would know. But now, what Ela has learned over the last few years, and what the Speaker has said tonight-- now I know what it was that Pipo learned. The Descolada doesn't just split the genetic molecules and prevent them from reforming or duplicating. It also encourages them to bond with completely foreign genetic molecules. Ela did the work on this against my will. All the native life on Lusitania thrives in plant-and-animal pairs. The cabra with the capim. The watersnakes with the grama. The suckflies with the reeds. The xingadora bird with the tropeço vines. And the piggies with the trees of the forest."

"You're saying that one becomes the other?" Dom Crist o was at once fascinated and repelled.

"The piggies may be unique in that, in transforming from the corpse of a piggy into a tree," said Novinha. "But perhaps the cabras become fertilized from the pollen of the capim. Perhaps the flies are hatched from the tassels of the river reeds. It should be studied. I should have been studying it all these years."

"And now they'll know this?" asked Dom Crist o. "From your files?"

"Not right away. But sometime in the next twenty or thirty years. Before any other framblings get here, they'll know," said Novinha.

"I'm not a scientist," said the Bishop. "Everyone else seems to understand except me. What does this have to do with the evacuation?"

Bosquinha fidgeted with her hands. "They can't take us off Lusitania," she said. "Anywhere they took us, we'd carry the Descolada with us, and it would kill everything. There aren't enough xenobiologists in the Hundred Worlds to save even a single planet from devastation. By the time they get here, they'll know that we can't leave."

"Well, then," said the Bishop. "That solves our problem. If we tell them now, they won't even send a fleet to evacuate us."

"No," said Ender. "Bishop Peregrino, once they know what the Descolada will do, they'll see to it that no one leaves this planet, ever."

The Bishop scoffed. "What, do you think they'll blow up the planet? Come now, Speaker, there are no more Enders among the human race. The worst they might do is quarantine us here--"

"In which case," said Dom Crist o, "why should we submit to their control at all? We could send them a message telling them about the Descolada, informing them that we will not leave the planet and they should not come here, and that's it."

Bosquinha shook her head. "Do you think that none of them will say, 'The Lusitanians, just by visiting another world, can destroy it. They have a starship, they have a known propensity for rebelliousness, they have the murderous piggies. Their existence is a threat.'"

"Who would say that?" said the Bishop.

"No one in the Vatican," said Ender. "But Congress isn't in the business of saving souls."

"And maybe they'd be right," said the Bishop. "You said yourself that the piggies want starflight. And yet wherever they might go, they'll have this same effect. Even uninhabited worlds, isn't that right? What will they do, endlessly duplicate this bleak landscape-- forests of a single tree, prairies of a single grass, with only the cabra to graze it and only the xingadora to fly above it?"

"Maybe someday we could find a way to get the Descolada under control," said Ela.

"We can't stake our future on such a thin chance," said the Bishop.

"That's why we have to rebel," said Ender. "Because Congress will think exactly that way. Just as they did three thousand years ago, in the Xenocide. Everybody condemns the Xenocide because it destroyed an alien species that turned out to be harmless in its intentions. But as long as it seemed that the buggers were determined to destroy humankind, the leaders of humanity had no choice but to fight back with all their strength. We are presenting them with the same dilemma again. They're already afraid of the piggies. And once they understand the Descolada, all the pretense of trying to protect the piggies will be done with. For the sake of humanity's survival, they'll destroy us. Probably not the whole planet. As you said, there are no Enders today. But they'll certainly obliterate Milagre and remove any trace of human contact. Including killing all the piggies who know us. Then they'll set a watch over this planet to keep the piggies from ever emerging from their primitive state. If you knew what they know, wouldn't you do the same?"

"A Speaker for the Dead says this?" said Dom Crist o.

"You were there," said the Bishop. "You were there the first time, weren't you. When the buggers were destroyed."

"Last time we had no way of talking to the buggers, no way of knowing they were ramen and not varelse. This time we're here. We know that we won't go out and destroy other worlds. We know that we'll stay here on Lusitania until we can go out safely, the Descolada neutralized. This time," said Ender, "we can keep the ramen alive, so that whoever writes the piggies' story won't have to be a Speaker for the Dead."

The secretary opened the door abruptly, and Ouanda burst in. "Bishop," she said. "Mayor. You have to come. Novinha--"

"What is it?" said the Bishop.

"Ouanda, I have to arrest you," said Bosquinha.

"Arrest me later," she said. "It's Miro. He climbed over the fence."

"He can't do that," said Novinha. "It might kill him--" Then, in horror, she realized what she had said. "Take me to him--"

"Get Navio," said Dona Crist .

"You don't understand," said Ouanda. "We can't get to him. He's on the other side of the fence."

"Then what can we do?" asked Bosquinha.

"Turn the fence off," said Ouanda.

Bosquinha looked helplessly at the others. "I can't do that. The Committee controls that now. By ansible. They'd never turn it off."

"Then Miro's as good as dead," said Ouanda.

"No," said Novinha.

Behind her, another figure came into the room. Small, fur-covered. None of them but Ender had ever before seen a piggy in the flesh, but they knew at once what the creature was. "Excuse me," said the piggy. "Does this mean we should plant him now?"

No one bothered to ask how the piggy got over the fence. They were too busy realizing what he meant by planting Miro.

"No!" screamed Novinha.

Mandachuva looked at her in surprise. "No?"

"I think," said Ender, "that you shouldn't plant any more humans."

Mandachuva stood absolutely still.

"What do you mean?" said Ouanda. "You're making him upset."

"I expect he'll be more upset before this day is over," said Ender. "Come, Ouanda, take us to the fence where Miro is."

"What good will it do if we can't get over the fence?" asked Bosquinha.

"Call for Navio," said Ender.

"I'll go get him," said Dona Crist. "You forget that no one can call anybody."

"I said, what good will it do?" demanded Bosquinha.

"I told you before," said Ender. "If you decide to rebel, we can sever the ansible connection. And then we can turn off the fence."

"Are you trying to use Miro's plight to force my hand?" asked the Bishop.

"Yes," said Ender. "He's one of your flock, isn't he? So leave the ninety-nine, shepherd, and come with us to save the one that's lost."

"What's happening?" asked Mandachuva.

"You're leading us to the fence," said Ender. "Hurry, please."

They filed down the stairs from the Bishop's chambers to the Cathedral below. Ender could hear the Bishop behind him, grumbling about perverting scripture to serve private ends.

They passed down the aisle of the Cathedral, Mandachuva leading the way. Ender noticed that the Bishop paused near the altar, watching the small furred creature as the humans trooped after him. Outside the Cathedral, the Bishop caught up with him. "Tell me, Speaker," he said, "just as a matter of opinion, if the fence came down, if we rebelled against Starways Congress, would all the rules about contact with the piggies be ended?"

"I hope so," said Ender. "I hope that there'll be no more unnatural barriers between us and them."

"Then," said the Bishop, "we'd be able to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Little Ones, wouldn't we? There'd be no rule against it."

"That's right," said Ender. "They might not be converted, but there'd be no rule against trying."

"I have to think about this," said the Bishop. "But perhaps, my dear infidel, your rebellion will open the door to the conversion of a great nation. Perhaps God led you here after all."

By the time the Bishop, Dom Crist o, and Ender reached the fence, Mandachuva and the women had already been there for some time. Ender could tell by the way Ela was standing between her mother and the fence, and the way Novinha was holding her hands out in front of her face, that Novinha had already tried to climb over the fence to reach her son. She was crying now and shouting at him. "Miro! Miro, how could you do ' this, how could you climb it--" while Ela tried to talk to her, to calm her.

On the other side of the fence, four piggies stood watching, amazed.

Ouanda was trembling with fear for Miro's life, but she had enough presence of mind to tell Ender what she knew he could not see for himself. "That's Cups, and Arrow, and Human, and Leaf-eater. Leaf-eater's trying to get the others to plant him. I think I know what that means, but we're all right. Human and Mandachuva have convinced them not to do it."

"But it still doesn't get us any closer," said Ender. "Why did Miro do something so stupid?"

"Mandachuva explained on the way here. The piggies chew capim and it has an anesthetic effect. They can climb the fence whenever they want. Apparently they've been doing it for years. They thought we didn't do it because we were so obedient to law. Now they know that capim doesn't have the same effect on us."

Ender walked to the fence. "Human," he said.

Human stepped forward.

"There's a chance that we can turn off the fence. But if we do it, we're at war with all the humans on every other world. Do you understand that? The humans of Lusitania and the piggies, together, at war against all the other humans."

"Oh," said Human.

"Will we win?" asked Arrow.

"We might," said Ender. "And we might not."

"Will you give us the hive queen?" asked Human.

"First I have to meet with the wives," said Ender.

The piggies stiffened.

"What are you talking about?" asked the Bishop.

"I have to meet with the wives," said Ender to the piggies, "because we have to make a treaty. An agreement. A set of rules between us. Do you understand me? Humans can't live by your laws, and

you can't live by ours, but if we're to live in peace, with no fence between us, and if I'm to let the hive queen live with you and help you and teach you, then you have to make us some promises, and keep them. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said Human. "But you don't know what you're asking for, to deal with the wives. They're not smart the way that the brothers are smart."

"They make all the decisions, don't they?"

"Of course," said Human. "They're the keepers of the mothers, aren't they? But I warn you, it's dangerous to speak to the wives. Especially for you, because they honor you so much."

"If the fence comes down, I have to speak to the wives. If I can't speak to them, then the fence stays up, and Miro dies, and we'll have to obey the Congressional Order that all the humans of Lusitania must leave here." Ender did not tell them that the humans might well be killed. He always told the truth, but he didn't always tell it all.

"I'll take you to the wives," said Human.

Leaf-eater walked up to him and ran his hand derisively across Human's belly. "They named you right," he said. "You are a human, not one of us." Leaf-eater started to run away, but Arrow and Cups held him.

"I'll take you," said Human. "Now, stop the fence and save Miro's life."

Ender turned to the Bishop.

"It's not my decision," said the Bishop. "It's Bosquinha's."

"My oath is to the Starways Congress," said Bosquinha, "but I'll perjure myself this minute to save the lives of my people. I say the fence comes down and we try to make the most of our rebellion."

"If we can preach to the piggies," said the Bishop.

"I'll ask them when I meet with the wives," said Ender. "I can't promise more than that."

"Bishop!" cried Novinha. "Pipo and Libo already died beyond that fence!"

"Bring it down," said the Bishop. "I don't want to see this colony end with God's work here still untouched." He smiled grimly. "But Os Venerados had better be made saints pretty soon. We'll need their help."

"Jane," murmured Ender.

"That's why I love you," said Jane. "You can do anything, as long as I set up the circumstances just right."

"Cut off the ansible and turn off the fence, please," said Ender.

"Done," she said.

Ender ran for the fence, climbed over it. With the piggies' help he lifted Miro to the top and let his rigid body drop into the waiting arms of the Bishop, the Mayor, Dom Cristo, and Novinha. Navio was jogging down the slope right behind Dona Cristo. Whatever they could do to help Miro would be done.

Ouanda was climbing the fence.

"Go back," said Ender. "We've already got him over."

"If you're going to see the wives," said Ouanda, "I'm going with you. You need my help."

Ender had no answer to that. She dropped down and came to Ender.

Navio was kneeling by Miro's body. "He climbed the fence?" he said. "There's nothing in the books for that. It isn't possible. Nobody can bear enough pain to get his head right through the field."

"Will he live?" demanded Novinha.

"How should I know?" said Navio, impatiently stripping away Miro's clothing and attaching sensors to him. "Nobody covered this in medical school."

Ender noticed that the fence was shaking again. Ela was climbing over. "I don't need your help," Ender said.

"It's about time somebody who knows something about xenobiology got to see what's going on," she retorted.

"Stay and look after your brother," said Ouanda.

Ela looked at her defiantly. "He's your brother, too," she said. "Now let's both see to it that if he dies, he didn't die for nothing."

The three of them followed Human and the other piggies into the forest.

Bosquinha and the Bishop watched them go. "When I woke up this morning," Bosquinha said, "I didn't expect to be a rebel before I went to bed."

"Nor did I ever imagine that the Speaker would be our ambassador to the piggies," said the Bishop.

"The question is," said Dom Crist o, "will we ever be forgiven for it."

"Do you think we're making a mistake?" snapped the Bishop.

"Not at all," said Dom Crist o. "I think we've taken a step toward something truly magnificent. But humankind almost never forgives true greatness."

"Fortunately," said the Bishop, "humankind isn't the judge that matters. And now I intend to pray for this boy, since medical science has obviously reached the boundary of its competence."

Chapter 17 -- The Wives

Find out how word got out that the Evacuation Fleet is armed with the Little Doctor. That is HIGHEST PRIORITY. Then find out who this so-called Demosthenes is. Calling the Evacuation Fleet a Second Xenocide is definitely a violation of the treason laws under the Code and if CSA can't find this voice and put a stop to it, I can't think of any good reason for CSA to continue to exist.

In the meantime, continue your evaluation of the files retrieved from Lusitania, It's completely irrational for them to rebel just because we want to arrest two errant xenologers. There was nothing in the Mayor's background to suggest this was possible. If there's a chance that there was a revolution, I want to find out who the leaders of that revolution might be.

Pyotr, I know you're doing your best. So am I. So is everybody. So are the people on Lusitania, probably. But my responsibility is the safety and integrity of the Hundred Worlds. I have a hundred times the responsibility of Peter the Hegemon and about a tenth of his power. Not to mention the fact that I'm far from being the genius he was. No doubt you and everybody else would be happier if Peter were still available. I'm just afraid that by the time this thing is over, we may need another Ender. Nobody wants Xenocide, but if it happens, I want to make sure it's the other guys that disappear. When it comes to war, human is human and alien is alien. All that raman business goes up in smoke when we're talking about survival.

Does that satisfy you? Do you believe me when I tell you that I'm not being soft? Now see to it you're not soft, either. See to it you get me results, fast. Now. Love and kisses, Bawa.

-- Gobawa Ekimbo, Chmn Xen Ovst Comm, to Pyotr Martinov, Dir Cgrs Sec Agc, Memo 44:1970:5:4:2; cit. Demosthenes, The Second Xenocide, 87:1972:1:1:1

Human led the way through the forest. The piggies scrambled easily up and down slopes, across a stream, through thick underbrush. Human, though, seemed to make a dance of it, running partway

up certain trees, touching and speaking to others. The other piggies were much more restrained, only occasionally joining him in his antics. Only Mandachuva hung back with the human beings.

"Why does he do that?" asked Ender quietly.

Mandachuva was baffled for a moment. Ouanda explained what Ender meant. "Why does Human climb the trees, or touch them and sing?"

"He sings to them about the third life," said Mandachuva. "It's very bad manners for him to do that. He has always been selfish and stupid."

Ouanda looked at Ender in surprise, then back at Mandachuva. "I thought everybody liked Human," she said.

"Great honor," said Mandachuva. "A wise one." Then Mandachuva poked Ender in the hip. "But he's a fool in one thing. He thinks you'll do him honor. He thinks you'll take him to the third life."

"What's the third life?" asked Ender.

"The gift that Pipo kept for himself," said Mandachuva. Then he walked faster, caught up with the other piggies.

"Did any of that make sense to you?" Ender asked Ouanda.

"I still can't get used to the way you ask them direct questions."

"I don't get much in the way of answers, do I?"

"Mandachuva is angry, that's something. And he's angry at Pipo, that's another. The third life-- a gift that Pipo kept for himself. It will all make sense."

"When?"

"In twenty years. Or twenty minutes. That's what makes xenology so fun."

Ela was touching the trees, too, and looking from time to time at the bushes. "All the same species of tree. And the bushes, too, just alike. And that vine, climbing most of the trees. Have you ever seen any other plant species here in the forest, Ouanda?"

"Not that I noticed. I never looked for that. The vine is called merdona. The macios seem to feed on it, and the piggies eat the macios. The merdona root, we taught the piggies how to make it edible. Before the amaranth. So they're eating lower on the food chain now."

"Look," said Ender.

The piggies were all stopped, their backs to the humans, facing a clearing. In a moment Ender, Ouanda, and Ela caught up with them and looked over them into the moonlit glen. It was quite a large space, and the ground was beaten bare. Several log houses lined the edges of the clearing, but the middle was empty except for a single huge tree, the largest they had seen in the forest.

The trunk seemed to be moving. "It's crawling with macios," said Ouanda.

"Not macios," said Human.

"Three hundred twenty," said Mandachuva.

"Little brothers," said Arrow.

"And little mothers," added Cups.

"And if you harm them," said Leaf-eater, "we will kill you unplanted and knock down your tree."

"We won't harm them," said Ender.

The piggies did not take a single step into the clearing. They waited and waited, until finally there was some movement near the largest of the log houses, almost directly opposite them. It was a piggy. But larger than any of the piggies they had seen before.

"A wife," murmured Mandachuva.

"What's her name?" asked Ender.

The piggies turned to him and stared. "They don't tell us their names," said Leaf-eater.

"If they even have names," added Cups.

Human reached up and drew Ender down to where he could whisper in his ear. "We always call her Shouter. But never where a wife can hear."

The female looked at them, and then sang-- there was no other way to describe the mellifluous flow of her voice-- a sentence or two in Wives' Language.

"It's for you to go," said Mandachuva. "Speaker. You."

"Alone?" asked Ender. "I'd rather bring Ouanda and Ela with me."

Mandachuva spoke loudly in Wives' Language; it sounded like gargling compared to the beauty of the female's voice. Shouter answered, again singing only briefly.

"She says of course they can come," Mandachuva reported. "She says they're females, aren't they? She's not very sophisticated about the differences between humans and little ones."

"One more thing," said Ender. "At least one of you, as an interpreter. Or can she speak Stark?"

Mandachuva relayed Ender's request. The answer was brief, and Mandachuva didn't like it. He refused to translate it. It was Human who explained. "She says that you may have any interpreter you like, as long as it's me."

"Then we'd like to have you as our interpreter," said Ender.

"You must enter the birthing place first," said Human. "You are the invited one."

Ender stepped out into the open and strode into the moonlight. He could hear Ela and Ouanda following him, and Human padding along behind. Now he could see that Shouter was not the only female here. Several faces were in every doorway. "How many are there?" asked Ender.

Human didn't answer. Ender turned to face him. "How many wives are there?" Ender repeated.

Human still did not answer. Not until Shouter sang again, more loudly and commandingly. Only then did Human translate. "In the birthing place, Speaker, it is only to speak when a wife asks you a question."

Ender nodded gravely, then walked back to where the other males waited at the edge of the clearing. Ouanda and Ela followed him. He could hear Shouter singing behind him, and now he understood why the males referred to her by that name-- her voice was enough to make the trees shake. Human caught up with Ender and tugged at his clothing. "She says why are you going, you haven't been given permission to go. Speaker, this is a very bad thing, she's very angry--"

"Tell her that I did not come to give instructions or to receive instructions. If she won't treat me as an equal, I won't treat her as an equal."

"I can't tell her that," said Human.

"Then she'll always wonder why I left, won't she?"

"This is a great honor, to be called among the wives!"

"It is also a great honor for the Speaker of the Dead to come and visit them."

Human stood still for a few moments, rigid with anxiety. Then he turned and spoke to Shouter.

She in turn fell silent. There was not a sound in the glen.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Speaker," murmured Ouanda.

"I'm improvising," said Ender. "How do you think it's going?"

She didn't answer.

Shouter went back into the large log house. Ender turned around and again headed for the forest. Almost immediately Shouter's voice rang out again.

"She commands you to wait," said Human.

Ender did not break stride, and in a moment he was on the other side of the piggy males. "If she asks me to return, I may come back. But you must tell her, Human, that I did not come to command or to be commanded."

"I can't say that," said Human.

"Why not?" asked Ender.

"Let me," said Ouanda. "Human, do you mean you can't say it because you're afraid, or because there are no words for it?"

"No words. For a brother to speak to a wife about him commanding her, and her petitioning him, those words can't be said in that direction."

Ouanda smiled at Ender. "Not mores, here, Speaker. Language."

"Don't they understand your language, Human?" asked Ender.

"Males' Language can't be spoken in the birthing place," said Human.

"Tell her that my words can't be spoken in Wives' Language, but only in Males' Language, and tell her that I-- petition-- that you be allowed to translate my words in Males' Language."

"You are a lot of trouble, Speaker," said Human. He turned and spoke again to Shouter.

Suddenly the glen was full of the sound of Wives' Language, a dozen different songs, like a choir warming up.

"Speaker," said Ouanda, "you have now violated just about every rule of good anthropological practice."

"Which ones did I miss?"

"The only one I can think of is that you haven't killed any of them yet."

"What you're forgetting," said Ender, "is that I'm not here as a scientist to study them. I'm here as an ambassador to make a treaty with them."

Just as quickly as they started, the wives fell silent. Shouter emerged from her house and walked to the middle of the clearing to stand very near to the huge central tree. She sang.

Human answered her-- in Brothers' Language. Ouanda murmured a rough translation. "He's telling her what you said, about coming as equals."

Again the wives erupted in cacophonous song.

"How do you think they'll respond?" asked Ela.

"How could I know?" asked Ouanda. "I've been here exactly as often as you."

"I think they'll understand it and let me in on those terms," said Ender.

"Why do you think that?" asked Ouanda.

"Because I came out of the sky. Because I'm the Speaker for the Dead."

"Don't start thinking you're a great white god," said Ouanda. "It usually doesn't work out very well."

"I'm not Pizarro," said Ender.

In his ear Jane murmured, "I'm beginning to make some sense out of the Wives' Language. The basics of the Males' Language were in Pipo's and Libo's notes. Human's translations are very helpful. The Wives' Language is closely related to Males' Language, except that it seems more archaic-- closer to the roots, more old forms-- and all the female-to-male forms are in the imperative voice, while the male-to-female forms are in the supplicative. The female word for the brothers seems to be related to the male word for macio, the tree worm. If this is the language of love, it's a wonder they manage to reproduce at all."

Ender smiled. It was good to hear Jane speak to him again, good to know he would have her help.

He realized that Mandachuva had been asking Ouanda a question, for now he heard her whispered answer. "He's listening to the jewel in his ear."

"Is it the hive queen?" asked Mandachuva.

"No," said Ouanda. "It's a..." She struggled to find a word. "It's a computer. A machine with a voice."

"Can I have one?" asked Mandachuva.

"Someday," Ender answered, saving Ouanda the trouble of trying to figure out how to answer.

The wives fell silent, and again Shouter's voice was alone. Immediately the males became agitated, bouncing up and down on their toes.

Jane whispered in his ear. "She's speaking Males' Language herself," she said.

"Very great day," said Arrow quietly. "The wives speaking Males' Language in this place. Never happened before."

"She invites you to come in," said Human. "As a sister to a brother she invites you."

Immediately Ender walked into the clearing and approached her directly. Even though she was taller than the males, she was still a good fifty centimeters shorter than Ender, so he fell to his knees at once. They were eye to eye.

"I am grateful for your kindness to me," said Ender.

"I could say that in Wives' Language," Human said.

"Say it in your language anyway," said Ender.

He did. Shouter reached out a hand and touched the smooth skin of his forehead, the rough stubble of his jaw; she pressed a finger against his lip, and he closed his eyes but did not flinch as she laid a delicate finger on his eyelid.

She spoke. "You are the holy Speaker?" translated Human. Jane corrected the translation. "He added the word holy."

Ender looked Human in the eye. "I am not holy," he said.

Human went rigid.

"Tell her."

He was in turmoil for a moment; then he apparently decided that Ender was the less dangerous of the two. "She didn't say holy."

"Tell me what she says, as exactly as you can," said Ender.

"If you aren't holy," said Human, "how did you know what she really said?"

"Please," said Ender, "be truthful between her and me."

"To you I'll be truthful," said Human. "But when I speak to her, it's my voice she hears saying your words. I have to say them-- carefully. "

"Be truthful," said Ender. "Don't be afraid. It's important that she knows exactly what I said. Tell her this. Say that I ask her to forgive you for speaking to her rudely, but I am a rude framling and you must say exactly what I say."

Human rolled his eyes, but turned to Shouter and spoke.

She answered briefly. Human translated. "She says her head is not carved from merdona root. Of course she understands that."

"Tell her that we humans have never seen such a great tree before. Ask her to explain to us what she and the other wives do with this tree."

Ouanda was aghast. "You certainly get straight to the point, don't you?"

But when Human translated Ender's words, Shouter immediately went to the tree, touched it, and began to sing.

Now, gathered closer to the tree, they could see the mass of creatures squirming on the bark. Most of them were no more than four or five centimeters long. They looked vaguely fetal, though a thin haze of dark fur covered their pinkish bodies. Their eyes were open. They climbed over each other, struggling to win a place at one of the smears of drying dough that dotted the bark.

"Amaranth mash," said Ouanda.

"Babies," said Ela.

"Not babies," said Human. "These are almost grown enough to walk."

Ender stepped to the tree, reached out his hand. Shouter abruptly stopped her song. But Ender did not stop his movement. He touched his fingers to the bark near a young piggy. In its climbing, it touched him, climbed over his hand, clung to him. "Do you know this one by name?" asked Ender.

Frightened, Human hastily translated. And gave back Shouter's answer. "That one is a brother of mine," he said. "He won't get a name until he can walk on two legs. His father is Rooter."

"And his mother?" asked Ender.

"Oh, the little mothers never have names," said Human.

"Ask her."

Human asked her. She answered. "She says his mother was very strong and very courageous. She made herself fat in bearing her five children." Human touched his forehead. "Five children is a very good number. And she was fat enough to feed them all."

"Does his mother bring the mash that feeds him?"

Human looked horrified. "Speaker, I can't say that. Not in any language."

"Why not?"

"I told you. She was fat enough to feed all five of her little ones. Put back that little brother, and let the wife sing to the tree."

Ender put his hand near the trunk again and the little brother squirmed away. Shouter resumed her song. Ouanda glared at Ender for his impetuosity. But Ela seemed excited. "Don't you see? The newborns feed on their mother's body."

Ender drew away, repelled.

"How can you say that?" asked Ouanda.

"Look at them squirming on the trees, just like little macios. They and the macios must have been competitors." Ela pointed toward a part of the tree unstained by amaranth mash. "The tree leaks sap. Here in the cracks. Back before the Descolada there must have been insects that fed on the sap, and the macios and the infant piggies competed to eat them. That's why the piggies were able to mingle their genetic molecules with these trees. Not only did the infants live here, the adults constantly had to climb the trees to keep the macios away. Even when there were plenty of other food sources, they were still tied to these trees throughout their life cycles. Long before they ever became trees."

"We're studying piggy society," said Ouanda impatiently. "Not the distant evolutionary past."

"I'm conducting delicate negotiations," said Ender. "So please be quiet and learn what you can without conducting a seminar."

The singing reached a climax; a crack appeared in the side of the tree.

"They're not going to knock down this tree for us, are they?" asked Ouanda, horrified.

"She is asking the tree to open her heart." Human touched his forehead. "This is the mothertree, and it is the only one in all our forest. No harm may come to this tree, or all our children will come from other trees, and our fathers all will die."

All the other wives' voices joined Shouter's now, and soon a hole gaped wide in the trunk of the mothertree. Immediately Ender moved to stand directly in front of the hole. It was too dark inside for him to see.

Ela took her nightstick from her belt and held it out to him. Ouanda's hand flew out and seized Ela's wrist. "A machine!" she said. "You can't bring that here."

Ender gently took the nightstick out of Ela's hand. "The fence is off," said Ender, "and we all can engage in Questionable Activities now." He pointed the barrel of the nightstick at the ground and pressed it on, then slid his finger quickly along the barrel to soften the light and spread it. The wives murmured, and Shouter touched Human on the belly.

"I told them you could make little moons at night," he said. "I told them you carried them with you."

"Will it hurt anything if I let this light into the heart of the mothertree?"

Human asked Shouter, and Shouter reached for the nightstick. Then, holding it in trembling hands, she sang softly and tilted it slightly so that a sliver of the light passed through the hole. Almost at once she recoiled and pointed the nightstick the other direction. "The brightness blinds them," Human said.

In Ender's ear, Jane whispered, "The sound of her voice is echoing from the inside of the tree. When the light went in, the echo modulated, causing a high overtone and a shaping of the sound. The tree was answering, using the sound of Shouter's own voice."

"Can you see?" Ender said softly.

"Kneel down and get me close enough, and then move me across the opening. " Ender obeyed, letting his head move slowly in front of the hole, giving the jeweled ear a clear angle toward the interior. Jane described what she saw. Ender knelt there for a long time, not moving. Then he turned to the others. "The little mothers," said Ender. "There are little mothers in there, pregnant ones. Not more than four centimeters long. One of them is giving birth."

"You see with your jewel?" asked Ela.

Ouanda knelt beside him, trying to see inside and failing. "Incredible sexual dimorphism. The females come to sexual maturity in their infancy, give birth, and die." She asked Human, "All of these little ones on the outside of the tree, they're all brothers?"

Human repeated the question to Shouter. The wife reached up to a place near the aperture in the trunk and took down one fairly large infant. She sang a few words of explanation. "That one is a young wife," Human translated. "She will join the other wives in caring for the children, when she's old enough."

"Is there only one?" asked Ela.

Ender shuddered and stood up. "That one is sterile, or else they never let her mate. She couldn't possibly have had children."

"Why not?" asked Ouanda.

"There's no birth canal," said Ender. "The babies eat their way out."

Ouanda muttered a prayer.

Ela, however, was more curious than ever. "Fascinating," she said. "But if they're so small, how do they mate?"

"We carry them to the fathers, of course," said Human. "How do you think? The father's can't come here, can they?"

"The fathers," said Ouanda. "That's what they call the most revered trees."

"That's right," said Human. "The fathers are ripe on the bark. They put their dust on the bark, in the sap. We carry the little mother to the father the wives have chosen. She crawls on the bark, and the dust on the sap gets into her belly and fills it up with little ones."

Ouanda wordlessly pointed to the small protuberances on Human's belly.

"Yes," Human said. "These are the carries. The honored brother puts the little mother on one of his carries, and she holds very tight all the way to the father." He touched his belly. "It is the greatest joy we have in our second life. We would carry the little mothers every night if we could."

Shouter sang, long and loud, and the hole in the mothertree began to close again.

"All those females, all the little mothers," asked Ela. "Are they sentient?"

It was a word that Human didn't know.

"Are they awake?" asked Ender.

"Of course," said Human.

"What he means," explained Ouanda, "is can the little mothers think? Do they understand language?"

"Them?" asked Human. "No, they're no smarter than the cabras. And only a little smarter than the macios. They only do three things. Eat, crawl, and cling to the carry. The ones on the outside of the tree, now-- they're beginning to learn. I can remember climbing on the face of the mothertree. So I had memory then. But I'm one of the very few that remember so far back."

Tears came unbidden to Ouanda's eyes. "All the mothers, they're born, they mate, they give birth and die, all in their infancy. They never even know they were alive."

"It's sexual dimorphism carried to a ridiculous extreme," said Ela. "The females reach sexual maturity early, but the males reach it late. It's ironic, isn't it, that the dominant female adults are all sterile. They govern the whole tribe, and yet their own genes can't be passed on--"

"Ela," said Ouanda, "what if we could develop a way to let the little mothers bear their children without being devoured. A caesarean section. With a protein-rich nutrient substitute for the little mother's corpse. Could the females survive to adulthood?"

Ela didn't have a chance to answer. Ender took them both by the arms and pulled them away. "How dare you!" he whispered. "What if they could find a way to let infant human girls conceive and bear children, which would feed on their mother's tiny corpse?"

"What are you talking about!" said Ouanda.

"That's sick," said Ela.

"We didn't come here to attack them at the root of their lives," said Ender. "We came here to find a way to share a world with them. In a hundred years or five hundred years, when they've learned enough to make changes for themselves, then they can decide whether to alter the way that their children are conceived and born. But we can't begin to guess what it would do to them if suddenly as many females as males came to maturity. To do what? They can't bear more children, can they? They can't compete with the males to become fathers, can they? What are they for?"

"But they're dying without ever being alive--"

"They are what they are," said Ender. "They decide what changes they'll make, not you, not from your blindly human perspective, trying to make them have full and happy lives, just like us."

"You're right," said Ela. "Of course, you're right, I'm sorry." To Ela, the piggies weren't people, they were strange alien fauna, and Ela was used to discovering that other animals had inhuman life patterns. But Ender could see that Ouanda was still upset. She had made the raman transition: She thought of piggies as us instead of them. She accepted the strange behavior that she knew about, even the murder of her father, as within an acceptable range of alienness. This meant she was actually more tolerant and accepting of the piggies than Ela could possibly be; yet it also made her more vulnerable to the discovery of cruel, bestial behaviors among her friends.

Ender noticed, too, that after years of association with the piggies, Ouanda had one of their habits: At a moment of extreme anxiety, her whole body became rigid. So he reminded her of her humanity by taking her shoulder in a fatherly gesture, drawing her close under his arm.

At his touch Ouanda melted a little, laughed nervously, her voice low. "Do you know what I keep thinking?" she said. "That the little mothers have all their children and die unbaptized."

"If Bishop Peregrino converts them," said Ender, "maybe they'll let us sprinkle the inside of the mothertree and say the words."

"Don't mock me," Ouanda whispered.

"I wasn't. For now, though, we'll ask them to change enough that we can live with them, and no more. We'll change ourselves only enough that they can bear to live with us. Agree to that, or the fence goes up again, because then we truly would be a threat to their survival."

Ela nodded her agreement, but Ouanda had gone rigid again. Ender's fingers suddenly dug harshly into Ouanda's shoulder. Frightened, she nodded her agreement. He relaxed his grip. "I'm sorry," he said. "But they are what they are. If you want, they are what God made them. So don't try to remake them in your own image."

He returned to the mothertree. Shouter and Human were waiting.

"Please excuse the interruption," said Ender.

"It's all right," said Human. "I told her what you were doing."

Ender felt himself sink inside. "What did you tell her we were doing?"

"I said that they wanted to do something to the little mothers that would make us all more like humans, but you said they never could do that or you'd put back the fence. I told her that you said we must remain Little Ones, and you must remain humans."

Ender smiled. His translation was strictly true, but he had the sense not to get into specifics. It was conceivable that the wives might actually want the little mothers to survive childbirth, without realizing how vast the consequences of such a simple-seeming, humanitarian change might be. Human was an excellent diplomat; he told the truth and yet avoided the whole issue.

"Well," said Ender. "Now that we've all met each other, it's time to begin serious talking."

Ender sat down on the bare earth. Shouter squatted on the ground directly opposite him. She sang a few words.

"She says you must teach us everything you know, take us out to the stars, bring us the hive queen and give her the lightstick that this new human brought with you, or in the dark of night she'll send all the brothers of this forest to kill all the humans in your sleep and hang you high above the ground so you get no third life at all." Seeing the humans' alarm, Human reached out his hand and touched Ender's chest. "No, no, you must understand. That means nothing. That's the way we always begin when we're talking to another tribe. Do you think we're crazy? We'd never kill you! You gave us amaranth, pottery, the Hive Queen and the Hegemon."

"Tell her to withdraw that threat or we'll never give her anything else."

"I told you, Speaker, it doesn't mean--"

"She said the words, and I won't talk to her as long as those words stand."

Human spoke to her.

Shouter jumped to her feet and walked all the way around the mothertree, her hands raised high, singing loudly.

Human leaned to Ender. "She's complaining to the great mother and to all the wives that you're a brother who doesn't know his place. She's saying that you're rude and impossible to deal with."

Ender nodded. "Yes, that's exactly right. Now we're getting somewhere."

Again Shouter squatted across from Ender. She spoke in Males' Language.

"She says she'll never kill any human or let any of the brothers or wives kill any of you. She says for you to remember that you're twice as tall as any of us and you know everything and we know nothing. Now has she humiliated herself enough that you'll talk to her?"

Shouter watched him, glumly waiting for his response.

"Yes," said Ender. "Now we can begin."

Novinha knelt on the floor beside Miro's bed. Quim and Olhado stood behind her. Dom Crist o was putting Quara and Grego to bed in their room. The sound of his off-tune lullaby was barely audible behind the tortured sound of Miro's breathing.

Miro's eyes opened.

"Miro," said Novinha.

Miro groaned.

"Miro, you're home in bed. You went over the fence while it was on. Now Dr. Navio says that your brain has been damaged. We don't know whether the damage is permanent or not. You may be partially paralyzed. But you're alive, Miro, and Navio says that he can do many things to help you compensate for what you may have lost. Do you understand? I'm telling you the truth. It may be very bad for a while, but it's worth trying."

He moaned softly. But it was not a sound of pain. It was as if he were trying to talk, and couldn't.

"Can you move your jaw, Miro?" asked Quim.

Slowly Miro's mouth opened and closed.

Olhado held his hand a meter above Miro's head and moved it. "Can you make your eyes follow the movement of my hand?"

Miro's eyes followed. Novinha squeezed Miro's hand. "Did you feel me squeeze your hand?"

Miro moaned again.

"Close your mouth for no," said Quim, "and open your mouth for yes."

Miro closed his mouth and said, "Mm."

Novinha could not help herself; despite her encouraging words, this was the most terrible thing that had happened to any of her children. She had thought when Lauro lost his eyes and became Olhado-- she hated the nickname, but now used it herself-- that nothing worse could happen. But Miro, paralyzed, helpless, so he couldn't even feel the touch of her hand, that could not be borne. She had felt one kind of grief when Pipo died, and another kind when Libo died, and a terrible regret at Marc o's death. She even remembered the aching emptiness she felt as she watched them lower her mother and father into the ground. But there was no pain worse than to watch her child suffer and be unable to help.

She stood up to leave. For his sake, she would do her crying silently, and in another room.

"Mm. Mm. Mm."

"He doesn't want you to go," said Quim.

"I'll stay if you want," said Novinha. "But you should sleep again. Navio said that the more you sleep for a while--"

"Mm. Mm. Mm."

"Doesn't want to sleep, either," said Quim.

Novinha stifled her immediate response, to snap at Quim and tell him that she could hear his answers perfectly well for herself. This was no time for quarreling. Besides, it was Quim who had worked out the system that Miro was using to communicate. He had a right to take pride in it, to pretend that he was Miro's voice. It was his way of affirming that he was part of the family. That he was not quitting because of what he learned in the praça today. It was his way of forgiving her, so she held her tongue.

"Maybe he wants to tell us something," said Olhado.

"Mm."

"Or ask a question?" said Quim.

"Ma. Aa."

"That's great," said Quim. "If he can't move his hands, he can't write."

"Sem problema," said Olhado. "Scanning. He can scan. If we bring him in by the terminal, I can make it scan the letters and he just says yes when it hits the letters he wants.

"That'll take forever," said Quim.

"Do you want to try that, Miro?" asked Novinha.

He wanted to.

The three of them carried him to the front room and laid him on the bed there. Olhado oriented the terminal so it displayed all the letters of the alphabet, facing so Miro could see them. He wrote a short program that caused each letter to light up in turn for a fraction of a second. It took a few trial runs for the speed to be right-- slow enough that Miro could make a sound that meant this letter before the light moved on to the next one.

Miro, in turn, kept things moving faster yet by deliberately abbreviating his words.

P-I-G.

"Piggies," said Olhado.

"Yes," said Novinha. "Why were you crossing the fence with the piggies?"

"Mmmmm!"

"He's asking a question, Mother," said Quim. "He doesn't want to answer any."

"Aa."

"Do you want to know about the piggies that were with you when you crossed the fence?" asked Novinha. He did. "They've gone back into the forest. With Ouanda and Ela and the Speaker for the Dead." Quickly she told him about the meeting in the Bishop's chambers, what they had learned about the piggies, and above all what they had decided to do. "When they turned off the fence to save you, Miro, it was a decision to rebel against Congress. Do you understand? The Committee's rules are finished. The fence is nothing but wires now. The gate will stand open."

Tears came to Miro's eyes.

"Is that all you wanted to know?" asked Novinha. "You should sleep."

No, he said. No no no no.

"Wait till his eyes are clear," said Quim. "And then we'll scan some more."

D-I-G-A F-A-L--

"Diga ao Falante pelos Mortos," said Olhado.

"What should we tell the Speaker?" asked Quim.

"You should sleep now and tell us later," said Novinha. "He won't be back for hours. He's negotiating a set of rules to govern relations between the piggies and us. To stop them from killing any more of us, the way they killed Pipo and L-- and your father."

But Miro refused to sleep. He continued spelling out his message as the terminal scanned. Together the three of them worked out what he was trying to get them to tell the Speaker. And they understood that he wanted them to go now, before the negotiations ended.

So Novinha left Dom Cristo and Dona Cristo to watch over the house and the little children. On the way out of the house she stopped beside her oldest son. The exertion had worn him out; his eyes were closed and his breathing was regular. She touched his hand, held it, squeezed it; he couldn't feel her touch, she knew, but then it was herself she was comforting, not him.

He opened his eyes. And, ever so gently, she felt his fingers tighten on hers. "I felt it," she whispered to him. "You'll be all right."

He shut his eyes against his tears. She got up and walked blindly to the door. "I have something in my eye," she told Olhado. "Lead me for a few minutes until I can see for myself."

Quim was already at the fence. "The gate's too far!" he shouted. "Can you climb over, Mother?"

She could, but it wasn't easy. "No doubt about it," she said. "Bosquinha's going to have to let us install another gate right here."

It was late now, past midnight, and both Ouanda and Ela was getting sleepy. Ender was not. He had been on edge for hours in his bargaining with Shouter; his body chemistry had responded, and even if he had gone home right now it would have been hours before he was capable of sleep.

He now knew far more about what the piggies wanted and needed. Their forest was their home, their nation; it was all the definition of property they had ever needed. Now, however, the amaranth fields had caused them to see that the prairie was also useful land, which they needed to control. Yet they had little concept of land measurement. How many hectares did they need to keep under cultivation? How much land could the humans use? Since the piggies themselves barely understood their needs, it was hard for Ender to pin them down.

Harder still was the concept of law and government. The wives ruled: to the piggies, it was that simple. But Ender had finally got them to understand that humans made their laws differently, and that human laws applied to human problems. To make them understand why humans needed their own laws, Ender had to explain to them human mating patterns. He was amused to note that

Shouter was appalled at the notion of adults mating with each other, and of men having an equal voice with women in the making of the laws. The idea of family and kinship separate from the tribe was "brother blindness" to her. It was all right for Human to take pride in his father's many matings, but as far as the wives were concerned, they chose fathers solely on the basis of what was good for the tribe. The tribe and the individual-- they were the only entities the wives respected.

Finally, though, they understood that human laws must apply within the borders of human settlements, and piggy laws must apply within the piggy tribes. Where the borders should be was entirely a different matter. Now, after three hours, they had finally agreed to one thing and one thing only: Piggy law applied within the forest, and all humans who came within the forest were subject to it. Human law applied within the fence, and all piggies who came there were subject to human government. All the rest of the planet would be divided up later. It was a very small triumph, but at least there was some agreement.

"You must understand," Ender told her, "that humans will need a lot of open land. But we're only the beginning of the problem. You want the hive queen to teach you, to help you mine ore and smelt metals and make tools. But she'll also need land. And in a very short time she'll be far stronger than either humans or Little Ones." Every one of her buggers, he explained, was perfectly obedient and infinitely hardworking. They would quickly outstrip the humans in their productivity and power. Once she was restored to life on Lusitania, she would have to be reckoned with at every turn.

"Rooter says she can be trusted," said Human. And, translating for Shouter, he said, "The mothertree also gives the hive queen her trust."

"Do you give her your land?" Ender insisted.

"The world is big," Human translated for Shouter. "She can use all the forests of the other tribes. So can you. We give them to you freely."

Ender looked at Ouanda and Ela. "That's all very good," said Ela, "but are those forests theirs to give?"

"Definitely not," said Ouanda. "They even have wars with the other tribes."

"We'll kill them for you if they give you trouble," offered Human. "We're very strong now. Three hundred twenty babies. In ten years no tribe can stand against us."

"Human," said Ender, "tell Shouter that we are dealing with this tribe now. We'll deal with other tribes later."

Human translated quickly, his words tumbling over each other, and quickly had Shouter's response. "No no no no no."

"What is she objecting to?" asked Ender.

"You won't deal with our enemies. You came to us. If you go to them, then you are the enemy, too."

It was at that moment that the lights appeared in the forest behind them, and Arrow and Leaf-eater led Novinha, Quim, and Olhado into the wives' clearing.

"Miro sent us," Olhado explained.

"How is he?" asked Ouanda.

"Paralyzed," said Quim bluntly. It saved Novinha the effort of explaining it gently.

"Nossa Senhora," whispered Ouanda.

"But much of it is temporary," said Novinha. "Before I left, I squeezed his hand. He felt it, and squeezed me back. Just a little, but the nerve connections aren't dead, not all of them, anyway."

"Excuse me," said Ender, "but that's a conversation you can carry on back in Milagre. I have another matter to attend to here. "

"Sorry," Novinha said. "Miro's message. He couldn't speak, but he gave it to us letter by letter, and we figured out what went in the cracks. The piggies are planning war. Using the advantages they've gained from us. Arrows, their greater numbers-- they'd be irresistible. As I understand it, though, Miro says that their warfare isn't just a matter of conquest of territory. It's an opportunity for genetic mixing. Male exogamy. The winning tribe gets the use of the trees that grow from the bodies of the war dead."

Ender looked at Human, Leaf-eater, Arrow. "It's true," said Arrow. "Of course it's true. We are the wisest of tribes now. All of us will make better fathers than any of the other piggies. "

"I see," said Ender.

"That's why Miro wanted us to come to you now, tonight," said Novinha. "While the negotiations still aren't final. That has to end."

Human stood up, bounced up and down as if he were about to take off and fly. "I won't translate that," said Human.

"I will," said Leaf-eater.

"Stop!" shouted Ender. His voice was far louder than he had ever let it be heard before. Immediately everyone fell silent; the echo of his shout seemed to linger among the trees. "Leaf-eater," said Ender, "I will have no interpreter but Human."

"Who are you to tell me that I may not speak to the wives? I am a piggy, and you are nothing."

"Human," said Ender, "tell Shouter that if she lets Leaf-eater translate words that we humans have said among ourselves, then he is a spy. And if she lets him spy on us, we will go home now and you will have nothing from us. I'll take the hive queen to another world to restore her. Do you understand?"

Of course he understood. Ender also knew that Human was pleased. Leaf-eater was trying to usurp Human's role and discredit him-- along with Ender. When Human finished translating Ender's words, Shouter sang at Leaf-eater. Abashed, he quickly retreated to the woods to watch with the other piggies.

But Human was by no means a puppet. He gave no sign that he was grateful. He looked Ender in the eye. "You said you wouldn't try to change us."

"I said I wouldn't try to change you more than is necessary."

"Why is this necessary? It's between us and the other piggies."

"Careful," said Ouanda. "He's very upset."

Before he could hope to persuade Shouter, he had to convince Human. "You are our first friends among the piggies. You have our trust and our love. We will never do anything to harm you, or to give any other piggies an advantage over you. But we didn't come just to you. We represent all of humankind, and we've come to teach all we can to all of the piggies. Regardless of tribe."

"You don't represent all humankind. You're about to fight a war with other humans. So how can you say that our wars are evil and your wars are good?"

Surely Pizarro, for all his shortcomings, had an easier time of it with Atahualpa. "We're trying not to fight a war with other humans," said Ender. "And if we fight one, it won't be our war, trying to gain an advantage over them. It will be your war, trying to win you the right to travel among the stars." Ender held up his open hand. "We have set aside our humanness to become ramen with you." He closed his hand into a fist. "Human and piggy and hive queen, here on Lusitania, will be one. All humans. All buggers. All piggies.

Human sat in silence, digesting this.

"Speaker," he finally said. "This is very hard. Until you humans came, other piggies were-- always to be killed, and their third life was to be slaves to us in forests that we kept. This forest was once a battlefield, and the most ancient trees are the warriors who died in battle. Our oldest fathers are the heroes of that war, and our houses are made of the cowards. All our lives we prepare to win battles with our enemies, so that our wives can make a mothertree in a new battle forest, and make us mighty and great. These last ten years we have learned to use arrows to kill from far off. Pots and cabra skins to carry water across the drylands. Amaranth and merdona root so we can be many and strong and carry food with us far from the macios of our home forest. We rejoiced in this because it meant that we would always be victorious in war. We would carry our wives, our little mothers, our

heroes to every corner of the great world, and finally one day out into the stars. This is our dream, Speaker, and you tell me now that you want us to lose it like wind in the sky."

It was a powerful speech. None of the others offered Ender any suggestions about what to say in answer. Human had half-convinced them.

"Your dream is a good one," said Ender. "It's the dream of every living creature. The desire that is the very root of life itself: To grow until all the space you can see is part of you, under your control. It's the desire for greatness. There are two ways, though, to fulfil it. One way is to kill anything that is not yourself, to swallow it up or destroy it, until nothing is left to oppose you. But that way is evil. You say to all the universe, Only I will be great, and to make room for me the rest of you must give up even what you already have, and become nothing. Do you understand, Human, that if we humans felt this way, acted this way, we could kill every piggy in Lusitania and make this place our home. How much of your dream would be left, if we were evil?"

Human was trying hard to understand. "I see that you gave us great gifts, when you could have taken from us even the little that we had. But why did you give us the gifts, if we can't use them to become great?"

"We want you to grow, to travel among the stars. Here on Lusitania we want you to be strong and powerful, with hundreds and thousands of brothers and wives. We want to teach you to grow many kinds of plants and raise many different animals. Ela and Novinha, these two women, will work all the days of their lives to develop more plants that can live here in Lusitania, and every good thing that they make, they'll give to you. So you can grow. But why does a single piggy in any other forest have to die, just so you can have these gifts? And why would it hurt you in any way, if we also gave the same gifts to them?"

"If they become just as strong as we are, then what have we gained?"

What am I expecting this brother to do, thought Ender. His people have always measured themselves against the other tribes. Their forest isn't fifty hectares or five hundred-- it's either larger or smaller than the forest of the tribe to the west or the south. What I have to do now is the work of a generation: I have to teach him a new way of conceiving the stature of his own people. "Is Rooter great?" asked Ender.

"I say he is," said Human. "He's my father. His tree isn't the oldest or thickest, but no father that we remember has ever had so many children so quickly after he was planted."

"So in a way, all the children that he fathered are still part of him. The more children he fathers, the greater he becomes." Human nodded slowly. "And the more you accomplish in your life, the greater you make your father, is that true?"

"If his children do well, then yes, it's a great honor to the fathertree."

"Do you have to kill all the other great trees in order for your father to be great?"

"That's different," said Human. "All the other great trees are fathers of the tribe. And the lesser trees are still brothers." Yet Ender could see that Human was uncertain now. He was resisting Ender's ideas because they were strange, not because they were wrong or incomprehensible. He was beginning to understand.

"Look at the wives," said Ender. "They have no children. They can never be great the way that your father is great."

"Speaker, you know that they're the greatest of all. The whole tribe obeys them. When they rule us well, the tribe prospers; when the tribe becomes many, then the wives are also made strong--"

"Even though not a single one of you is their own child."

"How could we be?" asked Human.

"And yet you add to their greatness. Even though they aren't your mother or your father, they still grow when you grow."

"We're all the same tribe."

"But why are you the same tribe? You have different fathers, different mothers."

"Because we are the tribe! We live here in the forest, we--"

"If another piggy came here from another tribe, and asked you to let him stay and be a brother--"

"We would never make him a fathertree!"

"But you tried to make Pipo and Libo fathertrees."

Human was breathing heavily. "I see," he said. "They were part of the tribe. From the sky, but we made them brothers and tried to make them fathers. The tribe is whatever we believe it is. If we say the tribe is all the Little Ones in the forest, and all the trees, then that is what the tribe is. Even though some of the oldest trees here came from warriors of two different tribes, fallen in battle. We become one tribe because we say we're one tribe."

Ender marveled at his mind, this small raman. How few humans were able to grasp this idea, or let it extend beyond the narrow confines of their tribe, their family, their nation.

Human walked behind Ender, leaned against him, the weight of the young piggy pressed against his back. Ender felt Human's breath on his cheek, and then their cheeks were pressed together, both of them looking in the same direction. All at once Ender understood: "You see what I see," said Ender.

"You humans grow by making us part of you, humans and piggies and buggers, ramen together. Then we are one tribe, and our greatness is your greatness, and yours is ours." Ender could feel

Human's body trembling with the strength of the idea. "You say to us, we must see all other tribes the same way. As one tribe, our tribe all together, so that we grow by making them grow."

"You could send teachers," said Ender. "Brothers to the other tribes, who could pass into their third life in the other forests and have children there."

"This is a strange and difficult thing to ask of the wives," said Human. "Maybe an impossible thing. Their minds don't work the way a brother's mind works. A brother can think of many different things. But a wife thinks of only one thing: what is good for the tribe, and at the root of that, what is good for the children and the little mothers."

"Can you make them understand this?" asked Ender.

"Better than you could," said Human. "But probably not. Probably I'll fail."

"I don't think you'll fail," said Ender.

"You came here tonight to make a covenant between us, the piggies of this tribe, and you, the humans who live on this world. The humans outside Lusitania won't care about our covenant, and the piggies outside this forest won't care about it."

"We want to make the same covenant with all of them."

"And in this covenant, you humans promise to teach us everything."

"As quickly as you can understand it."

"Any question we ask."

"If we know the answer."

"When! If! These aren't words in a covenant! Give me straight answers now, Speaker for the Dead." Human stood up, pushed away from Ender, walked around in front of him, bent down a little to look at Ender from above. "Promise to teach us everything that you know!"

"We promise that."

"And you also promise to restore the hive queen to help us."

"I'll restore the hive queen. You'll have to make your own covenant with her. She doesn't obey human law."

"You promise to restore the hive queen, whether she helps us or not."

"Yes."

"You promise to obey our law when you come into our forest. And you agree that the prairie land that we need will also be under our law."

"Yes."

"And you will go to war against all the other humans in all the stars of the sky to protect us and let us also travel in the stars?"

"We already have."

Human relaxed, stepped back, squatted in his old position. He drew with his finger in the dirt. "Now, what you want from us," said Human. "We will obey human law in your city, and also in the prairie land that you need."

"Yes," said Ender.

"And you don't want us to go to war," said Human.

"That's right."

"And that's all?"

"One more thing," said Ender.

"What you ask is already impossible," said Human. "You might as well ask more."

"The third life," said Ender. "When does it begin? When you kill a piggy and he grows into a tree, is that right?"

"The first life is within the mothertree, where we never see the light, and where we eat blindly the meat of our mother's body and the sap of the mothertree. The second life is when we live in the shade of the forest, the half-light, running and walking and climbing, seeing and singing and talking, making with our hands. The third life is when we reach and drink from the sun, in the full light at last, never moving except in the wind; only to think, and on those certain days when the brothers drum on your trunk, to speak to them. Yes, that's the third life."

"Humans don't have the third life."

Human looked at him, puzzled.

"When we die, even if you plant us, nothing grows. There's no tree. We never drink from the sun. When we die, we're dead."

Human looked at Ouanda. "But the other book you gave us. It talked all the time about living after death and being born again."

"Not as a tree," said Ender. "Not as anything you can touch or feel. Or talk to. Or get answers from."

"I don't believe you," said Human. "If that's true, why did Pipo and Libo make us plant them?"

Novinha knelt down beside Ender, touching him-- no, leaning on him-- so she could hear more clearly.

"How did they make you plant them?" said Ender.

"They made the great gift, won the great honor. The human and the piggy together. Pipo and Mandachuva. Libo and Leaf-eater. Mandachuva and Leaf-eater both thought that they would win the third life, but each time, Pipo and Libo would not. They insisted on keeping the gift for themselves. Why would they do that, if humans have no third life?"

Novinha's voice came then, husky and emotional. "What did they have to do, to give the third life to Mandachuva or Leaf-eater?"

"Plant them, of course," said Human. "The same as today."

"The same as what today?" asked Ender.

"You and me," said Human. "Human and the Speaker for the Dead. If we make this covenant so that the wives and the humans agree together, then this is a great, a noble day. So either you will give me the third life, or I will give it to you."

"With my own hand?"

"Of course," said Human. "If you won't give me the honor, then I must give it to you."

Ender remembered the picture he had first seen only two weeks ago, of Pipo dismembered and disemboweled, his body parts stretched and spread. Planted. "Human," said Ender, "the worst crime that a human being can commit is murder. And one of the worst ways to do it is to take a living person and cut him and hurt him so badly that he dies."

Again Human squatted for a while, trying to make sense of this. "Speaker," he said at last, "my mind keeps seeing this two ways. If humans don't have a third life, then planting is killing, forever. In our eyes, Libo and Pipo were keeping the honor to themselves, and leaving Mandachuva and Leaf-eater as you see them, to die without honor for their accomplishments. In our eyes, you humans came out of the fence to the hillside and tore them from the ground before their roots could grow. In our eyes, it was you who committed murder, when you carried Pipo and Libo away. But now I see it another way. Pipo and Libo wouldn't take Mandachuva and Leaf-eater into the third life, because to them it would be murder. So they willingly allowed their own death, just so they wouldn't have to kill any of us."

"Yes," said Novinha.

"But if that's so, then when you humans saw them on the hillside, why didn't you come into the forest and kill us all? Why didn't you make a great fire and consume all our fathers, and the great mothertree herself?"

Leaf-eater cried out from the edge of the forest, a terrible keening cry, an unbearable grief.

"If you had cut one of our trees," said Human. "If you had murdered a single tree, we would have come upon you in the night and killed you, every one of you. And even if some of you survived, our messengers would have told the story to every other tribe, and none of you would ever have left this land alive. Why didn't you kill us, for murdering Pipo and Libo?"

Mandachuva suddenly appeared behind Human, panting heavily. He flung himself to the ground, his hands outstretched toward Ender. "I cut him with these hands," he cried. "I tried to honor him, and I killed his tree forever!"

"No," said Ender. He took Mandachuva's hands, held them. "You both thought you were saving each other's life. He hurt you, and you-- hurt him, yes, killed him, but you both believed you were doing good. That's enough, until now. Now you know the truth, and so do we. We know that you didn't mean murder. And you know that when you take a knife to a human being, we die forever. That's the last term in the covenant, Human. Never take another human being to the third life, because we don't know how to go."

"When I tell this story to the wives," said Human, "you'll hear grief so terrible that it will sound like the breaking of trees in a thunderstorm."

He turned and stood before Shouter, and spoke to her for a few moments. Then he returned to Ender. "Go now," he said.

"We have no covenant yet," said Ender.

"I have to speak to all the wives. They'll never do that while you're here, in the shade of the mothertree, with no one to protect the little ones. Arrow will lead you back out of the forest. Wait for me on the hillside, where Rooter keeps watch over the gate. Sleep if you can. I'll present the covenant to the wives and try to make them understand that we must deal as kindly with the other tribes as you have dealt with us."

Impulsively, Human reached out a hand and touched Ender firmly on the belly. "I make my own covenant," he said to Ender. "I will honor you forever, but I will never kill you."

Ender put out his hand and laid his palm against Human's warm abdomen. The protuberances under his hand were hot to the touch. "I will also honor you forever," said Ender.

"And if we make this covenant between your tribe and ours," said Human, "will you give me the honor of the third life? Will you let me rise up and drink the light?"

"Can we do it quickly? Not the slow and terrible way that--"

"And make me one of the silent trees? Never fathering? Without honor, except to feed my sap to the filthy macios and give my wood to the brothers when they sing to me?"

"Isn't there someone else who can do it?" asked Ender. "One of the brothers, who knows your way of life and death?"

"You don't understand," said Human. "This is how the whole tribe knows that the truth has been spoken. Either you must take me into the third life, or I must take you, or there's no covenant. I won't kill you, Speaker, and we both want a treaty."

"I'll do it," said Ender.

Human nodded, withdrew his hand, and returned to Shouter.

"O Deus," whispered Ouanda. "How will you have the heart?"

Ender had no answer. He merely followed silently behind Arrow as he led them to the woods. Novinha gave him her own nightstick to lead the way; Arrow played with it like a child, making the light small and large, making it hover and swoop like a suckfly among the trees and bushes. He was as happy and playful as Ender had ever seen a piggy be.

But behind them, they could hear the voices of the wives, singing a terrible and cacophonous song. Human had told them the truth about Pipo and Libo, that they died the final death, and in pain, all so that they would not have to do to Mandachuva and Leaf-eater what they thought was murder. Only when they had gone far enough that the sound of the wives' keening was softer than their own footfalls and the wind in the trees did any of the humans speak.

"That was the mass for my father's soul," said Ouanda softly.

"And for mine," answered Novinha; they all knew that she spoke of Pipo, not the long-dead Venerado, Gusto.

But Ender was not part of their conversation; he had not known Libo and Pipo, and did not belong to their memory of grief. All he could think of was the trees of the forest. They had once been living, breathing piggies, every one of them. The piggies could sing to them, talk to them, even, somehow, understand their speech. But Ender couldn't. To Ender the trees were not people, could never be people. If he took the knife to Human, it might not be murder in the piggies' eyes, but to Ender himself he would be taking away the only part of Human's life that Ender understood. As a piggy, Human was a true raman, a brother. As a tree he would be little more than a gravestone, as far as Ender could understand, as far as he could really believe.

Once again, he thought, I must kill, though I promised that I never would again.

He felt Novinha's hand take him by the crook of the arm. She leaned on him. "Help me," she said. "I'm almost blind in the darkness."

"I have good night vision," Olhado offered cheerfully from behind her.

"Shut up, stupid," Ela whispered fiercely. "Mother wants to walk with him."

Both Novinha and Ender heard her clearly, and both could feel each other's silent laughter. Novinha drew closer to him as they walked. "I think you have the heart for what you have to do," she said softly, so that only he could hear.

"Cold and ruthless?" he asked. His voice hinted at wry humor, but the words tasted sour and truthful in his mouth.

"Compassionate enough," she said, "to put the hot iron into the wound when that's the only way to heal it."

As one who had felt his burning iron cauterize her deepest wounds, she had the right to speak; and he believed her, and it eased his heart for the bloody work ahead.

Ender hadn't thought it would be possible to sleep, knowing what was ahead of him. But now he woke up, Novinha's voice soft in his ear. He realized that he was outside, lying in the capim, his head resting on Novinha's lap. It was still dark.

"They're coming," said Novinha softly.

Ender sat up. Once, as a child, he would have come awake fully, instantly; but he was trained as a soldier then. Now it took a moment to orient himself. Ouanda, Ela, both awake and watching; Olhado asleep; Quim just stirring. The tall tree of Rooter's third life rising only a few meters away. And in the near distance, beyond the fence at the bottom of the little valley, the first houses of Milagre rising up the slopes; the Cathedral and the monastery atop the highest and nearest of the hills.

In the other direction, the forest, and coming down from the trees, Human, Mandachuva, Leaf-eater, Arrow, Cups, Calendar, Worm, Bark-dancer, several other brothers whose names Ouanda didn't know. "I've never seen them," she said. "They must come from other brother-houses."

Do we have a covenant? said Ender silently. That's all I care about. Did Human make the wives understand a new way of conceiving of the world?

Human was carrying something. Wrapped in leaves. The piggies wordlessly laid it before Ender; Human unwrapped it carefully. It was a computer printout.

"The Hive Queen and the Hegemon," said Ouanda softly. "The copy Miro gave them."

"The covenant," said Human.

Only then did they realize that the printout was upside down, on the blank side of the paper. And there, in the light of a nightstick, they saw faint hand-printed letters. They were large and awkwardly formed. Ouanda was in awe. "We never taught them to make ink," she said. "We never taught them to write."

"Calendar learned to make the letters," said Human. "Writing with sticks in the dirt. And Worm made the ink from cabra dung and dried macios. This is how you make treaties, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Ender.

"If we didn't write it on paper, then we would remember it differently."

"That's right," said Ender. "You did well to write it down."

"We made some changes. The wives wanted some changes, and I thought you would accept them." Human pointed them out. "You humans can make this covenant with other piggies, but you can't make a different covenant. You can't teach any other piggies things you haven't taught us. Can you accept that?"

"Of course," said Ender.

"That was the easy one. Now, what if we disagree about what the rules are? What if we disagree about where your prairie land ends and ours begins? So Shouter said, Let the hive queen judge between humans and Little Ones. Let the humans judge between the Little Ones and the hive queen. And let Little Ones judge between the hive queen and the humans."

Ender wondered how easy that would be. He remembered, as no other living human did, how terrifying the buggers were three thousand years ago. Their insectlike bodies were the nightmares of humanity's childhood. How easily would the people of Milagre accept their judgment?

So it's hard. It's no harder than what we've asked the piggies to do. "Yes," said Ender. "We can accept that, too. It's a good plan."

"And another change," said Human. He looked up at Ender and grinned. It looked ghastly, since piggy faces weren't designed for that human expression. "This is why it took so long. All these changes."

Ender smiled back.

"If a tribe of piggies won't sign the covenant with humans, and if that tribe attacks one of the tribes that has signed the covenant, then we can go to war against them."

"What do you mean by attack?" asked Ender. If they could take a mere insult as an attack, then this clause would reduce the prohibition of war to nothing.

"Attack," said Human. "It begins when they come into our lands and kill the brothers or the wives. It is not attack when they present themselves for war, or offer an agreement to begin a war. It is attack when they start to fight without an agreement. Since we will never agree to a war, an attack by another tribe is the only way war could begin. I knew you'd ask."

He pointed to the words of the covenant, and indeed the treaty carefully defined what constituted an attack.

"That is also acceptable," said Ender. It meant that the possibility of war would not be removed for many generations, perhaps for centuries, since it would take a long time to bring this covenant to every tribe of piggies in the world. But long before the last tribe joined the covenant, Ender thought, the benefits of peaceful exogamy would be made plain, and few would want to be warriors anymore.

"Now the last change," said Human. "The wives meant this to punish you for making this covenant so difficult. But I think you will believe it is no punishment. Since we are forbidden to take you into the third life, after this covenant is in effect humans are also forbidden to take brothers into the third life."

For a moment Ender thought it meant his reprieve; he would not have to do the thing that Libo and Pipo had both refused.

"After the covenant," said Human. "You will be the first and last human to give this gift."

"I wish..." said Ender.

"I know what you wish, my friend Speaker," said Human. "To you it feels like murder. But to me-- when a brother is given the right to pass into the third life as a father, then he chooses his greatest rival or his truest friend to give him the passage. You. Speaker-- ever since I first learned Stark and read the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, I waited for you. I said many times to my father, Rooter, of all humans he is the one who will understand us. Then Rooter told me when your starship came, that it was you and the hive queen aboard that ship, and I knew then that you had come to give me passage, if only I did well."

"You did well, Human," said Ender.

"Here," he said. "See? We signed the covenant in the human way."

At the bottom of the last page of the covenant two words were crudely, laboriously shaped. "Human," Ender read aloud. The other word he could not read.

"It's Shouter's true name," said Human. "Star-looker. She wasn't good with the writing stick-- the wives don't use tools very often, since the brothers do that kind of work. So she wanted me to tell

you what her name is. And to tell you that she got it because she was always looking in the sky. She says that she didn't know it then, but she was watching for you to come."

So many people had so much hope in me, thought Ender. In the end, though, everything depended on them. On Novinha, Miro, Ela, who called for me; on Human and Star-looker. And on the ones who feared my coming, too.

Worm carried the cup of ink; Calendar carried the pen. It was a thin strip of wood with a slit in it and a narrow well that held a little ink when he dipped it in the cup. He had to dip it five times in order to sign his name. "Five," said Arrow. Ender remembered then that the number five was portentous to the piggies. It had been an accident, but if they chose to see it as a good omen, so much the better.

"I'll take the covenant to our Governor and the Bishop," said Ender.

"Of all the documents that were ever treasured in the history of mankind..." said Ouanda. No one needed her to finish the sentence. Human, Leaf-eater, and Mandachuva carefully wrapped the book again in leaves and handed it, not to Ender, but to Ouanda. Ender knew at once, with terrible certainty, what that meant. The piggies still had work for him to do, work that would require that his hands be free.

"Now the covenant is made the human way," said Human. "You must make it true for the Little Ones as well."

"Can't the signing be enough?" asked Ender.

"From now on the signing is enough," said Human. "But only because the same hand that signed for the humans also took the covenant in our way, too."

"Then I will," said Ender, "as I promised you I would."

Human reached out and stroked Ender from the throat to the belly. "The brother's word is not just in his mouth," he said. "The brother's word is in his life." He turned to the other piggies. "Let me speak to my father one last time before I stand beside him."

Two of the strange brothers came forward with their small clubs in their hands. They walked with Human to Rooter's tree and began to beat on it and sing in the Fathers' Language. Almost at once the trunk split open. The tree was still fairly young, and not so very much thicker in the trunk than Human's own body; it was a struggle for him to get inside. But he fit, and the trunk closed up after him. The drumming changed rhythm, but did not let up for a moment.

Jane whispered in Ender's ear. "I can hear the resonance of the drumming change inside the tree," she said. "The tree is slowly shaping the sound, to turn the drumming into language."

The other piggies set to work clearing ground for Human's tree. Ender noticed that he would be planted so that, from the gate, Rooter would seem to stand on the left hand, and Human on the

right. Pulling up the capim by the root was hard work for the piggies; soon Quim was helping them, and then Olhado, and then Ouanda and Ela.

Ouanda gave the covenant to Novinha to hold while she helped dig capim. Novinha, in turn, carried it to Ender, stood before him, looked at him steadily. "You signed it Ender Wiggin," she said. "Ender."

The name sounded ugly even to his own ears. He had heard it too often as an epithet. "I'm older than I look," said Ender. "That was the name I was known by when I blasted the buggers' home world out of existence. Maybe the presence of that name on the first treaty ever signed between humans and ramen will do something to change the meaning of the name."

"Ender," she whispered. She reached toward him, the bundled treaty in her hands, and held it against his chest; it was heavy, since it contained all the pages of the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, on the other sides of pages where the covenant was written. "I never went to the priests to confess," she said, "because I knew they would despise me for my sin. Yet when you named all my sins today, I could bear it because I knew you didn't despise me. I couldn't understand why, though, till now."

"I'm not one to despise other people for their sins," said Ender. "I haven't found one yet, that I didn't say inside myself, I've done worse than this."

"All these years you've borne the burden of humanity's guilt."

"Yes, well, it's nothing mystical," said Ender. "I think of it as being like the mark of Cain. You don't make many friends, but nobody hurts you much, either."

The ground was clear. Mandachuva spoke in Tree Language to the piggies beating on the trunk; their rhythm changed, and again the aperture in the tree came open. Human slid out as if he were an infant being born. Then he walked to the center of the cleared ground. Leaf-eater and Mandachuva each handed him a knife. As he took the knives, Human spoke to them-- in Portuguese, so the humans could understand, and so it would carry great force. "I told Shouter that you lost your passage to the third life because of a great misunderstanding by Pipo and Libo. She said that before another hand of hands of days, you both would grow upward into the light."

Leaf-eater and Mandachuva both let go of their knives, touched Human gently on the belly, and stepped back to the edge of the cleared ground.

Human held out the knives to Ender. They were both made of thin wood. Ender could not imagine a tool that could polish wood to be at once so fine and sharp, and yet so strong. But of course no tool had polished these. They had come thus perfectly shaped from the heart of a living tree, given as a gift to help a brother into the third life.

It was one thing to know with his mind that Human would not really die. It was another thing to believe it. Ender did not take the knives at first. Instead he reached past the blades and took Human

by the wrists. "To you it doesn't feel like death. But to me-- I only saw you for the first time yesterday, and tonight I know you are my brother as surely as if Rooter were my father, too. And yet when the sun rises in the morning, I'll never be able to talk to you again. It feels like death to me, Human, how ever it feels to you."

"Come and sit in my shade," said Human, "and see the sunlight through my leaves, and rest your back against my trunk. And do this, also. Add another story to the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. Call it the Life of Human. Tell all the humans how I was conceived on the bark of my father's tree, and born in darkness, eating my mother's flesh. Tell them how I left the life of darkness behind and came into the half-light of my second life, to learn language from the wives and then come forth to learn all the miracles that Libo and Miro and Ouanda came to teach. Tell them how on the last day of my second life, my true brother came from above the sky, and together we made this covenant so that humans and piggies would be one tribe, not a human tribe or a piggy tribe, but a tribe of ramen. And then my friend gave me passage to the third life, to the full light, so that I could rise into the sky and give life to ten thousand children before I die."

"I'll tell your story," said Ender.

"Then I will truly live forever."

Ender took the knives. Human lay down upon the ground.

"Olhado," said Novinha. "Quim. Go back to the gate. Ela, you too."

"I'm going to see this, Mother," said Ela. "I'm a scientist."

"You forget my eyes," said Olhado. "I'm recording everything. We can show humans everywhere that the treaty was signed. And we can show piggies that the Speaker took the covenant in their way, too."

"I'm not going, either," said Quim. "Even the Blessed Virgin stood at the foot of the cross."

"You can stay," said Novinha softly. And she also stayed.

Human's mouth was filled with capim, but he didn't chew it very much. "More," said Ender, "so you don't feel anything."

"That's not right," said Mandachuva. "These are the last moments of his second life. It's good to feel something of the pains of this body, to remember when you're in the third life, and beyond pain."

Mandachuva and Leaf-eater told Ender where and how to cut. It had to be done quickly, they told him, and their hands reached into the steaming body to point out organs that must go here or there. Ender's hands were quick and sure, his body calm, but even though he could only rarely spare a glance away from the surgery, he knew that above his bloody work, Human's eyes were watching him, watching him, filled with gratitude and love, filled with agony and death.

It happened under his hands, so quickly that for the first few minutes they could watch it grow. Several large organs shriveled as roots shot out of them; tendrils reached from place to place within the body; Human's eyes went wide with the final agony; and out of his spine a sprout burst upward, two leaves, four leaves-- And then stopped. The body was dead; its last spasm of strength had gone to making the tree that rooted in Human's spine. Ender had seen the rootlets and tendrils reaching through the body. The memories, the soul of Human had been transferred into the cells of the newly sprouted tree. It was done. His third life had begun. And when the sun rose in the morning, not long from now, the leaves would taste the light for the first time.

The other piggies were rejoicing, dancing. Leaf-eater and Mandachuva took the knives from Ender's hands and jammed them into the ground on either side of Human's head. Ender could not join their celebration. He was covered with blood and reeked with the stench of the body he had butchered. On all fours he crawled from the body, up the hill to a place where he didn't have to see it. Novinha followed him. Exhausted, spent, all of them, from the work and the emotions of the day. They said nothing, did nothing, but fell into the thick capim, each one leaning or lying on someone else, seeking relief at last in sleep, as the piggies danced away up the hill into the woods.

Bosquinha and Bishop Peregrino made their way to the gate before the sun was up, to watch for the Speaker's return from the forest. They were there a full ten minutes before they saw a movement much nearer than the forest's edge. It was a boy, sleepily voiding his bladder into a bush.

"Olhado!" called the Mayor.

The boy turned, waved, then hastily fastened his trousers and began waking others who slept in the tall grass. Bosquinha and the Bishop opened the gate and walked out to meet them.

"Foolish, isn't it," said Bosquinha, "but this is the moment when our rebellion seems most real. When I first walk beyond the fence."

"Why did they spend the night out of doors?" Peregrino wondered aloud. "The gate was open, they could have gone home."

Bosquinha took a quick census of the group outside the gates. Ouanda and Ela, arm in arm like sisters. Olhado and Quim. Novinha. And there, yes, the Speaker, sitting down, Novinha behind him, resting her hands on his shoulders. They all waited expectantly, saying nothing. Until Ender looked up at them. "We have the treaty," he said. "It's a good one."

Novinha held up a bundle wrapped in leaves. "They wrote it down," she said. "For you to sign."

Bosquinha took the bundle. "All the files were restored before midnight," she said. "Not just the ones we saved in your message queue. Whoever your friend is, Speaker, he's very good."

"She," said the Speaker. "Her name is Jane."

Now, though, the Bishop and Bosquinha could see what lay on the cleared earth just down the hill from where the Speaker had slept. Now they understood the dark stains on the Speaker's hands and arms, the spatter marks on his face.

"I would rather have no treaty," said Bosquinha, "than one you had to kill to get."

"Wait before you judge," said the Bishop. "I think the night's work was more than just what we see before us."

"Very wise, Father Peregrino," said the Speaker softly.

"I'll explain it to you if you want," said Ouanda. "Ela and I understand it as well as anyone."

"It was like a sacrament," said Olhado.

Bosquinha looked at Novinha, uncomprehending. "You let him watch?"

Olhado tapped his eyes. "All the piggies will see it, someday, through my eyes."

"It wasn't death," said Quim. "It was resurrection."

The Bishop stepped near the tortured corpse and touched the seedling tree growing from the chest cavity. "His name is Human," said the Speaker.

"And so is yours," said the Bishop softly. He turned and looked around at the members of his little flock, who had already taken humanity a step further than it had ever gone before. Am I the shepherd, Peregrino asked himself, or the most confused and helpless of the sheep? "Come, all of you. Come with me to the Cathedral. The bells will soon ring for mass."

The children gathered and prepared to go. Novinha, too, stepped away from her place behind the Speaker. Then she stopped, turned back to him, looked at him with silent invitation in her eyes.

"Soon," he said. "A moment more."

She, too, followed the Bishop through the gate and up the hill into the Cathedral.

The mass had barely begun when Peregrino saw the Speaker enter at the back of the Cathedral. He paused a moment, then found Novinha and her family with his eyes. In only a few steps he had taken a place beside her. Where Marc o had sat, those rare times when the whole family came together.

The duties of the service took his attention; a few moments later, when Peregrino could look again, he saw that Grego was now sitting beside the Speaker. Peregrino thought of the terms of the

treaty as the girls had explained it to him. Of the meaning of the death of the piggy called Human, and before him, of the deaths of Pipo and Libo. All things coming clear, all things coming together. The young man, Miro, lying paralyzed in bed, with his sister Ouanda tending him. Novinha, the lost one, now found. The fence, its shadow so dark in the minds of all who had lived within its bounds, now still and harmless, invisible, insubstantial.

It was the miracle of the wafer, turned into the flesh of God in his hands. How suddenly we find the flesh of God within us after all, when we thought that we were only made of dust.

Chapter 18 -- The Hive Queen

Evolution gave his mother no birth canal and no breasts. So the small creature who would one day be named Human was given no exit from the womb except by the teeth of his mouth. He and his infant siblings devoured their mother's body. Because Human was strongest and most vigorous, he ate the most and so became even stronger.

Human lived in utter darkness. When his mother was gone, there was nothing to eat but the sweet liquid that flowed on the surface of his world. He did not know yet that the vertical surface was the inside of a great hollow tree, and that the liquid that he ate was the sap of the tree. Nor did he know that the warm creatures that were far larger than himself were older piggies, almost ready to leave the darkness of the tree, and that the smaller creatures were younger ones, more recently emerged than himself.

All he really cared about was to eat, to move, and to see the light. For now and then, in rhythms that he could not comprehend, a sudden light came into the darkness. It began each time with a sound, whose source he could not comprehend. Then the tree would shudder slightly; the sap would cease to flow; and all the tree's energy would be devoted to changing the shape of the trunk in one place, to make an opening that let the light inside. When the light was there, Human moved toward it. When the light was gone, Human lost his sense of direction, and wandered aimlessly in search of liquid to drink.

Until one day, when almost all the other creatures were smaller than himself, and none at all were larger, the light came and he was so strong and swift that he reached the opening before it closed. He bent his body around the curve of the wood of the tree, and for the first time felt the rasp of outer bark under his soft belly. He hardly noticed this new pain, because the light dazzled him. It was not just in one place, but everywhere, and it was not grey but vivid green and yellow. His rapture lasted many seconds. Then he was hungry again, and here on the outside of the mothertree the sap flowed only in the fissures of the bark, where it was hard to reach, and instead of all the other creatures being little ones that he could push aside, they all were larger than himself, and drove him away from the easy feeding places. This was a new thing, a new world, a new life, and he was afraid.

Later, when he learned language, he would remember the journey from darkness into light, and he would call it the passage from the first life to the second, from the life of darkness to the half-lit life.

-- Speaker for the Dead, *The Life of Human*, 1:1-5

Miro decided to leave Lusitania. Take the Speaker's starship and go to Trondheim after all. Perhaps at his trial he could persuade the Hundred Worlds not to go to war against Lusitania. At worst, he could become a martyr, to stir people's hearts, to be remembered, to stand for something. Whatever happened to him, it would be better than staying here.

In the first few days after he climbed the fence, Miro recovered rapidly. He gained some control and feeling in his arms and legs. Enough to take shuffling steps, like an old man. Enough to move his arms and hands. Enough to end the humiliation of his mother having to clean his body. But then his progress slowed and stopped. "Here it is," said Navio. "We have reached the level of permanent damage. You are so lucky, Miro, you can walk, you can talk, you are a whole man. You are no more limited than, say, a very healthy man who is a hundred years old. I would rather tell you that your body would be as it was before you climbed the fence, that you would have all the vigor and control of a twenty-year-old. But I'm very glad that I don't have to tell you that you will be bedridden all your life, diapered and catheterized, able to do nothing more than listen to soft music and wonder where your body went."

So I'm grateful, Miro thought. As my fingers curl into a useless club on the ends of my arms, as I hear my own speech sounding thick and unintelligible, my voice unable to modulate properly, then I will be so glad that I am like a hundred-year-old man, that I can look forward to eighty more years of life as a centegenarian.

Once it was clear that he did not need constant attention, the family scattered and went about their business. These days were too exciting for them to stay home with a crippled brother, son, friend. He understood completely. He did not want them to stay home with him. He wanted to be with them. His work was unfinished. Now, at long last, all the fences, all the rules were gone. Now he could ask the piggies the questions that had so long puzzled him.

He tried at first to work through Ouanda. She came to him every morning and evening and made her reports on the terminal in the front room of the Ribeira house. He read her reports, asked her questions, listened to her stories. And she very seriously memorized the questions he wanted her to ask the piggies. After a few days of this, however, he noticed that in the evening she would indeed have the answers to Miro's questions. But there was no follow-up, no exploration of meaning. Her real attention was devoted to her own work.

And Miro stopped giving her questions to ask for him. He lied and told her that he was far more interested in what she was doing, that her avenues of exploration were the most important.

The truth was that he hated seeing Ouanda. For him, the revelation that she was his sister was painful, terrible, but he knew that if the decision were his alone, he would cast aside the incest tabu, marry her and live in the forest with the piggies if need be. Ouanda, however, was a believer, a believer. She couldn't possibly violate the only universal human law. She grieved when she learned that Miro was her brother, but she immediately began to separate herself from him, to forget the touches, the kisses, the whispers, the promises, the teasing, the laughter...

Better if he forgot them, too. But he could not. Every time he saw her, it hurt him to see how reserved she was, how polite and kind she was. He was her brother, he was crippled, she would be good to him. But the love was gone.

Uncharitably, he compared Ouanda to his own mother, who had loved her lover regardless of the barriers between them. But Mother's lover had been a whole man, an able man, not this useless carcass.

So Miro stayed home and studied the file reports of everybody else's work. It was torture to know what they were doing, that he could not take part in it; but it was better than doing nothing, or watching the tedious vids on the terminal, or listening to music. He could type, slowly, by aiming his hand so the stiffest of his fingers, the index finger, touched exactly one key. It wasn't fast enough to enter any meaningful data, or even to write memos, but he could call up other people's public files and read what they were doing. He could maintain some connection with the vital work that had suddenly blossomed on Lusitania, with the opening of the gate.

Ouanda was working with the piggies on a lexicon of the Males' and Wives' Languages, complete with a phonological spelling system so they could write their language down. Quim was helping her, but Miro knew that he had his own purpose: He intended to be a missionary to the piggies in other tribes, taking them the Gospels before they ever saw the Hive Queen and the Hegemon; he intended to translate at least some of the scripture and speak to the piggies in their own language. All this work with piggy language and culture was very good, very important, preserve the past, prepare to communicate with other tribes, but Miro knew that it could easily be done by Dom Crist o's scholars, who now ventured forth in their monkish robes and quietly asked questions of the piggies and answered their questions ably and powerfully. Ouanda was allowing herself to become redundant, Miro believed.

The real work with the piggies, as Miro saw it, was being done by Ender and a few key technicians from Bosquinha's services department. They were laying pipe from the river to the mothertree's clearing, to bring water to them. They were setting up electricity and teaching the brothers how to use a computer terminal. In the meantime, they were teaching them very primitive means of agriculture and trying to domesticate cabras to pull plows. It was confusing, the different levels of technology that were coming to the piggies all at once, but Ender had discussed it with Miro, explaining that he wanted the piggies to see quick, dramatic, immediate results from their treaty. Running water, a computer connection with a holographic terminal that let them read anything in the library, electric lights at night. But all this was still magic, completely dependent on human society. At the same time, Ender was trying to keep them self-sufficient, inventive, resourceful. The dazzle of electricity would make myths that would spread through the world from tribe to tribe, but it would be no more than rumor for many, many years. It was the wooden plow,

the scythe, the harrow, the amaranth seed that would make the real changes, that would allow piggy population to increase tenfold wherever they went. And those could be transmitted from place to place with a handful of seeds in a cabra-skin pouch and the memory of how the work was done.

This was the work that Miro longed to be part of. But what good were his clubbed hands and shuffling step in the amaranth fields? Of what use was he sitting at a loom, weaving cabra wool? He couldn't even talk well enough to teach.

Ela was working on developing new strains of Earthborn plants and even small animals and insects, new species that could resist the Descolada, even neutralize it. Mother was helping her with advice, but little more, for she was working on the most vital and secret project of them all. Again, it was Ender who came to Miro and told him what only his family and Ouanda knew: that the hive queen lived, that she was being restored as soon as Novinha found a way for her to resist the Descolada, her and all the buggers that would be born to her. As soon as it was ready, the hive queen would be revived.

And Miro would not be part of that, either. For the first time, humans and two alien races, living together as ramen on the same world, and Miro wasn't part of any of it. He was less human than the piggies were. He couldn't speak or use his hands half so well. He had stopped being a tool-using, language-speaking animal. He was varelse now. They only kept him as a pet.

He wanted to go away. Better yet, he wanted to disappear, to go away even from himself.

But not right now. There was a new puzzle that only he knew about, and so only he could solve. His terminal was behaving very strangely.

He noticed it the first week after he recovered from total paralysis. He was scanning some of Ouanda's files and realized that without doing anything special, he had accessed confidential files. They were protected with several layers, he had no idea what the passwords were, and yet a simple, routine scan had brought the information forward. It was her speculations on piggy evolution and their probable pre-Descolada society and life patterns. The sort of thing that as recently as two weeks ago she would have talked about, argued about with Miro. Now she kept it confidential and never discussed it with him at all.

Miro didn't tell her he had seen the files, but he did steer conversations toward the subject and drew her out; she talked about her ideas willingly enough, once Miro showed his interest. Sometimes it was almost like old times. Except that he would hear the sound of his own slurred voice and keep most of his opinions to himself, merely listening to her, letting things he would have argued with pass right by. Still, seeing her confidential files allowed him to penetrate to what she was really interested in.

But how had he seen them?

It happened again and again. Files of Ela's, Mother's, Dom Crist o's. As the piggies began to play with their new terminal, Miro was able to watch them in an echo mode that he had never seen the terminal use before-- it enabled him to watch all their computer transactions and then make some

suggestions, change things a little. He took particular delight in guessing what the piggies were really trying to do and helping them, surreptitiously, to do it. But how had he got such unorthodox, powerful access to the machine?

The terminal was learning to accommodate itself to him, too. Instead of long code sequences, he only had to begin a sequence and the machine would obey his instructions. Finally he did not even have to log on. He touched the keyboard and the terminal displayed a list of all the activities he usually engaged in, then scanned through them. He could touch a key and it would go directly to the activity he wanted, skipping dozens of preliminaries, saving him many painful minutes of typing one character at a time.

At first he thought that Olhado had created the new program for him, or perhaps someone in the Mayor's office. But Olhado only looked blankly at what the terminal was doing and said, "Bacana," that's great. And when he sent a message to the Mayor, she never got it. Instead, the Speaker for the Dead came to visit him.

"So your terminal is being helpful," said Ender.

Miro didn't answer. He was too busy trying to think why the Mayor had sent the Speaker to answer his note.

"The Mayor didn't get your message," said Ender. "I did. And it's better if you don't mention to anybody else what your terminal is doing."

"Why?" asked Miro. That was one word he could say without slurring too much.

"Because it isn't a new program helping you. It's a person."

Miro laughed. No human being could be as quick as the program that was helping him. It was faster, in fact, than most programs he had worked with before, and very resourceful and intuitive; faster than a human, but smarter than a program.

"It's an old friend of mine, I think. At least, she was the one who told me about your message and suggested that I let you know that discretion was a good idea. You see, she's a bit shy. She doesn't make many friends."

"How many?"

"At the present moment, exactly two. For a few thousand years before now, exactly one."

"Not human," said Miro.

"Raman," said Ender. "More human than most humans. We've loved each other for a long time, helped each other, depended on each other. But in the last few weeks, since I got here, we've drifted apart. I'm-- involved more in the lives of people around me. Your family."

"Mother."

"Yes. Your mother, your brothers and sisters, the work with the piggies, the work for the hive queen. My friend and I used to talk to each other constantly. I don't have time now. We've hurt each other's feelings sometimes. She's lonely, and so I think she's chosen another companion."

"Nao quero." Don't want one.

"Yes you do," said Ender. "She's already helped you. Now that you know she exists, you'll find that she's-- a good friend. You can't have a better one. More loyal. More helpful."

"Puppy dog?"

"Don't be a jackass," said Ender. "I'm introducing you to a fourth alien species. You're supposed to be a xenologer, aren't you? She knows you, Miro. Your physical problems are nothing to her. She has no body at all. She exists among the phlotic disturbances in the ansible communications of the Hundred Worlds. She's the most intelligent creature alive, and you're the second human being she's ever chosen to reveal herself to."

"How?" How did she come to be? How did she know me, to choose me?

"Ask her yourself." Ender touched the jewel in his ear. "Just a word of advice. Once she comes to trust you, keep her with you always. Keep no secrets from her. She once had a lover who switched her off. Only for an hour, but things were never the same between them after that. They became-- just friends. Good friends, loyal friends, always until he dies. But all his life he will regret that one thoughtless act of disloyalty."

Ender's eyes glistened, and Miro realized that whatever this creature was that lived in the computer, it was no phantom, it was part of this man's life. And he was passing it down to Miro, like father to son, the right to know this friend.

Ender left without another word, and Miro turned to the terminal. There was a holo of a woman there. She was small, sitting on a stool, leaning against a holographic wall. She was not beautiful. Not ugly, either. Her face had character. Her eyes were haunting, innocent, sad. Her mouth delicate, about to smile, about to weep. Her clothing seemed veil-like, insubstantial, and yet instead of being provocative, it revealed a sort of innocence, a girlish, small-breasted body, the hands clasped lightly in her lap, her legs childishly parted with the toes pointing inward. She could have been sitting on a teeter-totter in a playground. Or on the edge of her lover's bed.

"Bom dia," Miro said softly.

"Hi," she said. "I asked him to introduce us."

She was quiet, reserved, but it was Miro who felt shy. For so long, Ouanda had been the only woman in his life, besides the women of his family, and he had little confidence in the social

graces. At the same time, he was aware that he was speaking to a hologram. A completely convincing one, but a midair laser projection all the same.

She reached up one hand and laid it gently on her breast. "Feels nothing," she said. "No nerves."

Tears came to his eyes. Self-pity, of course. That he would probably never have a woman more substantial than this one. If he tried to touch one, his caresses would be crude pawing. Sometimes, when he wasn't careful, he drooled and couldn't even feel it. What a lover.

"But I have eyes," she said. "And ears. I see everything in all the Hundred Worlds. I watch the sky through a thousand telescopes. I overhear a trillion conversations every day." She giggled a little. "I'm the best gossip in the universe."

Then, suddenly, she stood up, grew larger, closer, so that she only showed from the waist up, as if she had moved closer to an invisible camera. Her eyes burned with intensity as she stared right at him. "And you're a parochial schoolboy who's never seen anything but one town and one forest in his life."

"Don't get much chance to travel," he said.

"We'll see about that," she answered. "So. What do you want to do today?"

"What's your name?" he asked.

"You don't need my name," she said.

"How do I call you?"

"I'm here whenever you want me."

"But I want to know," he said.

She touched her ear. "When you like me well enough to take me with you wherever you go, then I'll tell you my name."

Impulsively, he told her what he had told no one else. "I want to leave this place," said Miro. "Can you take me away from Lusitania?"

She at once became coquettish, mocking. "And we only just met! Really, Mr. Ribeira, I'm not that sort of girl."

"Maybe when we get to know each other," Miro said, laughing.

She made a subtle, wonderful transition, and the woman on the screen was a lanky feline, sprawling sensuously on a tree limb. She purred noisily, stretched out a limb, groomed herself. "I can break your neck with a single blow from my paw," she whispered; her tone of voice suggested

seduction; her claws promised murder. "When I get you alone, I can bite your throat out with a single kiss."

He laughed. Then he realized that in all this conversation, he had actually forgotten how slurred his speech was. She understood every word. She never said, "What? I didn't get that," or any of the other polite but infuriating things that people said. She understood him without any special effort at all.

"I want to understand everything," said Miro. "I want to know everything and put it all together to see what it means."

"Excellent project," she said. "it will look very good on your r, sum,."

Ender found that Olhado was a much better driver than he was. The boy's depth perception was better, and when he plugged his eye directly into the onboard computer, navigation practically took care of itself. Ender could devote his energies to looking.

The scenery seemed monotonous when they first began these exploratory flights. Endless prairies, huge herds of cabra, occasional forests in the distance-- they never came close to those, of course, since they didn't want to attract the attention of the piggies that lived there. Besides, they were looking for a home for the hive queen, and it wouldn't do to put her too close to any tribe.

Today they headed west, on the other side of Rooter's Forest, and they followed a small river to its outlet. They stopped there on the beach, with breakers rolling gently to shore. Ender tasted the water. Salt. The sea.

Olhado got the onboard terminal to display a map of this region of Lusitania, pointing out their location, Rooter's Forest, and the other piggy settlements nearby. It was a good place, and in the back of his mind Ender could sense the hive queen's approval. Near the sea, plenty of water, sunny.

They skimmed over the water, traveling upstream a few hundred meters until the right bank rose to form a low cliff. "Any place to stop along here?" asked Ender.

Olhado found a place, fifty meters from the crown of the hill. They walked back along the river's edge, where the reeds gave way to the grama. Every river on Lusitania looked like this, of course. Ela had easily documented the genetic patterns, as soon as she had access to Novinha's files and permission to pursue the subject. Reeds that co-reproduced with suckflies. Grama that mated with watersnakes. And then the endless capim, which rubbed its pollen-rich tassels on the bellies of fertile cabra to germinate the next generation of manure-producing animals. Entwined in the roots and stems of the capim were the tropeços, long trailing vines that Ela proved had the same genes as the xingadora, the groundnesting bird that used the living plant for its nest, The same sort of pairing continued in the forest: Macio worms that hatched from the seeds of merдона vines and then gave birth to merдона seed. Puladors, small insects that mated with the shiny-leafed bushes in the forest.

And, above all, the piggies and the trees, both at the peak of their kingdoms, plant and animal merged into one long life.

That was the list, the whole list of surface animals and plants of Lusitania. Under water there were many, many more. But the Descolada had left Lusitania monotonous.

And yet even the monotony had a peculiar beauty. The geography was as varied as any other world-- rivers, hills, mountains, deserts, oceans, islands. The carpet of capim and the patches of forest became background music to the symphony of landforms. The eye became sensitized to undulations, outcroppings, cliffs, pits, and, above all, the sparkle and rush of water in the sunlight. Lusitania, like Trondheim, was one of the rare worlds that was dominated by a single motif instead of displaying the whole symphony of possibility. With Trondheim, however, it was because the planet was on the bare edge of habitability, its climate only just able to support surface life. Lusitania's climate and soil cried out a welcome to the oncoming plow, the excavator's pick, the mason's trowel. Bring me to life, it said.

Ender did not understand that he loved this place because it was as devastated and barren as his own life, stripped and distorted in his childhood by events every bit as terrible, on a small scale, as the Descolada had been to this world. And yet it had thrived, had found a few threads strong enough to survive and continue to grow. Out of the challenge of the Descolada had come the three lives of the Little Ones. Out of the Battle School, out of years of isolation, had come Ender Wiggin. He fit this place as if he had planned it. The boy who walked beside him through the grama felt like his true son, as if he had known the boy from infancy. I know how it feels to have a metal wall between me and the world, Olhado.

But here and now I have made the wall come down, and flesh touches earth, drinks water, gives comfort, takes love. The earthen bank of the river rose in terraces, a dozen meters from shore to crest. The soil was moist enough to dig and hold its shape. The hive queen was a burrower; Ender felt the desire in him to dig, and so he dug, Olhado beside him. The ground gave way easily enough, and yet the roof of their cavelet stayed firm.

<Yes. Here.>

And so it was decided.

"Here it is," said Ender aloud.

Olhado grinned. But it was really Jane that Ender was talking to, and her answer that he heard. "Novinha thinks they have it. The tests all came through negative-- the Descolada stayed inactive with the new Colador present in the cloned bugger cells. Ela thinks that the daisies she's been working with can be adapted to produce the Colador naturally. If that works, you'll only have to plant seeds here and there and the buggers can keep the Descolada at bay by sucking flowers."

Her tone was lively enough, but it was all business, no fun. No fun at all. "Fine," Ender said. He felt a stab of jealousy-- Jane was no doubt talking far more easily with Miro, teasing him, taunting him as she used to do with Ender.

But it was easy enough to drive the feeling of jealousy away. He put out a hand and rested it easily on Olhado's shoulder; he momentarily pulled the boy close, and then together they walked back to the waiting flyer. Olhado marked the spot on the map and stored it. He laughed and made jokes all the way home, and Ender laughed with him. The boy wasn't Jane. But he was Olhado, and Ender loved him, and Olhado needed Ender, and that was what a few million years of evolution had decided Ender needed most. It was the hunger that had gnawed at him through all those years with Valentine, that had kept him moving from world to world. This boy with metal eyes. His bright and devastatingly destructive little brother Grego. Quara's penetrating understanding, her innocence; Quim's utter self-control, asceticism, faith; Ela's dependability, like a rock, and yet she knew when to move out and act; and Miro...

Miro. I have no consolation for Miro, not in this world, not at this time. His life's work was taken from him, his body, his hope for the future, and nothing I can say or do will give him a vital work to do. He lives in pain, his lover turned into his sister, his life among the piggies now impossible to him as they look to other humans for friendship and learning.

"Miro needs..." Ender said softly.

"Miro needs to leave Lusitania," said Olhado.

"Mm," said Ender.

"You've got a starship, haven't you?" said Olhado. "I remember reading a story once. Or maybe it was a vid. About an old-time hero in the Bugger Wars, Mazer Rackham. He saved Earth from destruction once, but they knew he'd be dead long before the next battle. So they sent him out in a starship at relativistic speeds, just sent him out and had him come back. A hundred years had gone by for the Earth, but only two years for him."

"You think Miro needs something as drastic as that?"

"There's a battle coming. There are decisions to make. Miro's the smartest person in Lusitania, and the best. He doesn't get mad, you know. Even in the worst of times with Father. Marc o. Sorry, I still call him Father."

"That's all right. In most ways he was."

"Miro would think, and he'd decide the best thing to do, and it always was the best thing. Mother depended on him to. The way I see it, we need Miro when Starways Congress sends its fleet against us. He'll study all the information, everything we've learned in the years that he was gone, put it all together, and tell us what to do."

Ender couldn't help himself. He laughed. "So it's a dumb idea," said Olhado.

"You see better than anybody else I know," said Ender. "I've got to think about this, but you might be right."

They drove on in silence for a while.

"I was just talking," said Olhado. "When I said that about Miro. It was just something I thought, putting him together with that old story. It probably isn't even a true story."

"It's true," said Ender.

"How do you know?"

"I knew Mazer Rackham."

Olhado whistled. "You're old. You're older than any of the trees."

"I'm older than any of the human colonies. It doesn't make me wise, unfortunately."

"Are you really Ender? The Ender?"

"That's why it's my password."

"It's funny. Before you got here, the Bishop tried to tell us all that you were Satan. Quim's the only one in the family that took him seriously. But if the Bishop had told us you were Ender, we would have stoned you to death in the praqa the day you arrived."

"Why don't you now?"

"We know you now. That makes all the difference, doesn't it? Even Quim doesn't hate you now. When you really know somebody, you can't hate them."

"Or maybe it's just that you can't really know them until you stop hating them."

"Is that a circular paradox? Dom Crist o says that most truth can only be expressed in circular paradoxes."

"I don't think it has anything to do with truth, Olhado. It's just cause and effect. We never can sort them out. Science refuses to admit any cause except first cause-- knock down one domino, the one next to it also falls. But when it comes to human beings, the only type of cause that matters is final cause, the purpose. What a person had in mind. Once you understand what people really want, you can't hate them anymore. You can fear them, but you can't hate them, because you can always find the same desires in your own heart."

"Mother doesn't like it that you're Ender."

"I know."

"But she loves you anyway."

"I know."

"And Quim-- it's really funny, but now that he knows you're Ender, he likes you better for it."

"That's because he's a crusader, and I got my bad reputation by winning a crusade."

"And me," said Olhado.

"Yes, you," said Ender.

"You killed more people than anybody in history."

"Be the best at whatever you do, that's what my mother always told me."

"But when you Spoke for Father, you made me feel sorry for him. You make people love each other and forgive each other. How could you kill all those millions of people in the Xenocide?"

"I thought I was playing games. I didn't know it was the real thing. But that's no excuse, Olhado. If I had known the battle was real, I would have done the same thing. We thought they wanted to kill us. We were wrong, but we had no way to know that." Ender shook his head. "Except that I knew better. I knew my enemy. That's how I beat her, the hive queen, I knew her so well that I loved her, or maybe I loved her so well that I knew her. I didn't want to fight her anymore. I wanted to quit. I wanted to go home. So I blew up her planet."

"And today we found the place to bring her back to life." Olhado was very serious. "Are you sure she won't try to get even? Are you sure she won't try to wipe out humankind, starting with you?"

"I'm as sure," said Ender, "as I am of anything."

"Not absolutely sure," said Olhado.

"Sure enough to bring her back to life," said Ender. "And that's as sure as we ever are of anything. We believe it enough to act as though it's true. When we're that sure, we call it knowledge. Facts. We bet our lives on it."

"I guess that's what you're doing. Betting your life on her being what you think she is."

"I'm more arrogant than that. I'm betting your life, too, and everybody else's, and I'm not so much as asking anyone else's opinion."

"Funny," said Olhado. "If I asked somebody whether they'd trust Ender with a decision that might affect the future of the human race, they'd say, of course not. But if I asked them whether they'd trust the Speaker for the Dead, they'd say yes, most of them. And they wouldn't even guess that they were the same person."

"Yeah," said Ender. "Funny."

Neither of them laughed. Then, after a long time, Olhado spoke again. His thoughts had wandered to a subject that mattered more. "I don't want Miro to go away for thirty years."

"Say twenty years."

"In twenty years I'll be thirty-two. But he'd come back the age he is now. Twenty. Twelve years younger than me. If there's ever a girl who wants to marry a guy with reflecting eyes, I might even be married and have kids then. He won't even know me. I won't be his little brother anymore." Olhado swallowed. "It'd be like him dying."

"No," said Ender. "It'd be like him passing from his second life to his third."

"That's like dying, too," said Olhado.

"It's also like being born," said Ender. "As long as you keep getting born, it's all right to die sometimes."

Valentine called the next day. Ender's fingers trembled as he keyed instructions into the terminal. It wasn't just a message, either. It was a call, a full ansible voice communication. Incredibly expensive, but that wasn't a problem. It was the fact that ansible communications with the Hundred Worlds were supposedly cut off; for Jane to allow this call to come through meant that it was urgent. It occurred to Ender right away that Valentine might be in danger. That Starways Congress might have decided Ender was involved in the rebellion and traced his connection with her.

She was older. The hologram of her face showed weather lines from many windy days on the islands, floes, and boats of Trondheim. But her smile was the same, and her eyes danced with the same light. Ender was silenced at first by the changes the years had wrought in his sister; she, too, was silenced, by the fact that Ender seemed unchanged, a vision coming back to her out of her past.

"Ah, Ender," she sighed. "Was I ever so young?"

"And will I age so beautifully?"

She laughed. Then she cried. He did not; how could he? He had missed her for a couple of months. She had missed him for twenty-two years.

"I suppose you've heard," he said, "about our trouble getting along with Congress."

"I imagine that you were at the thick of it."

"Stumbled into the situation, really," said Ender. "But I'm glad I was here. I'm going to stay."

She nodded, drying her eyes. "Yes. I thought so. But I had to call and make sure. I didn't want to spend a couple of decades flying to meet you, and have you gone when I arrive."

"Meet me?" he said.

"I got much too excited about your revolution there, Ender. After twenty years of raising a family, teaching my students, loving my husband, living at peace with myself, I thought I'd never resurrect Demosthenes again. But then the story came about illegal contact with the piggies, and right away the news that Lusitania was in revolt, and suddenly people were saying the most ridiculous things, and I saw it was the beginning of the same old hate. Remember the videos about the buggers? How terrifying and awful they were? Suddenly we were seeing videos of the bodies they found, of the xenologers, I can't remember their names, but grisly pictures everywhere you looked, heating us up to war fever. And then stories about the Descolada, how if anyone ever went from Lusitania to another world it would destroy everything-- the most hideous plague imaginable--"

"It's true," said Ender, "but we're working on it. Trying to find ways to keep the Descolada from spreading when we go to other worlds."

"True or not, Ender, it's all leading to war. I remember war-- nobody else does. So I revived Demosthenes. I stumbled across some memos and reports. Their fleet is carrying the Little Doctor, Ender. If they decide to, they can blow Lusitania to bits. Just like--"

"Just like I did before. Poetic justice, do you think, for me to end the same way? He who lives by the sword--"

"Don't joke with me, Ender! I'm a middle-aged matron now, and I've lost my patience with silliness. At least for now. I wrote some very ugly truths about what Starways Congress is doing, and published them as Demosthenes. They're looking for me. Treason is what they're calling it."

"So you're coming here?"

"Not just me. Dear Jakt is turning the fleet over to his brothers and sisters. We've already bought a starship. There's apparently some kind of resistance movement that's helping us-- someone named Jane has jimmied the computers to cover our tracks."

"I know Jane," said Ender.

"So you do have an organization here! I was shocked when I got a message that I could call you. Your ansible was supposedly blown up."

"We have powerful friends."

"Ender, Jakt and I are leaving today. We're bringing our three children."

"Your first one--"

"Yes, Syfte, the one who was making me fat when you left, she's almost twenty-two now. A very lovely girl. And a good friend, the children's tutor, named Plikt."

"I have a student by that name," said Ender, thinking back to conversations only a couple of months ago.

"Oh, yes, well, that was twenty years ago, Ender. And we're bringing several of Jakt's best men and their families. Something of an ark. It's not an emergency-- you have twenty-two years to prepare for me. Actually longer, more like thirty years. We're taking the voyage in several hops, the first few in the wrong direction, so that nobody can be sure we're going to Lusitania."

Coming here. Thirty years from now. I'll be older than she is now. Coming here. By then I'll have my family, too. Novinha's and my children, if we have any, all grown, like hers.

And then, thinking of Novinha, he remembered Miro, remembered what Olhado had suggested several days ago, the day they found the nesting place for the hive queen.

"Would you mind terribly," said Ender, "if I sent someone to meet you on the way?"

"Meet us? In deep space? No, don't send someone to do that, Ender-- it's too terrible a sacrifice, to come so far when the computers can guide us in just fine--"

"It's not really for you, though I want him to meet you. He's one of the xenologers. He was badly injured in an accident. Some brain damage; like a bad stroke. He's-- he's the smartest person in Lusitania, says someone whose judgment I trust, but he's lost all his connections with our life here. Yet we'll need him later. When you arrive. He's a very good man, Val. He can make the last week of your voyage very educational."

"Can your friend arrange to get us course information for such a rendezvous? We're navigators, but only on the sea."

"Jane will have the revised navigational information in your ship's computer when you leave."

"Ender-- for you it'll be thirty years, but for me-- I'll see you in only a few weeks." She started to cry.

"Maybe I'll come with Miro to meet you."

"Don't!" she said. "I want you to be as old and crabbed as possible when I arrive. I couldn't put up with you as the thirty-year-old brat I see on my terminal."

"Thirty-five."

"You'll be there when I arrive!" she demanded.

"I will," he said. "And Miro, the boy I'm sending to you. Think of him as my son."

She nodded gravely. "These are such dangerous times, Ender. I only wish we had Peter."

"I don't. If he were running our little rebellion, he'd end up Hegemon of all the Hundred Worlds. We just want them to leave us alone."

"It may not be possible to get the one without the other," said Val. "But we can quarrel about that later. Good-bye, my dear brother."

He didn't answer. Just looked at her and looked at her until she smiled wryly and switched off the connection.

Ender didn't have to ask Miro to go; Jane had already told him everything.

"Your sister is Demosthenes?" asked Miro. Ender was used to his slurred speech now. Or maybe his speech was clearing a little. It wasn't as hard to understand, anyway.

"We were a talented family," said Ender. "I hope you like her."

"I hope she likes me." Miro smiled, but he looked afraid.

"I told her," said Ender, "to think of you as my son."

Miro nodded. "I know," he said. And then, almost defiantly, "She showed me your conversation with her."

Ender felt cold inside.

Jane's voice came into his ear. "I should have asked you," she said. "But you know you would have said yes."

It wasn't the invasion of privacy that Ender minded. It was the fact that Jane was so very close to Miro. Get used to it, he told himself. He's the one she's looking out for now.

"We'll miss you," said Ender.

"Those who will miss me, miss me already," said Miro, "because they already think of me as dead."

"We need you alive," said Ender.

"When I come back, I'll still be only nineteen. And brain-damaged."

"You'll still be Miro, and brilliant, and trusted, and loved. You started this rebellion, Miro. The fence came down for you. Not for some great cause, but for you. Don't let us down."

Miro smiled, but Ender couldn't tell if the twist in his smile was because of his paralysis, or because it was a bitter, poisonous smile.

"Tell me something," said Miro.

"If I won't," said Ender, "she will."

"It isn't hard. I just want to know what it was that Pipo and Libo died for. What it was the piggies honored them for."

Ender understood better than Miro knew: He understood why the boy cared so much about the question. Miro had learned that he was really Libo's son only hours before he crossed the fence and lost his future. Pipo, then Libo, then Miro; father, son, grandson; the three xenologers who had lost their futures for the piggies' sake. Miro hoped that in understanding why his forebears died, he might make more sense of his own sacrifice.

The trouble was that the truth might well leave Miro feeling that none of the sacrifices meant anything at all. So Ender answered with a question. "Don't you already know why?"

Miro spoke slowly and carefully, so that Ender could understand his slurred speech. "I know that the piggies thought they were doing them an honor. I know that Mandachuva and Leaf-eater could have died in their places. With Libo, I even know the occasion. It was when the first amaranth harvest came, and there was plenty of food. They were rewarding him for that. Except why not earlier? Why not when we taught them to use merдона root? Why not when we taught them to make pots, or shoot arrows?"

"The truth?" said Ender.

Miro knew from Ender's tone that the truth would not be easy. "Yes," he said.

"Neither Pipo nor Libo really deserved the honor. It wasn't the amaranth that the wives were rewarding. It was the fact that Leaf-eater had persuaded them to let a whole generation of infants be conceived and born even though there wasn't enough food for them to eat once they left the mothertree. It was a terrible risk to take, and if he had been wrong, that whole generation of young piggies would have died. Libo brought the harvest, but Leaf-eater was the one who had, in a sense, brought the population to a point where they needed the grain."

Miro nodded. "Pipo?"

"Pipo told the piggies about his discovery. That the Descolada, which killed humans, was part of their normal physiology. That their bodies could handle transformations that killed us. Mandachuva told the wives that this meant that humans were not godlike and all-powerful. That in some ways we were even weaker than the Little Ones. That what made humans stronger than piggies was not something inherent in us-- our size, our brains, our language-- but rather the mere accident that we were a few thousand years ahead of them in learning. If they could acquire our knowledge, then we humans would have no more power over them. Mandachuva's discovery that piggies were

potentially equal to humans-- that was what they rewarded, not the information Pipo gave that led to that discovery."

"So both of them--"

"The piggies didn't want to kill either Pipo or Libo. In both cases, the crucial achievement belonged to a piggy. The only reason Pipo and Libo died was because they couldn't bring themselves to take a knife and kill a friend."

Miro must have seen the pain in Ender's face, despite his best effort to conceal it. Because it was Ender's bitterness that he answered. "You," said Miro, "you can kill anybody."

"It's a knack I was born with," said Ender.

"You killed Human because you knew it would make him live a new and better life," said Miro.

"Yes."

"And me," said Miro.

"Yes," said Ender. "Sending you away is very much like killing you."

"But will I live a new and better life?"

"I don't know. Already you get around better than a tree."

Miro laughed. "So I've got one thing on old Human, don't I-- at least I'm ambulatory. And nobody has to hit me with a stick so I can talk." Then Miro's expression grew sour again. "Of course, now he can have a thousand children."

"Don't count on being celibate all your life," said Ender. "You may be disappointed."

"I hope so," said Miro.

And then, after a silence: "Speaker?"

"Call me Ender."

"Ender, did Pipo and Libo die for nothing, then?" Ender understood the real question: Am I also enduring this for nothing?

"There are worse reasons to die," Ender answered, "than to die because you cannot bear to kill."

"What about someone," said Miro, "who can't kill, and can't die, and can't live, either?"

"Don't deceive yourself," said Ender. "You'll do all three someday."

Miro left the next morning. There were tearful good-byes. For weeks afterward, it was hard for Novinha to spend any time in her own house, because Miro's absence was so painful to her. Even though she had agreed wholeheartedly with Ender that it was right for Miro to go, it was still unbearable to lose her child. It made Ender wonder if his own parents felt such pain when he was taken away. He suspected they had not. Nor had they hoped for his return. He already loved another man's children more than his parents had loved their own child. Well, he'd get fit revenge for their neglect of him. He'd show them, three thousand years later, how a father should behave. Bishop Peregrino married them in his chambers. By Novinha's calculations, she was still young enough to have another six children, if they hurried. They set at the task with a will.

Before the marriage, though, there were two days of note. On a day in summer, Ela, Ouanda, and Novinha presented him with the results of their research and speculation: as completely as possible, the life cycle and community structure of the piggies, male and female, and a likely reconstruction of their patterns of life before the Descolada bonded them forever to the trees that, till then, had been no more to them than habitat. Ender had reached his own understanding of who the piggies were, and especially who Human was before his passage to the life of light.

He lived with the piggies for a week while he wrote the *Life of Human*. Mandachuva and Leaf-eater read it carefully, discussed it with him; he revised and reshaped; finally it was ready. On that day he invited everyone who was working with the piggies-- all the Ribeira family, Ouanda and her sisters, the many workmen who had brought technological miracles to the piggies, the scholar-monks of the Children of the Mind, Bishop Peregrino, Mayor Bosquinha-- and read the book to them. It wasn't long, less than an hour to read. They had gathered on the hillside near where Human's seedling tree reached upward, now more than three meters high, and where Rooter overshadowed them in the afternoon sunlight. "Speaker," said the Bishop, "almost thou persuadest me to become a humanist." Others, less trained to eloquence, found no words to say, not then or ever. But they knew from that day forward who the piggies were, just as the readers of the *Hive Queen* had understood the buggers, and the readers of the *Hegemon* had understood humankind in its endless quest for greatness in a wilderness of separation and suspicion. "This was why I called you here," said Novinha. "I dreamed once of writing this book. But you had to write it."

"I played more of a role in the story than I would have chosen for myself," said Ender. "But you fulfilled your dream, Ivanova. It was your work that led to this book. And you and your children who made me whole enough to write it."

He signed it, as he had signed the others, *The Speaker for the Dead*.

Jane took the book and carried it by ansible across the lightyears to the Hundred Worlds. With it she brought the text of the *Covenant* and Olhado's pictures of its signing and of the passage of Human into the full light. She placed it here and there, in a score of places on each of the Hundred Worlds, giving it to people likely to read it and understand what it was. Copies were sent as messages from computer to computer; by the time Starways Congress knew of it, it was too widely distributed to be suppressed.

Instead they tried to discredit it as a fake. The pictures were a crude simulation. Textual analysis revealed that it could not possibly have the same author as the other two books. Ansible usage records revealed that it could not possibly have come from Lusitania, which had no ansible. Some people believed them. Most people didn't care. Many who did care enough to read the Life of Human hadn't the heart to accept the piggies as ramen.

Some did accept the piggies, and read the accusation that Demosthenes had written a few months before, and began to call the fleet that was already under way toward Lusitania "The Second Xenocide." It was a very ugly name. There weren't enough jails in the Hundred Worlds to hold all those who used it. The Starways Congress had thought the war would begin when their ships reached Lusitania forty years from then. Instead, the war was already begun, and it would be fierce. What the Speaker for the Dead wrote, many people believed; and many were ready to accept the piggies as ramen, and to think of anyone who sought their deaths as murderers.

Then, on a day in autumn, Ender took the carefully wrapped cocoon, and he and Novinha, Olhado, Quim, and Ela skimmed over the kilometers of capim till they came to the hill beside the river. The daisies they had planted were in furious bloom; the winter here would be mild, and the hive queen would be safe from the Descolada.

Ender carried the hive queen gingerly to the riverbank, and laid her in the chamber he and Olhado had prepared. They laid the carcass of a freshly killed cabra on the ground outside her chamber.

And then Olhado drove them back. Ender wept with the vast, uncontrollable ecstasy that the hive queen placed within his mind, her rejoicing too strong for a human heart to bear; Novinha held him, Quim quietly prayed, and Ela sang a jaunty folksong that once had been heard in the hill country of Minas Gerais, among the caipiras and mineiros of old Brazil. It was a good time, a good place to be, better than Ender had ever dreamed for himself in the sterile corridors of the Battle School when he was little, and fighting for his life.

"I can probably die now," said Ender. "All my life's work is done."

"Mine too," said Novinha. "But I think that means that it's time to start to live."

Behind them, in the dank and humid air of a shallow cave by a river, strong mandibles tore at the cocoon, and a limp and skeletal body struggled forth. Her wings only gradually spread out and dried in the sunlight; she struggled weakly to the riverbank and pulled strength and moisture into her desiccated body. She nibbled at the meat of the cabra. The unhatched eggs she held within her cried out to be released; she laid the first dozen of them in the cabra's corpse, then ate the nearest daisies, trying to feel the changes in her body as she came alive at last.

The sunlight on her back, the breeze against her wings, the water cool under her feet, her eggs warming and maturing in the flesh of the cabra: Life, so long waited for, and not until today could she be sure that she would be, not the last of her tribe, but the first.

XENOCIDE
by Orson Scott Card

Chapter 1 -- A PARTING

<Today one of the brothers asked me: Is it a terrible prison, not to be able to move from the place where you're standing?>

<You answered ...>

<I told him that I am now more free than he is. The inability to move frees me from the obligation to act.>

<You who speak languages, you are such liars.>

Han Fei-tzu sat in lotus position on the bare wooden floor beside his wife's sickbed. Until a moment ago he might have been sleeping; he wasn't sure. But now he was aware of the slight change in her breathing, a change as subtle as the wind from a butterfly's passing.

Jiang-qing, for her part, must also have detected some change in him, for she had not spoken before and now she did speak. Her voice was very soft. But Han Fei-tzu could hear her clearly, for the house was silent. He had asked his friends and servants for stillness during the dusk of Jiang-qing's life. Time enough for careless noise during the long night that was to come, when there would be no hushed words from her lips.

"Still not dead," she said. She had greeted him with these words each time she woke during the past few days. At first the words had seemed whimsical or ironic to him, but now he knew that she spoke with disappointment. She longed for death now, not because she hadn't loved life, but because death was now unavoidable, and what cannot be shunned must be embraced. That was the Path. Jiang-qing had never taken a step away from the Path in her life.

"Then the gods are kind to me," said Han Fei-tzu.

"To you," she breathed. "What do we contemplate?"

It was her way of asking him to share his private thoughts with her. When others asked his private thoughts, he felt spied upon. But Jiang-qing asked only so that she could also think the same thought; it was part of their having become a single soul.

"We are contemplating the nature of desire," said Han Fei-tzu.

"Whose desire?" she asked. "And for what?"

My desire for your bones to heal and become strong, so that they don't snap at the slightest pressure. So that you could stand again, or even raise an arm without your own muscles tearing away chunks of bone or causing the bone to break under the tension. So that I wouldn't have to watch you wither away until now you weigh only eighteen kilograms. I never knew how perfectly happy we were until I learned that we could not stay together.

"My desire," he answered. "For you."

"You only covet what you do not have.' Who said that?"

"You did," said Han Fei-tzu. "Some say, 'what you cannot have.' Others say, 'what you should not have.' I say, 'You can truly covet only what you will always hunger for.'"

"You have me forever."

"I will lose you tonight. Or tomorrow. Or next week."

"Let us contemplate the nature of desire," said Jiang-qing. As before, she was using philosophy to pull him out of his brooding melancholy.

He resisted her, but only playfully. "You are a harsh ruler," said Han Feitzu. "Like your ancestor-of-the-heart, you make no allowance for other people's frailty." Jiang-qing was named for a revolutionary leader of the ancient past, who had tried to lead the people onto a new Path but was overthrown by weak-hearted cowards. It was not right, thought Han Fei-tzu, for his wife to die before him: her ancestor-of-the-heart had outlived her husband. Besides, wives should live longer than husbands. Women were more complete inside themselves. They were also better at living in their children. They were never as solitary as a man alone.

Jiang-qing refused to let him return to brooding. "When a man's wife is dead, what does he long for?"

Rebelliously, Han Fei-tzu gave her the most false answer to her question. "To lie with her," he said.

"The desire of the body," said Jiang-qing.

Since she was determined to have this conversation, Han Fei-tzu took up the catalogue for her. "The desire of the body is to act. It includes all touches, casual and intimate, and all customary movements. Thus he sees a movement out of the corner of his eye, and thinks he has seen his dead wife moving across the doorway, and he cannot be content until he has walked to the door and seen that it was not his wife. Thus he wakes up from a dream in which he heard her voice, and finds himself speaking his answer aloud as if she could hear him."

"What else?" asked Jiang-qing.

"I'm tired of philosophy," said Han Fei-tzu. "Maybe the Greeks found comfort in it, but not me."

"The desire of the spirit," said Jiang-qing, insisting.

"Because the spirit is of the earth, it is that part which makes new things out of old ones. The husband longs for all the unfinished things that he and his wife were making when she died, and all the unstarted dreams of what they would have made if she had lived. Thus a man grows angry at his children for being too much like him and not enough like his dead wife. Thus a man hates the house they lived in together, because either he does not change it, so that it is as dead as his wife, or because he does change it, so that it is no longer half of her making."

"You don't have to be angry at our little Qing-jao," said Jiang-qing.

"Why?" asked Han Fei-tzu. "Will you stay, then, and help me teach her to be a woman? All I can teach her is to be what I am-- cold and hard, sharp and strong, like obsidian. If she grows like that, while she looks so much like you, how can I help but be angry?"

"Because you can teach her everything that I am, too," said Jiang-qing.

"If I had any part of you in me," said Han Fei-tzu, "I would not have needed to marry you to become a complete person." Now he teased her by using philosophy to turn the conversation away from pain. "That is the desire of the soul. Because the soul is made of light and dwells in air, it is that part which conceives and keeps ideas, especially the idea of the self. The husband longs for his whole self, which was made of the husband and wife together. Thus he never believes any of his own thoughts, because there is always a question in his mind to which his wife's thoughts were the only possible answer. Thus the whole world seems dead to him because he cannot trust anything to keep its meaning before the onslaught of this unanswerable question."

"Very deep," said Jiang-qing.

"If I were Japanese I would commit seppuku, spilling my bowel into the jar of your ashes."

"Very wet and messy," she said.

He smiled. "Then I should be an ancient Hindu, and burn myself on your pyre."

But she was through with joking. "Qing-jao," she whispered. She was reminding him he could do nothing so flamboyant as to die with her. There was little Qing-jao to care for.

So Han Fei-tzu answered her seriously. "How can I teach her to be what you are?"

"All that is good in me," said Jiang-qing, "comes from the Path. If you teach her to obey the gods, honor the ancestors, love the people, and serve the rulers, I will be in her as much as you are."

"I would teach her the Path as part of myself," said Han Fei-tzu.

"Not so," said Jiang-qing. "The Path is not a natural part of you, my husband. Even with the gods speaking to you every day, you insist on believing in a world where everything can be explained by natural causes."

"I obey the gods." He thought, bitterly, that he had no choice; that even to delay obedience was torture.

"But you don't know them. You don't love their works."

"The Path is to love the people. The gods we only obey." How can I love gods who humiliate me and torment me at every opportunity?

"We love the people because they are creatures of the gods."

"Don't preach to me."

She sighed.

Her sadness stung him like a spider. "I wish you would preach to me forever," said Han Fei-tzu.

"You married me because you knew I loved the gods, and that love for them was completely missing from yourself. That was how I completed you."

How could he argue with her, when he knew that even now he hated the gods for everything they had ever done to him, everything they had ever made him do, everything they had stolen from him in his life.

"Promise me," said Jiang-qing.

He knew what these words meant. She felt death upon her; she was laying the burden of her life upon him. A burden he would gladly bear. It was losing her company on the Path that he had dreaded for so long.

"Promise that you will teach Qing-jiao to love the gods and walk always on the Path. Promise that you will make her as much my daughter as yours."

"Even if she never hears the voice of the gods?"

"The Path is for everyone, not just the godspoken."

Perhaps, thought Han Fei-tzu, but it was much easier for the godspoken to follow the Path, because to them the price for straying from it was so terrible. The common people were free; they could leave the Path and not feel the pain of it for years. The godspoken couldn't leave the Path for an hour.

"Promise me."

I will. I promise.

But he couldn't say the words out loud. He did not know why, but his reluctance was deep.

In the silence, as she waited for his vow, they heard the sound of running feet on the gravel outside the front door of the house. It could only be Qing-jao, home from the garden of Sun Cao-pi. Only Qing-jao was allowed to run and make noise during this time of hush. They waited, knowing that she would come straight to her mother's room.

The door slid open almost noiselessly. Even Qing-jao had caught enough of the hush to walk softly when she was actually in the presence of her mother. Though she walked on tiptoe, she could hardly keep from dancing, almost galloping across the floor. But she did not fling her arms around her mother's neck; she remembered that lesson even though the terrible bruise had faded from Jiang-qing's face, where Qing-jao's eager embrace had broken her jaw three months ago.

"I counted twenty-three white carp in the garden stream," said Qing-jao.

"So many," said Jiang-qing.

"I think they were showing themselves to me," said Qing-jao. "So I could count them. None of them wanted to be left out."

"Love you," whispered Jiang-qing.

Han Fei-tzu heard a new sound in her breathy voice-- a popping sound, like bubbles bursting with her words.

"Do you think that seeing so many carp means that I will be godspoken?" asked Qing-jao.

"I will ask the gods to speak to you," said Jiang-qing.

Suddenly Jiang-qing's breathing became quick and harsh. Han Fei-tzu immediately knelt and looked at his wife. Her eyes were wide and frightened. The moment had come.

Her lips moved. Promise me, she said, though her breath could make no sound but gasping.

"I promise," said Han Fei-tzu.

Then her breathing stopped.

"What do the gods say when they talk to you?" asked Qing-jao.

"Your mother is very tired," said Han Fei-tzu. "You should go out now."

"But she didn't answer me. What do the gods say?"

"They tell secrets," said Han Fei-tzu. "No one who hears will repeat them."

Qing-jao nodded wisely. She took a step back, as if to leave, but stopped. "May I kiss you, Mama?"

"Lightly on the cheek," said Han Fei-tzu.

Qing-jao, being small for a four-year-old, did not have to bend very far at all to kiss her mother's cheek. "I love you, Mama."

"You'd better leave now, Qing-jao," said Han Fei-tzu.

"But Mama didn't say she loved me too."

"She did. She said it before. Remember? But she's very tired and weak. Go now."

He put just enough sternness in his voice that Qing-jao left without further questions. Only when she was gone did Han Fei-tzu let himself feel anything but care for her. He knelt over Jiang-qing's body and tried to imagine what was happening to her now. Her soul had flown and was now already in heaven. Her spirit would linger much longer; perhaps her spirit would dwell in this house, if it had truly been a place of happiness for her. Superstitious people believed that all spirits of the dead were dangerous, and put up signs and wards to fend them off. But those who followed the Path knew that the spirit of a good person was never harmful or destructive, for their goodness in life had come from the spirit's love of making things. Jiang-qing's spirit would be a blessing in the house for many years to come, if she chose to stay.

Yet even as he tried to imagine her soul and spirit, according to the teachings of the Path, there was a cold place in his heart that was certain that all that was left of Jiang-qing was this brittle, dried-up body. Tonight it would burn as quickly as paper, and then she would be gone except for the memories in his heart.

Jiang-qing was right. Without her to complete his soul, he was already doubting the gods. And the gods had noticed-- they always did. At once he felt the unbearable pressure to do the ritual of cleansing, until he was rid of his unworthy thoughts. Even now they could not leave him unpunished. Even now, with his wife lying dead before him, the gods insisted that he do obeisance to them before he could shed a single tear of grief for her.

At first he meant to delay, to put off obedience. He had schooled himself to be able to postpone the ritual for as long as a whole day, while hiding all outward signs of his inner torment. He could do that now-- but only by keeping his heart utterly cold. There was no point in that. Proper grief could come only when he had satisfied the gods. So, kneeling there, he began the ritual.

He was still twisting and gyrating with the ritual when a servant peered in. Though the servant said nothing, Han Fei-tzu heard the faint sliding of the door and knew what the servant would

assume: Jiang-qing was dead, and Han Fei-tzu was so righteous that he was communing with the gods even before he announced her death to the household. No doubt some would even suppose that the gods had come to take Jiang-qing, since she was known for her extraordinary holiness. No one would guess that even as Han Fei-tzu worshiped, his heart was full of bitterness that the gods would dare demand this of him even now.

O Gods, he thought, if I knew that by cutting off an arm or cutting out my liver I could be rid of you forever, I would seize the knife and relish the pain and loss, all for the sake of freedom.

That thought, too, was unworthy, and required even more cleansing. It was hours before the gods at last released him, and by then he was too tired, too sick at heart to grieve. He got up and fetched the women to prepare Jiang-qing's body for the burning.

At midnight he was the last to come to the pyre, carrying a sleepy Qing-jao in his arms. She clutched in her hands the three papers she had written for her mother in her childish scrawl. "Fish," she had written, and "book" and "secrets." These were the things that Qing-jao was giving to her mother to carry with her into heaven. Han Fei-tzu had tried to guess at the thoughts in Qing-jao's mind as she wrote those words. Fish because of the carp in the garden stream today, no doubt. And book-- that was easy enough to understand, because reading aloud was one of the last things Jiang-qing could do with her daughter. But why secrets? What secrets did Qing-jao have for her mother? He could not ask. One did not discuss the paper offerings to the dead.

Han Fei-tzu set Qing-jao on her feet; she had not been deeply asleep, and so she woke at once and stood there, blinking slowly. Han Fei-tzu whispered to her and she rolled her papers and tucked them into her mother's sleeve. She didn't seem to mind touching her mother's cold flesh-- she was too young to have learned to shudder at the touch of death.

Nor did Han Fei-tzu mind the touch of his wife's flesh as he tucked his own three papers into her other sleeve. What was there to fear from death now, when it had already done its worst?

No one knew what was written on his papers, or they would have been horrified, for he had written, "My body," "My spirit," and "My soul." Thus it was that he burned himself on Jiang-qing's funeral pyre, and sent himself with her wherever it was she was going.

Then Jiang-qing's secret maid, Mu-pao, laid the torch onto the sacred wood and the pyre burst into flames. The heat of the fire was painful, and Qing-jao hid herself behind her father, only peeking around him now and then to watch her mother leave on her endless journey. Han Fei-tzu, though, welcomed the dry heat that seared his skin and made brittle the silk of his robe. Her body had not been as dry as it seemed; long after the papers had crisped into ash and blown upward into the smoke of the fire, her body still sizzled, and the heavy incense burning all around the fire could not conceal from him the smell of burning flesh. That is what we're burning here: meat, fish, carrion, nothing. Not my Jiang-qing. Only the costume she wore into this life. That which made that body into the woman that I loved is still alive, must still live. And for a moment he thought he could see, or hear, or somehow feel the passage of Jiang-qing.

Into the air, into the earth, into the fire. I am with you.

Chapter 2 -- A MEETING

<The strangest thing about humans is the way they pair up, males and females. Constantly at war with each other, never content to leave each other alone. They never seem to grasp the idea that males and females are separate species with completely different needs and desires, forced to come together only to reproduce.>

<Of course you feel that way. Your mates are nothing but mindless drones, extensions of yourself, without their own identity.>

<We know our lovers with perfect understanding. Humans invent an imaginary lover and put that mask over the face of the body in their bed.>

<That is the tragedy of language, my friend. Those who know each other only through symbolic representations are forced to imagine each other. And because their imagination is imperfect, they are often wrong.>

<That is the source of their misery.>

<And some of their strength, I think. Your people and mine, each for our own evolutionary reasons, mate with vastly unequal partners. Our mates are always, hopelessly, our intellectual inferiors. Humans mate with beings who challenge their supremacy. They have conflict between mates, not because their communication is inferior to ours, but because they commune with each other at all.>

Valentine Wiggin read over her essay, making a few corrections here and there. When she was done, the words stood in the air over her computer terminal. She was feeling pleased with herself for having written such a deft ironic dismemberment of the personal character of Rymus Ojman, the chairman of the cabinet of Starways Congress.

"Have we finished another attack on the masters of the Hundred Worlds?"

Valentine did not turn to face her husband; she knew from his voice exactly what expression would be on his face, and so she smiled back at him without turning around. After twenty-five years of marriage, they could see each other clearly without having to look. "We have made Rymus Ojman look ridiculous."

Jakt leaned into her tiny office, his face so close to hers that she could hear his soft breathing as he read the opening paragraphs. He wasn't young anymore; the exertion of leaning into her office, bracing his hands on the doorframe, was making him breathe more rapidly than she liked to hear.

Then he spoke, but with his face so close to hers that she felt his lips brush her cheek, tickling her with every word. "From now on even his mother will laugh behind her hand whenever she sees the poor bastard."

"It was hard to make it funny," said Valentine. "I caught myself denouncing him again and again."

"This is better."

"Oh, I know. If I had let my outrage show, if I had accused him of all his crimes, it would have made him seem more formidable and frightening and the Rule-of-law Faction would have loved him all the more, while the cowards on every world would have bowed to him even lower."

"If they bow any lower they'll have to buy thinner carpets," said Jakt.

She laughed, but it was as much because the tickling of his lips on her cheek was becoming unbearable. It was also beginning, just a little, to tantalize her with desires that simply could not be satisfied on this voyage. The starship was too small and cramped, with all their family aboard, for any real privacy. "Jakt, we're almost at the midpoint. We've abstained longer than this during the mishmish run every year of our lives."

"We could put a do-not-enter sign on the door."

"Then you might just as well put out a sign that says, 'naked elderly couple reliving old memories inside.'"

"I'm not elderly."

"You're over sixty."

"If the old soldier can still stand up and salute, I say let him march in the parade."

"No parades till the voyage is over. It's only a couple of weeks more. We only have to complete this rendezvous with Ender's stepson and then we're back on course to Lusitania."

Jakt drew away from her, pulled himself out of her doorway and stood upright in the corridor--one of the few places on the starship where he could actually do that. He groaned as he did it, though.

"You creak like an old rusty door," said Valentine.

"I've heard you make the same sounds when you get up from your desk here. I'm not the only senile, decrepit, miserable old coot in our family."

"Go away and let me transmit this."

"I'm used to having work to do on a voyage," said Jakt. "The computers do everything here, and this ship never rolls or pitches in the sea."

"Read a book."

"I worry about you. All work and no play makes Val a mean-tempered old hag."

"Every minute that we talk here is eight and a half hours in real time."

"Our time here on this starship is just as real as their time out there," said Jakt. "Sometimes I wish Ender's friends hadn't figured out a way for our starship to keep up a landside link."

"It takes up a huge amount of computer time," said Val. "Until now, only the military could communicate with starships during near-light-speed flight. If Ender's friends can achieve it, then I owe it to them to use it."

"You're not doing all this because you owe it to somebody."

That was true enough. "If I write an essay every hour, Jakt, it means that to the rest of humanity Demosthenes is publishing something only once every three weeks."

"You can't possibly write an essay every hour. You sleep, you eat."

"You talk, I listen. Go away, Jakt."

"If I'd known that saving a planet from destruction would mean my returning to a state of virginity, I'd never have agreed to it."

He was only half teasing. Leaving Trondheim was a hard decision for all her family-- even for her, even knowing that she was going to see Ender again. The children were all adults now, or nearly so; they saw this voyage as a great adventure. Their visions of the future were not so tied to a particular place. None of them had become a sailor, like their father; all of them were becoming scholars or scientists, living the life of public discourse and private contemplation, like their mother. They could live their lives, substantially unchanged, anywhere, on any world. Jakt was proud of them, but disappointed that the chain of family reaching back for seven generations on the seas of Trondheim would end with him. And now, for her sake, he had given up the sea himself. Giving up Trondheim was the hardest thing she could ever have asked of Jakt, and he had said yes without hesitation.

Perhaps he would go back someday, and, if he did, the oceans, the ice, the storms, the fish, the desperately sweet green meadows of summer would still be there. But his crews would be gone, were already gone. The men he had known better than his own children, better than his wife-- those men were already fifteen years older, and when he returned, if he returned, another forty years

would have passed. Their grandsons would be working the boats then. They wouldn't know the name of Jakt. He'd be a foreign shipowner, come from the sky, not a sailor, not a man with the stink and yellowy blood of skrika on his hands. He would not be one of them.

So when he complained that she was ignoring him, when he teased about their lack of intimacy during the voyage, there was more to it than an aging husband's playful desire. Whether he knew he was saying it or not, she understood the true meaning of his overtures: After what I've given up for you, have you nothing to give to me?

And he was right-- she was pushing herself harder than she needed to. She was making more sacrifices than needed to be made-- requiring overmuch from him as well. It wasn't the sheer number of subversive essays that Demosthenes published during this voyage that would make the difference. What mattered was how many people read and believed what she wrote, and how many then thought and spoke and acted as enemies of Starways Congress. Perhaps more important was the hope that some within the bureaucracy of Congress itself would be moved to feel a higher allegiance to humanity and break their maddening institutional solidarity. Some would surely be changed by what she wrote. Not many, but maybe enough. And maybe it would happen in time to stop them from destroying the planet Lusitania.

If not, she and Jakt and those who had given up so much to come with them on this voyage from Trondheim would reach Lusitania just in time to turn around and flee-- or be destroyed along with all the others of that world. It was not unreasonable for Jakt to be tense, to want to spend more time with her. It was unreasonable for her to be so single-minded, to use every waking moment writing propaganda.

"You make the sign for the door, and I'll make sure you aren't alone in the room."

"Woman, you make my heart go flip-flop like a dying flounder," said Jakt.

"You are so romantic when you talk like a fisherman," said Valentine. "The children will have a good laugh, knowing you couldn't keep your hands off me even for the three weeks of this voyage."

"They have our genes. They should be rooting for us to stay randy till we're well into our second century."

"I'm well into my fourth millennium."

"When oh when can I expect you in my stateroom, Ancient One?"

"When I've transmitted this essay."

"And how long will that be?"

"Sometime after you go away and leave me alone."

With a deep sigh that was more theatre than genuine misery, he padded off down the carpeted corridor. After a moment there came a clanging sound and she heard him yelp in pain. In mock pain, of course; he had accidentally hit the metal beam with his head on the first day of the voyage, but ever since then his collisions had been deliberate, for comic effect. No one ever laughed out loud, of course-- that was a family tradition, not to laugh when Jakt pulled one of his physical gags-- but then Jakt was not the sort of man who needed overt encouragement from others. He was his own best audience; a man couldn't be a sailor and a leader of men all his life without being quite self-contained. As far as Valentine knew, she and the children were the only people he had ever allowed himself to need.

Even then, he had not needed them so much that he couldn't go on with his life as a sailor and fisherman, away from home for days, often weeks, sometimes months at a time. Valentine went with him sometimes at first, when they were still so hungry for each other that they could never be satisfied. But within a few years their hunger had given way to patience and trust; when he was away, she did her research and wrote her books, and then gave her entire attention to him and the children when he returned.

The children used to complain, "I wish Father would get home, so Mother would come out of her room and talk to us again." I was not a very good mother, Valentine thought. It's pure luck that the children turned out so well.

The essay remained in the air over the terminal. Only a final touch remained to be given. At the bottom, she centered the cursor and typed the name under which all her writings were published:

DEMOSTHENES

It was a name given to her by her older brother, Peter, when they were children together fifty-- no, three thousand years ago.

The mere thought of Peter still had the power to upset her, to make her go hot and cold inside. Peter, the cruel one, the violent one, the one whose mind was so subtle and dangerous that he was manipulating her by the age of two and the world by the age of twenty. When they were still children on Earth in the twenty-second century, he studied the political writings of great men and women, living and dead, not to learn their ideas-- those he grasped instantly-- but to learn how they said them. To learn, in practical terms, how to sound like an adult. When he had mastered it, he taught Valentine, and forced her to write low political demagoguery under the name Demosthenes while he wrote elevated statesmanlike essays under the name Locke. Then they submitted them to the computer networks and within a few years were at the heart of the greatest political issues of the day.

What galled Valentine then-- and still stung a bit today, since it had never been resolved before Peter died-- was that he, consumed by the lust for power, had forced her to write the sort of thing that expressed his character, while he got to write the peace-loving, elevated sentiments that were hers by nature. In those days the name "Demosthenes" had felt like a terrible burden to her. Everything she wrote under that name was a lie; and not even her lie-- Peter's lie. A lie within a lie.

Not now. Not for three thousand years. I've made the name my own. I've written histories and biographies that have shaped the thinking of millions of scholars on the Hundred Worlds and helped to shape the identities of dozens of nations. So much for you, Peter. So much for what you tried to make of me.

Except that now, looking at the essay she had just written, she realized that even though she had freed herself from Peter's suzerainty, she was still his pupil. All she knew of rhetoric, polemic-- yes, of demagoguery-- she had learned from him or because of his insistence. And now, though she was using it in a noble cause, she was nevertheless doing exactly the sort of political manipulation that Peter had loved so much.

Peter had gone on to become Hegemon, ruler of all humanity for sixty years at the beginning of the Great Expansion. He was the one who united all the quarreling communities of man for the vast effort that flung starships out to every world where the buggers had once dwelt, and then on to discover more habitable worlds until, by the time he died, all the Hundred Worlds had either been settled or had colony ships on the way. It was almost a thousand years after that, of course, before Starways Congress once again united all of humankind under one government-- but the memory of the first true Hegemon-- *the* Hegemon-- was at the heart of the story that made human unity possible.

Out of a moral wasteland like Peter's soul came harmony and unity and peace. While Ender's legacy, as far as humanity remembered, was murder, slaughter, xenocide.

Ender, Valentine's younger brother, the man she and her family were voyaging to see-- he was the tender one, the brother she loved and, in the earliest years, tried to protect. He was the good one. Oh, yes, he had a streak of ruthlessness that rivaled Peter's, but he had the decency to be appalled by his own brutality. She had loved him as fervently as she had loathed Peter; and when Peter exiled his younger brother from the Earth that Peter was determined to rule, Valentine went with Ender-- her final repudiation of Peter's personal hegemony over her.

And here I am again, thought Valentine, back in the business of politics.

She spoke sharply, in the clipped voice that told her terminal that she was giving it a command. "Transmit," she said.

The word transmitting appeared in the air above her essay. Ordinarily, back when she was writing scholarly works, she would have had to specify a destination-- submit the essay to a publisher through some roundabout pathway so that it could not readily be traced to Valentine Wiggin. Now, though, a subversive friend of Ender's, working under the obvious code name of "Jane," was taking care of all that for her-- managing the tricky business of translating an ansible message from a ship going at near-light speed to a message readable by a planetbound ansible for which time was passing more than five hundred times faster.

Since communicating with a starship ate up huge amounts of planetside ansible time, it was usually done only to convey navigational information and instructions. The only people permitted to send extended text messages were high officials in the government or the military. Valentine

could not begin to understand how "Jane" managed to get so much ansible time for these text transmissions-- and at the same time keep anyone from discovering where these subversive documents were coming from. Furthermore, "Jane" used even more ansible time transmitting back to her the published responses to her writings, reporting to her on all the arguments and strategies the government was using to counter Valentine's propaganda. Whoever "Jane" was-- and Valentine suspected that "Jane" was simply the name for a clandestine organization that had penetrated the highest reaches of government-- she was extraordinarily good. And extraordinarily foolhardy. Still, if Jane was willing to expose herself-- themselves-- to such risks, Valentine owed it to her-- them-- to produce as many tracts as she could, and as powerful and dangerous as she could make them.

If words can be lethal weapons, I must provide them with an arsenal.

But she was still a woman; even revolutionaries are allowed to have a life, aren't they? Moments of joy-- or pleasure, or perhaps only relief-- stolen here and there. She got up from her seat, ignoring the pain that came from moving after sitting so long, and twisted her way out of the door of her tiny office-- a storage bin, really, before they converted the starship to their own use. She was a little ashamed of how eager she was to get to the room where Jakt would be waiting. Most of the great revolutionary propagandists in history would have been able to endure at least three weeks of physical abstinence. Or would they? She wondered if anyone had done a study of that particular question.

She was still imagining how a researcher would go about writing a grant proposal for such a project when she got to the four-bunk compartment they shared with Syfte and her husband, Lars, who had proposed to her only a few days before they left, as soon as he realized that Syfte really meant to leave Trondheim. It was hard to share a cabin with newlyweds-- Valentine always felt like such an intruder, using the same room. But there was no choice. Though this starship was a luxury yacht, with all the amenities they could hope for, it simply hadn't been meant to hold so many bodies. It had been the only starship near Trondheim that was remotely suitable, so it had to do.

Their twenty-year-old daughter, Ro, and Varsam, their sixteen-year-old son, shared another compartment with Plikt, who had been their lifelong tutor and dearest family friend. The members of the yacht's staff and crew who had chosen to make this voyage with them-- it would have been wrong to dismiss them all and strand them on Trondheim-- used the other two.

The bridge, the dining room, the galley, the salon, the sleeping compartments-- all were filled with people doing their best not to let their annoyance at the close quarters get out of hand.

None of them were in the corridor now, however, and Jakt had already taped a sign to their door:

STAY OUT OR DIE.

It was signed, "The proprietor." Valentine opened the door. Jakt was leaning against the wall so close to the door that she was startled and gave a little gasp.

"Nice to know that the sight of me can make you cry out in pleasure."

"In shock."

"Come in, my sweet seditiousist."

"Technically, you know, I'm the proprietor of this starship."

"What's yours is mine. I married you for your property."

She was inside the compartment now. He closed the door and sealed it.

"That's all I am to you?" she asked. "Real estate?"

"A little plot of ground where I can plow and plant and harvest, all in their proper season." He reached out to her; she stepped into his arms. His hands slid lightly up her back, cradled her shoulders. She felt contained in his embrace, never confined.

"It's late in the autumn," she said. "Getting on toward winter."

"Time to harrow, perhaps," said Jakt. "Or perhaps it's already time to kindle up the fire and keep the old hut warm before the snow comes."

He kissed her and it felt like the first time.

"If you asked me to marry you all over again today, I'd say yes," said Valentine.

"And if I had only met you for the first time today, I'd ask."

They had said the same words many, many times before. Yet they still smiled to hear them, because they were still true.

The two starships had almost completed their vast ballet, dancing through space in great leaps and delicate turns until at last they could meet and touch. Miro Ribeira had watched the whole process from the bridge of his starship, his shoulders hunched, his head leaned back on the headrest of the seat. To others this posture always looked awkward. Back on Lusitania, whenever Mother caught him sitting that way she would come and fuss over him, insist on bringing him a pillow so he could be comfortable. She never seemed to grasp the idea that it was only in that hunched, awkward-seeming posture that his head would remain upright without any conscious effort on his part.

He would endure her ministrations because it wasn't worth the effort to argue with her. Mother was always moving and thinking so quickly, it was almost impossible for her to slow down enough to listen to him. Since the brain damage he had suffered passing through the disruptor field that separated the human colony and the piggies' forest, his speech had been unbearably slow, painful to produce and difficult to understand. Miro's brother Quim, the religious one, had told him that he should be grateful to God that he was able to speak at all-- the first few days he had been incapable

of communicating except through alphabetic scanning, spelling out messages letter by letter. In some ways, though, spelling things out had been better. At least then Miro had been silent; he hadn't had to listen to his own voice. The thick, awkward sound, the agonizing slowness of it. Who in his family had the patience to listen to him? Even the ones who tried-- his next-younger sister, Ela; his friend and stepfather, Andrew Wiggin, the Speaker for the Dead; and Quim, of course-- he could feel their impatience. They tended to finish his sentences for him. They needed to hurry things. So even though they said they wanted to talk with him, even though they actually sat and listened as he spoke, he still couldn't speak freely to them. He couldn't talk about ideas; he couldn't speak in long, involved sentences, because by the time he got to the end his listeners would have lost track of the beginning.

The human brain, Miro had concluded, just like a computer, can only receive data at certain speeds. If you get too slow, the listener's attention wanders and the information is lost.

Not just the listeners, either. Miro had to be fair-- he was as impatient with himself as they were. When he thought of the sheer effort involved in explaining a complicated idea, when he anticipated trying to form the words with lips and tongue and jaws that wouldn't obey him, when he thought of how long it would all take, he usually felt too weary to speak. His mind raced on and on, as fast as ever, thinking so many thoughts that at times Miro wanted his brain to shut down, to be silent and give him peace. But his thoughts remained his own, unshared.

Except with Jane. He could speak to Jane. She had come to him first on his terminal at home, her face taking form on the screen. "I'm a friend of the Speaker for the Dead," she had told him. "I think we can get this computer to be a little more responsive." From then on, Miro had found that Jane was the only person he could talk to easily. For one thing, she was infinitely patient. She never finished his sentences. She could wait for him to finish them himself, so that he never felt rushed, never felt that he was boring her.

Perhaps even more important, he didn't have to form his words as fully for her as he did for human listeners. Andrew had given him a personal terminal-- a computer transceiver encased in a jewel like the one Andrew wore in his own ear. From that vantage point, using the jewel's sensors, Jane could detect every sound he made, every motion of the muscles in his head. He didn't have to complete each sound, he had only to begin it and she would understand. So he could be lazy. He could speak more quickly and be understood.

And he could also speak silently. He could subvocalize-- he didn't have to use that awkward, barking, yowling voice that was all his throat could produce now. So that when he was talking to Jane, he could speak quickly, naturally, without any reminder that he was crippled. With Jane he could feel like himself.

Now he sat on the bridge of the cargo ship that had brought the Speaker for the Dead to Lusitania only a few months ago. He dreaded the rendezvous with Valentine's ship. If he could have thought of somewhere else to go, he might have gone there-- he had no desire to meet Andrew's sister Valentine or anybody else. If he could have stayed alone in the starship forever, speaking only to Jane, he would have been content.

No he wouldn't. He would never be content again.

At least this Valentine and her family would be somebody new. On Lusitania he knew everybody, or at least everybody that he valued-- all the scientific community there, the people of education and understanding. He knew them all so well that he could not help but see their pity, their grief, their frustration at what had become of him. When they looked at him all they could see was the difference between what he was before and what he was now. All they could see was loss.

There was a chance that new people-- Valentine and her family-- would be able to look at him and see something else.

Even that was unlikely, though. Strangers would look at him and see less, not more, than those who had known him before he was crippled. At least Mother and Andrew and Ela and Ouanda and all the others knew that he had a mind, knew that he was capable of understanding ideas. What will new people think when they see me? They'll see a body that's already atrophying, hunched over; they'll see me walk with a shuffling gait; they'll watch me use my hands like paws, clutching a spoon like a three-year-old; they'll hear my thick, half-intelligible speech; and they'll assume, they'll know, that such a person cannot possibly understand anything complicated or difficult.

Why did I come?

I didn't come. I went. I wasn't coming here, to meet these people. I was leaving there. Getting away. Only I tricked myself. I thought of leaving on a thirty-year voyage, which is only how it will seem to them. To me I've been gone only a week and a half. No time at all. And already my time of solitude is over. My time of being alone with Jane, who listens to me as if I were still a human being, is done.

Almost. Almost he said the words that would have aborted the rendezvous. He could have stolen Andrew's starship and taken off on a voyage that would last forever without having to face another living soul.

But such a nihilistic act was not in him, not yet. He had not yet despaired, he decided. There might yet be something he could do that might justify his continuing to live in this body. And perhaps it would begin with meeting Andrew's sister.

The ships were now joining, the umbilicals snaking outward and searching, groping till they met each other. Miro watched on the monitors and listened to the computer reports of each successful linkage. The ships were joining in every possible way so that they could make the rest of the voyage to Lusitania in perfect tandem. All resources would be shared. Since Miro's ship was a cargo vessel, it couldn't take on more than a handful of people, but it could take some of the other ship's life-support supplies; together, the two ship's computers were figuring out a perfect balance.

Once they had calculated the load, they worked out exactly how fast each ship should accelerate as they made the park shift to get them both back to near-light-speed at exactly the same pace. It was an extremely delicate and complicated negotiation between two computers that had to know almost

perfectly what their ships carried and how they could perform. It was finished before the passage tube between the ships was fully connected.

Miro heard the footsteps scuffing along the corridor from the tube. He turned his chair-- slowly, because he did everything slowly-- and saw her coming toward him. Stooped over, but not very much, because she wasn't that tall to begin with. Hair mostly white, with a few strands of mousy brown. When she stood he looked at her face and judged her. Old but not elderly. If she was nervous about this meeting it didn't show. But then, from what Andrew and Jane had told him about her, she had met a lot of people who were a good deal more fearsome than a twenty-year-old cripple.

"Miro?" she asked.

"Who else?" he said.

It took a moment, just a heartbeat, for her to process the strange sounds that came out of his mouth and recognize the words. He was used to that pause now, but he still hated it.

"I'm Valentine," she said.

"I know," he answered. He wasn't making this any easier, with his laconic replies, but what else was there to say? This wasn't exactly a meeting between heads of state with a list of vital decisions to make. But he had to make some effort, if only not to seem hostile.

"Your name, Miro-- it means 'I look,' doesn't it?"

"'I look closely.' Maybe 'I pay attention.'"

"It's really not that hard to understand you," said Valentine.

He was startled that she addressed the matter so openly.

"I think I'm having more problems with your Portuguese accent than with the brain damage."

For a moment it felt like a hammer in his heart-- she was speaking more frankly about his situation than anyone except Andrew. But then she was Andrew's sister, wasn't she? He should have expected her to be plainspoken.

"Or do you prefer that we pretend that it isn't a barrier between you and other people?"

Apparently she had sensed his shock. But that was over, and now it occurred to him that he probably shouldn't be annoyed, that he should probably be glad that they wouldn't have to sidestep the issue. Yet he was annoyed, and it took him a moment to think why. Then he knew.

"My brain damage isn't your problem," he said.

"If it makes it hard for me to understand you, then it's a problem I have to deal with. Don't get prickly with me already, young man. I have only begun to bother you, and you have only begun to bother me. So don't get steamed up because I happened to mention your brain damage as being somehow my problem. I have no intention of watching every word I say for fear I'll offend an oversensitive young man who thinks the whole world revolves around his disappointments."

Miro was furious that she had judged him already, and so harshly. It was unfair-- not at all what the author of Demosthenes' hierarchy ought to be like. "I don't think the whole world revolves around my disappointments! But don't you think you can come in here and run things on my ship!" That's what annoyed him, not her words. She was right-- her words were nothing. It was her attitude, her complete self-confidence. He wasn't used to people looking at him without shock or pity.

She sat down in the seat next to him. He swiveled to face her. She, for her part, did not look away. Indeed, she pointedly scanned his body, head to toe, looking him over with an air of cool appraisal. "He said you were tough. He said you had been twisted but not broken."

"Are you supposed to be my therapist?"

"Are you supposed to be my enemy?"

"Should I be?" asked Miro.

"No more than I should be your therapist. Andrew didn't have us meet so I could heal you. He had us meet so you could help me. If you're not going to, fine. If you are, fine. Just let me make a few things clear. I'm spending every waking moment writing subversive propaganda to try to arouse public sentiment on the Hundred Worlds and in the colonies. I'm trying to turn the people against the fleet that Starways Congress has sent to subdue Lusitania. Your world, not mine, I might add."

"Your brother's there." He was not about to let her claim complete altruism.

"Yes, we both have family there. And we both are concerned about keeping the pequeninos from destruction. And we both know that Ender has restored the hive queen on your world, so that there are two alien species that will be destroyed if Starways Congress gets its way. There's a great deal at stake, and I am already doing all that I can possibly do to try to stop that fleet. Now, if spending a few hours with you can help me do it better, it's worth taking time away from my writing in order to talk with you. But I have no intention of wasting my time worrying about whether I'm going to offend you or not. So if you're going to be my adversary, you can sit up here all by yourself and I'll get back to my work."

"Andrew said you were the best person he ever knew."

"He reached that conclusion before he saw me raise three barbarian children to adulthood. I understand your mother has six."

"Right."

"And you're the oldest."

"Yes."

"That's too bad. Parents always make their worst mistakes with the oldest children. That's when parents know the least and care the most, so they're more likely to be wrong and also more likely to insist that they're right."

Miro didn't like hearing this woman leap to conclusions about his mother. "She's nothing like you."

"Of course not." She leaned forward in her seat. "Well, have you decided?"

"Decided what?"

"Are we working together or did you just unplug yourself from thirty years of human history for nothing?"

"What do you want from me?"

"Stories, of course. Facts I can get from the computer."

"Stories about what?"

"You. The piggies. You and the piggies. This whole business with the Lusitania Fleet began with you and the piggies, after all. It was because you interfered with them that--"

"We helped them!"

"Oh, did I use the wrong word again?"

Miro glared at her. But even as he did, he knew that she was right-- he was being oversensitive. The word interfered, when used in a scientific context, was almost value-neutral. It merely meant that he had introduced change into the culture he was studying. And if it did have a negative connotation, it was that he had lost his scientific perspective-- he had stopped studying the pequeninos and started treating them as friends. Of that he was surely guilty. No, not guilty-- he was proud of having made that transition. "Go on," he said.

"All this began because you broke the law and piggies started growing amaranth."

"Not anymore."

"Yes, that's ironic, isn't it? The descolada virus has gotten in and killed every strain of amaranth that your sister developed for them. So your interference was in vain."

"No it wasn't," said Miro. "They're learning."

"Yes, I know. More to the point, they're choosing. What to learn, what to do. You brought them freedom. I approve wholeheartedly of what you decided to do. But my job is to write about you to the people out there in the Hundred Worlds and the colonies, and they won't necessarily see things that way. So what I need from you is the story of how and why you broke the law and interfered with the piggies, and why the government and people of Lusitania rebelled against Congress rather than send you off to be tried and punished for your crimes."

"Andrew already told you that story."

"And I've already written about it, in larger terms. Now I need the personal things. I want to be able to let other people know these so-called piggies as people. And you, too. I have to let them know you as a person. If it's possible, it would be nice if I could bring them to like you. Then the Lusitania Fleet will look like what it is-- a monstrous overreaction to a threat that never existed."

"The fleet is xenocide."

"So I've said in my propaganda," said Valentine.

He couldn't bear her self-certainty. He couldn't bear her unshakable faith in herself. So he had to contradict her, and the only way he could was to blurt out ideas that he had not yet thought out completely. Ideas that were still only half-formed doubts in his mind. "The fleet is also self-defense."

It had the desired effect-- it stopped her lecture and even made her raise her eyebrows, questioning him. The trouble was, now he had to explain what he meant.

"The descolada," he said. "It's the most dangerous form of life anywhere."

"The answer to that is quarantine. Not sending a fleet armed with the M.D. Device, so they have the capacity to turn Lusitania and everybody on it into microscopic interstellar dust."

"You're so sure you're right?"

"I'm sure that it's wrong for Starways Congress even to contemplate obliterating another sentient species."

"The piggies can't live without the descolada," said Miro, "and if the descolada ever spreads to another planet, it will destroy all life there. It will."

It was a pleasure to see that Valentine was capable of looking puzzled. "But I thought the virus was contained. It was your grandparents who found a way to stop it, to make it dormant in human beings."

"The descolada adapts," said Miro. "Jane told me that it's already changed itself a couple of times. My mother and my sister Ela are working on it-- trying to stay ahead of the descolada. Sometimes it even looks like the descolada is doing it deliberately. Intelligently. Finding strategies to get around the chemicals we use to contain it and stop it from killing people. It's getting into the Earthborn crops that humans need in order to survive on Lusitania. They have to spray them now. What if the descolada finds a way to get around all our barriers?"

Valentine was silent. No glib answer now. She hadn't faced this question squarely-- no one had, except Miro.

"I haven't even told this to Jane," said Miro. "But what if the fleet is right? What if the only way to save humanity from the descolada is to destroy Lusitania now?"

"No," said Valentine. "This has nothing to do with the purposes for which Starways Congress sent out the fleet. Their reasons all have to do with interplanetary politics, with showing the colonies who's boss. It has to do with a bureaucracy out of control and a military that--"

"Listen to me!" said Miro. "You said you wanted to hear my stories, listen to this one: It doesn't matter what their reasons are. It doesn't matter if they're a bunch of murderous beasts. I don't care. What matters is-- should they blow up Lusitania?"

"What kind of person are you?" asked Valentine. He could hear both awe and loathing in her voice.

"You're the moral philosopher," said Miro. "You tell me. Are we supposed to love the pequeninos so much that we allow the virus they carry to destroy all of humanity?"

"Of course not. We simply have to find a way to neutralize the descolada."

"And if we can't?"

"Then we quarantine Lusitania. Even if all the human beings on the planet die-- your family and mine-- we still don't destroy the pequeninos."

"Really?" asked Miro. "What about the hive queen?"

"Ender told me that she was reestablishing herself, but--"

"She contains within herself a complete industrialized society. She's going to build starships and get off the planet."

"She wouldn't take the descolada with her!"

"She has no choice. The descolada is in her already. It's in me."

That was when he really got to her. He could see it in her eyes-- the fear.

"It'll be in you, too. Even if you run back to your ship and seal me off and keep yourself from infection, once you land on Lusitania the descolada will get into you and your husband and your children. They'll have to ingest the chemicals with their food and water, every day of their lives. And they can never go away from Lusitania again or they'll carry death and destruction with them."

"I suppose we knew that was a possibility," said Valentine.

"When you left, it was only a possibility. We thought that the descolada would soon be controlled. Now they aren't sure if it can ever be controlled. And that means that you can never leave Lusitania once you go there."

"I hope we like the weather."

Miro studied her face, the way she was processing the information he had given her. The initial fear was gone. She was herself again-- thinking. "Here's what I think," said Miro. "I think that no matter how terrible Congress is, no matter how evil their plans might be, that fleet might be the salvation of humanity."

Valentine answered thoughtfully, searching for words. Miro was glad to see that-- she was a person who didn't shoot back without thinking. She was able to learn. "I can see that if events move down one possible path, there might be a time when-- but it's very improbable. First of all, knowing all this, the hive queen is quite unlikely to build any starships that would carry the descolada away from Lusitania."

"Do you know the hive queen?" demanded Miro. "Do you understand her?"

"Even if she would do such a thing," said Valentine, "your mother and sister are working on this, aren't they? By the time we reach Lusitania-- by the time the fleet reaches Lusitania-- they might have found a way to control the descolada once and for all."

"And if they do," said Miro, "should they use it?"

"Why shouldn't they?"

"How could they kill all the descolada virus? The virus is an integral part of the pequenino life cycle. When the pequenino body-form dies, it's the descolada virus that enables the transformation into the tree-state, what the piggies call the third life-- and it's only in the third life, as trees, that the pequenino males can fertilize the females. If the virus is gone, there can be no more passage into the third life, and this generation of piggies is the last."

"That doesn't make it impossible, it only makes it harder. Your mother and sister have to find a way to neutralize the descolada in human beings and the crops we need to eat, without destroying its ability to enable the pequeninos to pass into adulthood."

"And they have less than fifteen years to do it," said Miro. "Not likely."

"But not impossible."

"Yes. There's a chance. And on the strength of that chance, you want to get rid of the fleet?"

"The fleet is being sent to destroy Lusitania whether we control the descolada virus or not."

"And I say it again-- the motive of the senders is irrelevant. No matter what the reason, the destruction of Lusitania may be the only sure protection for all the rest of humanity."

"And I say you're wrong."

"You're Demosthenes, aren't you? Andrew said you were."

"Yes."

"So you thought up the Hierarchy of Foreignness. Utlannings are strangers from our own world. Framlings are strangers of our own species, but from another world. Ramen are strangers of another species, but capable of communication with us, capable of co-existence with humanity. Last are varelse-- and what are they?"

"The pequeninos are not varelse. Neither is the hive queen."

"But the descolada is. Varelse. An alien life form that's capable of destroying all of humanity ..."

"Unless we can tame it..."

"... Yet which we cannot possibly communicate with, an alien species that we cannot live with. You're the one who said that in that case war is unavoidable. If an alien species seems bent on destroying us and we can't communicate with them, can't understand them, if there's no possibility of turning them away from their course peacefully, then we are justified in any action necessary to save ourselves, including the complete destruction of the other species."

"Yes," said Valentine.

"But what if we must destroy the descolada, and yet we can't destroy the descolada without also destroying every living pequenino, the hive queen, and every human being on Lusitania?"

To Miro's surprise, Valentine's eyes were awash with tears. "So this is what you have become."

Miro was confused. "When did this conversation become a discussion of me?"

"You've done all this thinking, you've seen all the possibilities for the future-- good ones and bad ones alike-- and yet the only one that you're willing to believe in, the imagined future that you seize upon as the foundation for all your moral judgments, is the only future in which everyone that you and I have ever loved and everything we've ever hoped for must be obliterated."

"I didn't say I liked that future--"

"I didn't say you liked it either," said Valentine. "I said that's the future you choose to prepare for. But I don't. I choose to live in a universe that has some hope in it. I choose to live in a universe where your mother and sister will find a way to contain the descolada, a universe in which Starways Congress can be reformed or replaced, a universe in which there is neither the power nor the will to destroy an entire species."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then I'll still have plenty of time to despair before I die. But you-- do you seek out every opportunity to despair? I can understand the impulse that might lead to that. Andrew tells me you were a handsome man-- you still are, you know-- and that losing the full use of your body has hurt you deeply. But other people have lost more than you have without getting such a black-hearted vision of the world."

"This is your analysis of me?" asked Miro. "We've known each other half an hour, and now you understand everything about me?"

"I know that this is the most depressing conversation I've ever had in my life."

"And so you assume that it's because I am crippled. Well, let me tell you something, Valentine Wiggin. I hope the same things you hope. I even hope that someday I'll get more of my body back again. If I didn't have hope I'd be dead. The things I told you just now aren't because I despair. I said all that because these things are possible. And because they're possible we have to think of them so they don't surprise us later. We have to think of them so that if the worst does come, we'll already know how to live in that universe."

Valentine seemed to be studying his face; he felt her gaze on him as an almost palpable thing, like a faint tickling under the skin, inside his brain. "Yes," she said.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, my husband and I will move over here and live on your ship." She got up from her seat and started toward the corridor leading back to the tube.

"Why did you decide that?"

"Because it's too crowded on our ship. And because you are definitely worth talking to. And not just to get material for the essays I have to write."

"Oh, so I passed your test?"

"Yes, you did," she said. "Did I pass yours?"

"I wasn't testing you."

"Like hell," she said. "But in case you didn't notice, I'll tell you-- I did pass. Or you wouldn't have said to me all the things you said."

She was gone. He could hear her shuffling down the corridor, and then the computer reported that she was passing through the tube between ships.

He already missed her.

Because she was right. She had passed his test. She had listened to him the way no one else did-- without impatience, without finishing his sentences, without letting her gaze waver from his face. He had spoken to her, not with careful precision, but with great emotion. Much of the time his words must surely have been almost unintelligible. Yet she had listened so carefully and well that she had understood all his arguments and never once asked him to repeat something. He could talk to this woman as naturally as he ever talked to anyone before his brain was injured. Yes, she was opinionated, headstrong, bossy, and quick to reach conclusions. But she could also listen to an opposing view, change her mind when she needed to. She could listen, and so he could speak. Perhaps with her he could still be Miro.

Chapter 3 -- CLEAN HANDS

<The most unpleasant thing about human beings is that they don't metamorphose. Your people and mine are born as grubs, but we transform ourselves into a higher form before we reproduce. Human beings remain grubs all their lives.>

<Human beings do metamorphose. They change their identity constantly. However, each new identity thrives on the delusion that it was always in possession of the body it has just conquered.>

<Such changes are superficial. The nature of the organism remains the same. Humans are very proud of their changes, but every imagined transformation turns out to be a new set of excuses for behaving exactly as the individual has always behaved.>

<You are too different from humans ever to understand them.>

<You are too similar to humans for you ever to be able to see them clearly.>

The gods first spoke to Han Qing-jao when she was seven years old. She didn't realize for a while that she was hearing the voice of a god. All she knew was that her hands were filthy, covered with some loathsome invisible slime, and she had to purify them.

The first few times, a simple washing was enough, and she felt better for days. But as time passed, the feeling of filthiness returned sooner each time, and it took more and more scrubbing to remove the dirt, until she was washing several times a day, using a hard-bristled brush to stab at her hands until they bled. Only when the pain was unbearable did she feel clean, and then only for a few hours at a time.

She told no one; she knew instinctively that the filthiness of her hands had to be kept secret. Everyone knew that handwashing was one of the first signs that the gods were speaking to a child, and most parents in the whole world of Path watched their children hopefully for signs of excessive concern with cleanliness. But what these people did not understand was the terrible self-knowledge that led to the washing: The first message from the gods was of the unspeakable filthiness of the one they spoke to. Qing-jao hid her handwashing, not because she was ashamed that the gods spoke to her, but because she was sure that if anyone knew how vile she was, they would despise her.

The gods conspired with her in concealment. They allowed her to confine her savage scrubbing to the palms of her hands. This meant that when her hands were badly hurt, she could clench them into fists, or tuck them into the folds of her skirt as she walked, or lay them in her lap very meekly when she sat, and no one would notice them. They saw only a very well-behaved little girl.

If her mother had been alive, Qing-jao's secret would have been discovered much sooner. As it was, it took months for a servant to notice. Fat old Mu-pao happened to notice a bloody stain on the small tablecloth from Qing-jao's breakfast table. Mu-pao knew at once what it meant-- weren't bloody hands well known to be an early sign of the gods' attention? That was why many an ambitious mother and father forced a particularly promising child to wash and wash. Throughout the world of Path, ostentatious handwashing was called "inviting the gods."

Mu-pao went at once to Qing-jao's father, the noble Han Fei-tzu, rumored to be the greatest of the godspoken, one of the few so powerful in the eyes of the gods that he could meet with framblings-- offworlders-- and never betray a hint of the voices of the gods within him, thus preserving the divine secret of the world of Path. He would be grateful to hear the news, and Mu-pao would be honored for having been the first to see the gods in Qing-jao.

Within an hour, Han Fei-tzu had gathered up his beloved little Qing-jao and together they rode in a sedan chair to the temple at Rockfall. Qing-jao didn't like riding in such chairs-- she felt bad for the men who had to carry their weight. "They don't suffer," Father told her the first time she mentioned this idea. "They feel greatly honored. It's one of the ways the people show honor to the gods-- when one of the godspoken goes to a temple, he does it on the shoulders of the people of Path. "

"But I'm getting bigger every day," Qing-jao answered.

"When you're too big, either you'll walk on your own feet or you'll ride in your own chair," said Father. He did not need to explain that she would have her own chair only if she grew up to be godspoken herself. "And we try to show our humility by remaining very thin and light so we aren't a heavy burden to the people." This was a joke, of course, since Father's belly, while not immense, was copious. But the lesson behind the joke was true: The godspoken must never be a burden to the common people of Path. The people must always be grateful, never resentful, that the gods had chosen their world of all worlds to hear their voices.

Now, though, Qing-jao was more concerned with the ordeal that lay before her. She knew that she was being taken for testing. "Many children are taught to pretend that the gods speak to them," Father explained. "We must find out if the gods have truly chosen you."

"I want them to stop choosing me," said Qing-jao.

"And you will want it even more during the test," said Father. His voice was filled with pity. It made Qing-jao even more afraid. "The folk see only our powers and privileges, and envy us. They don't know the great suffering of those who hear the voices of the gods. If the gods truly speak to you, my Qing-jao, you will learn to bear the suffering the way jade bears the carver's knife, the polisher's rough cloth. It will make you shine. Why else do you think I named you Qing-jao?"

Qing-jao-- Gloriously Bright was what the name meant. It was also the name of a great poet from ancient times in Old China. A woman poet in an age when only men were given respect, and yet she was honored as the greatest of poets in her day. "Thin fog and thick cloud, gloom all day." It was the opening of Li Qing-jao's song "The Double Ninth." That was how Qing-jao felt now.

And how did the poem end? "Now my curtain's lifted only by the western wind. I've grown thinner than this golden blossom." Would this be her ending also? Was her ancestor-of-the-heart telling her in this poem that the darkness falling over her now would be lifted only when the gods came out of the west to lift her thin, light, golden soul out of her body? It was too terrible, to think of death now, when she was only seven years old; and yet the thought came to her: If I die soon, then soon I'll see Mother, and even the great Li Qing-jao herself.

But the test had nothing to do with death, or at least it was not supposed to. It was quite simple, really. Father led her into a large room where three old men knelt. Or they seemed like men-- they could have been women. They were so old that all distinctions had disappeared. They had only the tiniest wisps of white hair and no beards at all, and they dressed in shapeless sacks. Later Qing-jao would learn that these were temple eunuchs, survivors of the old days before Starways Congress intervened and forbade even voluntary self-mutilation in the service of a religion. Now, though, they were mysterious ghostly old creatures whose hands touched her, exploring her clothing.

What were they searching for? They found her ebony chopsticks and took them away. They took the sash from around her waist. They took her slippers. Later she would learn that these things were taken because other children had become so desperate during their testing that they had killed themselves. One of them had inserted her chopsticks into her nostrils and then flung herself to the floor, jamming the sticks into her brain. Another had hanged herself with her sash. Another had forced her slippers into her mouth and down her throat, choking herself to death. Successful suicide

attempts were rare, but they seemed to happen with the brightest of the children, and most commonly with girls. So they took away from Qing-jao all the known ways of committing suicide.

The old ones left. Father knelt beside Qing-jao and spoke to her face to face. "You must understand, Qing-jao, that we are not really testing you. Nothing that you do of your own free will can make the slightest difference in what happens here. We are really testing the gods, to see if they are determined to speak to you. If they are, they'll find a way, and we'll see it, and you'll come out of this room as one of the godspoken. If they aren't, then you'll come out of here free of their voices for all time. I can't tell you which outcome I pray for, since I don't know myself."

"Father," said Qing-jao, "what if you're ashamed of me?" The very thought made her feel a tingling in her hands, as if there were dirt on them, as if she needed to wash them.

"I will not be ashamed of you either way."

Then he clapped his hands. One of the old ones came back in, bearing a heavy basin. He set it down before Qing-jao.

"Thrust in your hands," said Father.

The basin was filled with thick black grease. Qing-jao shuddered. "I can't put my hands in there."

Father reached out, took her by the forearms, and forced her hands down into the muck. Qing-jao cried out-- her father had never used force with her before. And when he let go of her arms, her hands were covered with clammy slime. She gasped at the filthiness of her hands; it was hard to breathe, looking at them like that, smelling them.

The old one picked up the basin and carried it out.

"Where can I wash, Father?" Qing-jao whimpered.

"You can't wash," said Father. "You can never wash again."

And because Qing-jao was a child, she believed him, not guessing that his words were part of the test. She watched Father leave the room. She heard the door latch behind him. She was alone.

At first she simply held her hands out in front of her, making sure they didn't touch any part of her clothing. She searched desperately for somewhere to wash, but there was no water, nor even a cloth. The room was far from bare-- there were chairs, tables, statues, large stone jars-- but all the surfaces were hard and well-polished and so clean that she couldn't bear to touch them. Yet the filthiness of her hands was unendurable. She had to get them clean.

"Father!" she called out. "Come and wash my hands!" Surely he could hear her. Surely he was somewhere near, waiting for the outcome of her test. He must hear her-- but he didn't come.

The only cloth in the room was the gown she was wearing. She could wipe on that, only then she would be wearing the grease; it might get on other parts of her body. The solution, of course, was to take it off-- but how could she do that without touching her filthy hands to some other part of herself?

She tried. First she carefully scraped off as much of the grease as she could on the smooth arms of a statue. Forgive me, she said to the statue, in case it belonged to a god. I will come and clean you after; I'll clean you with my own gown.

Then she reached back over her shoulders and gathered the cloth on her back, pulling up on the gown to draw it over her head. Her greasy fingers slipped on the silk; she could feel the slime cold on her bare back as it penetrated the silk. I'll clean it after, she thought.

At last she got a firm enough grasp of the fabric that she could pull off the gown. It slid over her head, but even before it was completely off, she knew that things were worse than ever, for some of the grease was in her long hair, and that hair had fallen onto her face, and now she had filth not just on her hands but also on her back, in her hair, on her face.

Still she tried. She got the gown the rest of the way off, then carefully wiped her hands on one small part of the fabric. Then she wiped her face on another. But it was no good. Some of the grease clung to her no matter what she did. Her face felt as if the silk of her gown had only smeared the grease around instead of lifting it away. She had never been so hopelessly grimy in her life. It was unbearable, and yet she couldn't get rid of it.

"Father! Come take me away! I don't want to be godspoken!" He didn't come. She began to cry.

The trouble with crying was that it didn't work. The more she cried, the filthier she felt. The desperate need to be clean overpowered even her weeping. So with tears streaming down her face, she began to search desperately for some way to get the grease off her hands. Again she tried the silk of her gown, but within a little while she was wiping her hands on the walls, sidling around the room, smearing them with grease. She rubbed her palms on the wall so rapidly that heat built up and the grease melted. She did it again and again until her hands were red, until some of the softened scabs on her palms had worn away or been torn off by invisible snags in the wooden walls.

When her palms and fingers hurt badly enough that she couldn't feel the slime on them, she wiped her face with them, gouged at her face with her fingernails to scrape away the grease there. Then, hands dirty again, she once more rubbed them on the walls.

Finally, exhausted, she fell to the floor and wept at the pain in her hands, at her helplessness to get clean. Her eyes were shut with weeping. Tears streaked down her cheeks. She rubbed at her eyes, at her cheeks-- and felt how slimy the tears made her skin, how filthy she was. She knew what this surely meant: The gods had judged her and found her unclean. She wasn't worthy to live. If she couldn't get clean, she had to blot herself out. That would satisfy them. That would ease the agony of it. All she had to do was find a way to die. To stop breathing. Father would be sorry he didn't come when she called to him, but she couldn't help that. She was under the power of the gods now,

and they had judged her unworthy to be among the living. After all, what right did she have to breathe when the gate of Mother's lips had stopped letting the air pass through, in or out, for all these many years?

She first thought of using her gown, thought of stuffing it into her mouth to block her breath, or tying it around her throat to choke herself-- but it was too filthy to handle, too covered with grease. She would have to find another way.

Qing-jao walked to the wall, pressed against it. Sturdy wood. She leaned back and flung her head against the wood. Pain flashed through her head when it struck; stunned, she dropped to a sitting position on the floor. Her head ached inside. The room swung slowly around and around her. For a moment she forgot the filthiness of her hands.

But the relief didn't last long. She could see on the wall a slightly duller place where the grease from her forehead broke up the shiny polished surface. The gods spoke inside her, insisted she was as filthy as ever. A little pain wouldn't make up for her unworthiness.

Again she struck her head against the wall. This time, however, there was nowhere near as much pain. Again, again-- and now she realized that against her will, her body was recoiling from the blow, refusing to inflict so much pain on herself. This helped her understand why the gods found her so unworthy-- she was too weak to make her body obey. Well, she wasn't helpless. She could fool her body into submission.

She selected the tallest of the statues, which stood perhaps three meters high. It was a bronze casting of a man in mid-stride, holding a sword above his head. There were enough angles and bends and projections that she could climb. Her hands kept slipping, but she persevered until she balanced on the statue's shoulders, holding onto its headdress with one hand and the sword with the other.

For a moment, touching the sword, she thought of trying to cut her throat on it-- that would stop her breath, wouldn't it? But the blade was only a pretend blade. It wasn't sharp, and she couldn't get her neck to it at the right angle. So she went back to her original plan.

She took several deep breaths, then clasped her hands behind her back and toppled forward. She would land on her head; that would end her filthiness.

As the floor rushed upward, however, she lost control of herself. She screamed; she felt her hands tear free of each other behind her back and rush forward to try to break her fall. Too late, she thought with grim satisfaction, and then her head struck the floor and everything went black.

Qing-jao awoke with a dull ache in her arm and a sharp pain in her head whenever she moved-- but she was alive. When she could bear to open her eyes she saw that the room was darker. Was it night outside? How long had she slept? She couldn't bear to move her left arm, the one with the

pain; she could see an ugly red bruise at the elbow and she thought she must have broken it inside when she fell.

She also saw that her hands were still smeared with grease, and felt her unbearable dirtiness: the gods' judgment against her. She shouldn't have tried to kill herself after all. The gods wouldn't allow her to escape their judgment so easily.

What can I do? she pleaded. How can I be clean before you, O Gods? Li Qing-jao, my ancestor-of-the-heart, show me how to make myself worthy to receive the kind judgment of the gods!

What came at once to her mind was Li Qing-jao's love song "Separation." It was one of the first that Father had given her to memorize when she was only three years old, only a short time before he and Mother told her that Mother was going to die. It was exactly appropriate now, too, for wasn't she separated from the goodwill of the gods? Didn't she need to be reconciled with them so they could receive her as one of the truly godspoken ones?

someone's sent a loving note in lines of returning geese and as the moon fills my western chamber as petals dance over the flowing stream again I think of you the two of us living a sadness apart a hurt that can't be removed yet when my gaze comes down my heart stays up

The moon filling the western chamber told her that it was really a god, not an ordinary man-lover who was being pined for in this poem-- references to the west always meant that the gods were involved. Li Qing-Jao had answered the prayer of little Han Qing-jao, and sent this poem to tell her how to cure the hurt that couldn't be removed-- the filthiness of her flesh.

What is the loving note? thought Qing-jao. Lines of returning geese-- but there are no geese in this room. Petals dancing over a flowing stream-- but there are no petals, there is no stream here.

"Yet when my gaze comes down, my heart stays up." That was the clue, that was the answer, she knew it. Slowly, carefully Qing-jao rolled over onto her belly. Once when she tried to put weight on her left hand, her elbow buckled and an exquisite pain almost made her lose consciousness again. At last she knelt, her head bowed, leaning on her right hand. Gazing down. The poem promised that this would let her heart stay up.

She felt no better-- still filthy, still in pain. Looking down showed her nothing but the polished boards of the floor, the grain of the wood making rippling lines reaching from between her knees outward to the very edge of the room.

Lines. Lines of woodgrain, lines of geese. And couldn't the woodgrain also be seen as a flowing stream? She must follow these lines like the geese; she must dance over these flowing streams like a petal. That was what the promise meant: When her gaze came down, her heart would stay up.

She found one particular line in the woodgrain, a line of darkness like a river rippling through the lighter wood around it, and knew at once that this was the stream she was supposed to follow. She dared not touch it with her finger-- filthy, unworthy finger. It had to be followed lightly, the way a goose touched the air, the way a petal touched the stream. Only her eyes could follow the line.

So she began to trace the line, follow it carefully to the wall. A couple of times she moved so quickly that she lost the line, forgot which one it was; but soon she found it again, or thought she did, and followed it to the wall. Was it good enough? Were the gods satisfied?

Almost, but not quite-- she couldn't be sure that when her gaze slipped from the line she had returned to the right one. Petals didn't skip from stream to stream. She had to follow the right one, along its entire length. This time she started at the wall and bowed very low, so her eyes wouldn't be distracted even by the movement of her own right hand. She inched her way along, never letting herself so much as blink, even when her eyes burned. She knew that if she lost the grain she was following she'd have to go back and start over. It had to be done perfectly or it would lose all its power to cleanse her.

It took forever. She did blink, but not haphazardly, by accident. When her eyes burned too much, she would bow down until her left eye was directly over the grain. Then she would close the other eye for a moment. Her right eye relieved, she would open it, then put that eye directly over the line in the wood and close the left. This way she was able to make it halfway across the room until the board ended, butting up against another.

She wasn't sure whether that was good enough, whether it was enough to finish the board or if she needed to find another woodgrain line to follow. She made as if to get up, testing the gods, to see if they were satisfied. She half-rose, felt nothing; she stood, and still she was at ease.

Ah! They were satisfied, they were pleased with her. Now the grease on her skin felt like nothing more than a little oil. There was no need for washing, not at this moment, for she had found another way to cleanse herself, another way for the gods to discipline her. Slowly she lay back on the floor, smiling, weeping softly in joy. Li Qing-jao, my ancestor-of-the-heart, thank you for showing me the way. Now I have been joined to the gods; the separation is over. Mother, I am again connected to you, clean and worthy. White Tiger of the West, I am now pure enough to touch your fur and leave no mark of filthiness.

Then hands touched her-- Father's hands, picking her up. Drops of water fell onto her face, the bare skin of her body-- Father's tears. "You're alive," he said. "My godspoken one, my beloved, my daughter, my life, Gloriously Bright, you shine on."

Later she would learn that Father had had to be tied and gagged during her test, that when she climbed the statue and made as if to press her throat against the sword, he flung himself forward with such force that his chair fell and his head struck the floor. This was regarded as a great mercy, since it meant he didn't see her terrible fall from the statue. He wept for her all the time she lay unconscious. And then, when she rose to her knees and began to trace the woodgrains on the floor, he was the one who realized what it meant. "Look," he whispered. "The gods have given her a task. The gods are speaking to her."

The others were slow to recognize it, because they had never seen anyone trace woodgrain lines before. It wasn't in the Catalogue of Voices of the Gods: Door-Waiting, Counting-to-Multiples-of-Five, Object-Counting, Checking-for-Accidental-Murders, Fingernail-Tearing, Skin-Scraping,

Pulling-Out-of-Hair, Gnawing-at-Stone, Bugging-Out-of-Eyes-- all these were known to be penances that the gods demanded, rituals of obedience that cleansed the soul of the godspoken so that the gods could fill their minds with wisdom. No one had ever seen Woodgrain-Tracing. Yet Father saw what she was doing, named the ritual, and added it to the Catalogue of Voices. It would forever bear her name, Han Qing-jao, as the first to be commanded by the gods to perform this rite. It made her very special.

So did her unusual resourcefulness in trying to find ways to cleanse her hands and, later, kill herself. Many had tried scraping their hands on walls, of course, and most attempted to wipe on clothes. But rubbing her hands to build up the heat of friction, that was regarded as rare and clever. And while head-beating was common, climbing a statue and jumping off and landing on her head was very rare. And none who had done it before had been strong enough to keep their hands behind their back so long. The temple was all abuzz with it, and word soon spread to all the temples in Path.

It was a great honor to Han Fei-tzu, of course, that his daughter was so powerfully possessed by the gods. And the story of his near-madness when she was trying to destroy herself spread just as quickly and touched many hearts. "He may be the greatest of the godspoken," they said of him, "but he loves his daughter more than life." This made them love him as much as they already revered him.

It was then that people began whispering about the possible godhood of Han Fei-tzu. "He is great and strong enough that the gods will listen to him," said the people who favored him. "Yet he is so affectionate that he will always love the people of the planet Path, and try to do good for us. Isn't this what the god of a world ought to be?" Of course it was impossible to decide now-- a man could not be chosen to be god of a village, let alone of a whole world, until he died. How could you judge what sort of god he'd be, until his whole life, from beginning to end, was known?

These whispers came to Qing-jao's ears many times as she grew older, and the knowledge that her father might well be chosen god of Path became one of the beacons of her life. But at the time, and forever in her memory, she remembered that his hands were the ones that carried her bruised and twisted body to the bed of healing, his eyes were the ones that dropped warm tears on to her cold skin, his voice was the one that whispered in the beautiful passionate tones of the old language, "My beloved, my Gloriously Bright, never take your light from my life. Whatever happens, never harm yourself or I will surely die."

Chapter 4 -- JANE

<So many of your people are becoming Christians. Believing in the god these humans brought with them.>

<You don't believe in God?>

<The question never come up. We have always remembered how we began.>

<You evolved. We were created.>

<By a virus.>

<By a virus that God created in order to create us.>

<So you, too, are a believer.>

<I understand belief.>

<No-- you desire belief.>

<I desire it enough to act as if I believed. Maybe that's what faith is.>

<Or deliberate insanity>

It turned out not to be just Valentine and Jakt who came over to Miro's ship. Plikt also came, without invitation, and installed herself in a miserable little cubicle where there wasn't even room to stretch out completely. She was the anomaly on the voyage-- not family, not crew, but a friend. Plikt had been a student of Ender's when he was on Trondheim as a speaker for the dead. She had figured out, quite independently, that Andrew Wiggin was the Speaker for the Dead and that he was also the Ender Wiggin.

Why this brilliant young woman should have become so fixed on Ender Wiggin, Valentine could not really understand. At times she thought, Perhaps this is how some religions start. The founder doesn't ask for disciples; they come and force themselves upon him.

In any event, Plikt had stayed with Valentine and her family for all the years since Ender left Trondheim, tutoring the children and helping in Valentine's research, always waiting for the day that the family journeyed to be with Ender-- a day that only Plikt had known would come.

So during the last half of the voyage to Lusitania, it was the four of them who traveled in Miro's ship: Valentine, Miro, Jakt, and Plikt. Or so Valentine thought at first. It was on the third day since the rendezvous that she learned of the fifth traveler who had been with them all along.

That day, as always, the four of them were gathered on the bridge. There was nowhere else to go. This was a cargo ship-- besides the bridge and the sleeping quarters, there was only a tiny galley and the toilet. All the other space was designed to hold cargo, not people-- not in any kind of reasonable comfort.

Valentine didn't mind the loss of privacy, though. She was slacking off now on her output of subversive essays; it was more important, she felt, to get to know Miro-- and, through him, Lusitania. The people there, the pequeninos, and, most particularly, Miro's family-- for Ender had married Novinha, Mira's mother. Valentine did glean much of that kind of information, of course-- she couldn't have been a historian and biographer for all these years without learning how to extrapolate much from scant bits of evidence.

The real prize for her had turned out to be Miro himself. He was bitter, angry, frustrated, and filled with loathing for his crippled body, but all that was understandable-- his loss had happened only a few months before, and he was still trying to redefine himself. Valentine didn't worry about his future-- she could see that he was very strong-willed, the kind of man who didn't easily fall apart. He would adapt and thrive.

What interested her most was his thought. It was as if the confinement of his body had freed his mind. When he had first been injured his paralysis was almost total. He had had nothing to do but lie in one place and think. Of course, much of his time had been spent brooding about his losses, his mistakes, the future he couldn't have. But he had also spent many hours thinking about the issues that busy people almost never think about. And on that third day together, that's what Valentine was trying to draw out of him.

"Most people don't think about it, not seriously, and you have," said Valentine.

"Just because I think about it doesn't mean I know anything," said Miro. She really was used to his voice now, though sometimes his speech was maddeningly slow. It took a real effort of will at times to keep from showing any sign of inattention.

"The nature of the universe," said Jakt.

"The sources of life," said Valentine. "You said you had thought about what it means to be alive, and I want to know what you thought."

"How the universe works and why we all are in it." Miro laughed. "It's pretty crazy stuff."

"I've been trapped alone in an ice floe in a fishing boat for two weeks in a blizzard with no heat," said Jakt. "I doubt you've come up with anything that'll sound crazy to me."

Valentine smiled. Jakt was no scholar, and his philosophy was generally confined to holding his crew together and catching a lot of fish. But he knew that Valentine wanted to draw Miro out, and so he helped put the young man at ease, helped him know that he'd be taken seriously.

And it was important for Jakt to be the one who did that-- because Valentine had seen, and so had Jakt, how Miro watched him. Jakt might be old, but his arms and legs and back were still those of a fisherman, and every movement revealed the suppleness of his body. Miro even commented on it once, obliquely, admiringly: "You've got the build of a twenty-year-old." Valentine heard the ironic corollary that must have been in Miro's mind: While I, who am young, have the body of an arthritic ninety-year-old. So Jakt meant something to Miro-- he represented the future that Miro could never

have. Admiration and resentment; it would have been hard for Miro to speak openly in front of Jakt, if Jakt had not taken care to make sure Miro heard nothing but respect and interest from him.

Plikt, of course, sat in her place, silent, withdrawn, effectively invisible.

"All right," said Miro. "Speculations on the nature of reality and the soul."

"Theology or metaphysics?" asked Valentine.

"Metaphysics, mostly," said Miro. "And physics. Neither one is my specialty. And this isn't the kind of story you said you needed me for."

"I don't always know exactly what I'll need."

"All right," said Miro. He took a couple of breaths, as if he were trying to decide where to begin. "You know about philotic twining."

"I know what everybody knows," said Valentine. "And I know that it hasn't led anywhere in the last twenty-five hundred years because it can't really be experimented with." It was an old discovery, from the days when scientists were struggling to catch up with technology. Teenage physics students memorized a few wise sayings: "Philotes are the fundamental building blocks of all matter and energy. Philotes have neither mass nor inertia. Philotes have only location, duration, and connection." And everybody knew that it was philotic connections-- the twining of philotic rays-- that made ansibles work, allowing instantaneous communication between worlds and starships many light-years apart. But no one knew why it worked, and because philotes could not be "handled," it was almost impossible to experiment with them. They could only be observed, and then only through their connections.

"Philotics," said Jakt. "Ansibles?"

"A by-product," said Miro.

"What does it have to do with the soul?" asked Valentine.

Miro was about to answer, but he grew frustrated, apparently at the thought of trying to give a long speech through his sluggish, resisting mouth. His jaw was working, his lips moving slightly. Then he said aloud, "I can't do it."

"We'll listen," said Valentine. She understood his reluctance to try extended discourse with the limitations of his speech, but she also knew he had to do it anyway.

"No," said Miro.

Valentine would have tried further persuasion, but she saw his lips were still moving, though little sound came out. Was he muttering? Cursing?

No-- she knew it wasn't that at all.

It took a moment for her to realize why she was so sure. It was because she had seen Ender do exactly the same thing, moving his lips and jaw, when he was issuing subvocalized commands to the computer terminal built into the jewel he wore in his ear. Of course: Miro has the same computer hookup Ender has, so he'll speak to it the same way.

In a moment it became clear what command Miro had given to his jewel. It must have been tied in to the ship's computer, because immediately afterward one of the display screens cleared and then showed Miro's face. Only there was none of the slackness that marred his face in person. Valentine realized: It was Miro's face as it used to be. And when the computer image spoke, the sound coming from the speakers was surely Miro's voice as it used to be-- clear. Forceful. Intelligent. Quick.

"You know that when philotes combine to make a durable structure-- a meson, a neutron, an atom, a molecule, an organism, a planet-- they twine up."

"What is this?" demanded Jakt. He hadn't yet figured out why the computer was doing the talking.

The computer image of Miro froze on the screen and fell silent. Miro himself answered. "I've been playing with this," he said. "I tell it things, and it remembers and speaks for me."

Valentine tried to imagine Miro experimenting until the computer program got his face and voice just right. How exhilarating it must have been, to re-create himself as he ought to be. And also how agonizing, to see what he could have been and know that it could never be real. "What a clever idea," said Valentine. "Sort of a prosthesis for the personality."

Miro laughed-- a single "Ha!"

"Go ahead," said Valentine. "Whether you speak for yourself or the computer speaks for you, we'll listen."

The computer image came back to life, and spoke again in Miro's strong, imaginary voice. "Philotes are the smallest building blocks of matter and energy. They have no mass or dimension. Each philote connects itself to the rest of the universe along a single ray, a one-dimensional line that connects it to all the other philotes in its smallest immediate structure-- a meson. All those strands from the philotes in that structure are twined into a single philotic thread that connects the meson to the next larger structure-- a neutron, for instance. The threads in the neutron twine into a yarn connecting it to all the other particles of the atom, and then the yarns of the atom twine into the rope of the molecule. This has nothing to do with nuclear forces or gravity, nothing to do with chemical bonds. As far as we can tell, the philotic connections don't do anything. They're just there."

"But the individual rays are always there, present in the twines," said Valentine.

"Yes, each ray goes on forever," answered the screen.

It surprised her-- and Jakt, too, judging from the way his eyes widened-- that the computer was able to respond immediately to what Valentine said. It wasn't just a preset lecture. This had to be a sophisticated program anyway, to simulate Miro's face and voice so well; but now to have it responding as if it were simulating Miro's personality ...

Or had Miro given some cue to the program? Had he subvocalized the response? Valentine didn't know-- she had been watching the screen. She would stop doing that now-- she would watch Miro himself.

"We don't know if the ray is infinite," said Valentine. "We only know that we haven't found where the ray ends."

"They twine together, a whole planetful, and each planet's philotic twine reaches to its star, and each star to the center of the galaxy--"

"And where does the galactic twine go?" said Jakt. It was an old question-- schoolchildren asked it when they first got into philotics in high school. Like the old speculation that maybe galaxies were really neutrons or mesons inside a far vaster universe, or the old question, If the universe isn't infinite, what is beyond the edge?

"Yes, yes," said Miro. This time, though, he spoke from his own mouth. "But that's not where I'm going. I want to talk about life."

The computerized voice-- the voice of the brilliant young man-- took over. "The philotic twines from substances like rock or sand all connect directly from each molecule to the center of the planet. But when a molecule is incorporated into a living organism, its ray shifts. Instead of reaching to the planet, it gets twined in with the individual cell, and the rays from the cells are all twined together so that each organism sends a single fiber of philotic connections to twine up with the central philotic rope of the planet."

"Which shows that individual lives have some meaning at the level of physics," said Valentine. She had written an essay about it once, trying to dispel some of the mysticism that had grown up about philotics while at the same time using it to suggest a view of community formation. "But there's no practical effect from it, Miro. Nothing you can do with it. The philotic twining of living organisms simply is. Every philote is connected to something, and through that to something else, and through that to something else-- living cells and organisms are simply two of the leels where those connections can be made."

"Yes," said Miro. "That which lives, twines."

Valentine shrugged, nodded. It probably couldn't be proven, but if Miro wanted that as a premise in his speculations, that was fine.

The computer-Miro took over again. "What I've been thinking about is the endurance of the twining. When a twined structure is broken-- as when a molecule breaks apart-- the old philotic

twining remains for a time. Fragments that are no longer physically joined remain philotically connected for a while. And the smaller the particle, the longer that connection lasts after the breakup of the original structure, and the more slowly the fragments shift to new twinings."

Jakt: frowned. "I thought the smaller things were, the faster things happened."

"It is counterintuitive," said Valentine.

"After nuclear fission it takes hours for the philotic rays to sort themselves back out again," said the computer-Miro. "Split a smaller particle than an atom, and the philotic connection between the fragments will last much longer than that."

"Which is how the ansible works," said Miro.

Valentine looked at him closely. Why was he talking sometimes in his own voice, sometimes through the computer? Was the program under his control or wasn't it?

"The principle of the ansible is that if you suspend a meson in a powerful magnetic field," said computer-Miro, "split it, and carry the two parts as far away as you want, the philotic twining will still connect them. And the connection is instantaneous. If one fragment spins or vibrates, the ray between them spins and vibrates, and the movement is detectable at the other end at exactly the same moment. It takes no time whatsoever for the movement to be transmitted along the entire length of the ray, even if the two fragments are carried light-years away from each other. Nobody knows why it works, but we're glad it does. Without the ansible, there'd be no possibility of meaningful communication between human worlds."

"Hell, there's no meaningful communication now," said Jakt. "And if it wasn't for the ansibles, there'd be no warfleet heading for Lusitania right now."

Valentine wasn't listening to Jakt, though. She was watching Miro. This time Valentine saw when he moved his lips and jaw, slightly, silently. Sure enough, after he subvocalized, the computer image of Miro spoke again. He was giving commands. It had been absurd for her to think otherwise-- who else could be controlling the computer?

"It's a hierarchy," said the image. "The more complex the structure, the faster the response to change. It's as if the smaller the particle is, the stupider it is, so it's slower to pick up on the fact that it's now part of a different structure."

"Now you're anthropomorphizing," said Valentine.

"Maybe," said Miro. "Maybe not."

"Human beings are organisms," said the image. "But human philotic twinings go way beyond those of any other life form."

"Now you're talking about that stuff that came from Ganges a thousand years ago," said Valentine. "Nobody's been able to get consistent results from those experiments." The researchers-- Hindus all, and devout ones-- claimed that they had shown that human philotic twinings, unlike those of other organisms, did not always reach directly down into the planet's core to twine with all other life and matter. Rather, they claimed, the philotic rays from human beings often twined with those of other human beings, most often with families, but sometimes between teachers and students, and sometimes between close co-workers-- including the researchers themselves. The Gangeans had concluded that this distinction between humans and other plant and animal life proved that the souls of some humans were literally lifted to a higher plane, nearer to perfection. They believed that the Perfecting Ones had become one with each other the way that all of life was one with the world. "It's all very pleasingly mystical, but nobody except Gangean Hindus takes it seriously anymore."

"I do," said Miro.

"To each his own," said Jakt.

"Not as a religion," said Miro. "As science."

"You mean metaphysics, don't you?" said Valentine.

It was the Miro-image that answered. "The philotic connections between people change fastest of all, and what the Gangeans proved is that they respond to human will. If you have strong feelings binding you to your family, then your philotic rays will twine and you will be one, in exactly the same way that the different atoms in a molecule are one."

It was a sweet idea-- she had thought so when she first heard it, perhaps two thousand years ago, when Ender was speaking for a murdered revolutionary on Mindanao. She and Ender had speculated then on whether the Gangean tests would show that they were twined, as brother and sister. They wondered whether there had been such a connection between them as children, and if it had persisted when Ender was taken off to Battle School and they were separated for six years. Ender had liked that idea very much, and so had Valentine, but after that one conversation the subject never came up again. The notion of philotic connections between people had remained in the pretty-idea category in her memory. "It's nice to think that the metaphor of human unity might have a physical analogue," said Valentine.

"Listen!" said Miro. Apparently he didn't want her to dismiss the idea as "nice."

Again his image spoke for him. "If the Gangeans are right, then when a human being chooses to bond with another person, when he makes a commitment to a community, it is not just a social phenomenon. It's a physical event as well. The philote, the smallest conceivable physical particle-- if we can call something with no mass or inertia physical at all-- responds to an act of the human will."

"That's why it's so hard for anyone to take the Gangean experiments seriously."

"The Gangean experiments were careful and honest."

"But no one else ever got the same results."

"No one else ever took them seriously enough to perform the same experiments. Does that surprise you?"

"Yes," said Valentine. But then she remembered how the idea had been ridiculed in the scientific press, while it was immediately picked up by the lunatic fringe and incorporated into dozens of fringe religions. Once that happened, how could a scientist hope to get funding for such a project? How could a scientist expect to have a career if others came to think of him as a proponent of a metaphysical religion? "No, I suppose it doesn't."

The Miro-image nodded. "If the philotic ray twines in response to the human will, why couldn't we suppose that all philotic twining is willed? Every particle, all of matter and energy, why couldn't every observable phenomenon in the universe be the willing behavior of individuals?"

"Now we're beyond Gangean Hinduism," said Valentine. "How seriously am I supposed to take this? What you're talking about is Animism. The most primitive kind of religion. Everything's alive. Stones and oceans and--"

"No," said Miro. "Life is life."

"Life is life," said the computer program. "Life is when a single philote has the strength of will to bind together the molecules of a single cell, to entwine their rays into one. A stronger philote can bind together many cells into a single organism. The strongest of all are the intelligent beings. We can bestow our philotic connections where we will. The philotic basis of intelligent life is even clearer in the other known sentient species. When a pequenino dies and passes into the third life, it's his strong-willed philote that preserves his identity and passes it from the mammaloid corpse to the living tree."

"Reincarnation," said Jakt. "The philote is the soul."

"It happens with the piggies, anyway," said Miro.

"The hive queen as well," said the Miro-image. "The reason we discovered philotic connections in the first place was because we saw how the buggers communicated with each other faster than light-- that's what showed us it was possible. The individual buggers are all part of the hive queen; they're like her hands and feet, and she's their mind, one vast organism with thousands or millions of bodies. And the only connection between them is the twining of their philotic rays."

It was a picture of the universe that Valentine had never conceived of before. Of course, as a historian and biographer she usually conceived of things in terms of peoples and societies; while she wasn't ignorant of physics, neither was she deeply trained in it. Perhaps a physicist would know at once why this whole idea was absurd. But then, perhaps a physicist would be so locked into the consensus of his scientific community that it would be harder for him to accept an idea that transformed the meaning of everything he knew. Even if it were true.

And she liked the idea well enough to wish it were true. Of the trillion lovers who had whispered to each other, We are one, could it be that some of them really were? Of the billions of families who had bonded together so closely they felt like a single soul, wouldn't it be lovely to think that at the most basic level of reality it was so?

Jakt, however, was not so caught up in the idea. "I thought we weren't supposed to talk about the existence of the hive queen," he said. "I thought that was Ender's secret."

"It's all right," said Valentine. "Everyone in this room knows."

Jakt gave her his impatient look. "I thought we were coming to Lusitania to help in the struggle against Starways Congress. What does any of this have to do with the real world?"

"Maybe nothing," said Valentine. "Maybe everything."

Jakt buried his face in his hands for a moment, then looked back up at her with a smile that wasn't really a smile. "I haven't heard you say anything so transcendental since your brother left Trondheim."

That stung her, particularly because she knew it was meant to. After all these years, was Jakt still jealous of her connection with Ender? Did he still resent the fact that she could care about things that meant nothing to him? "When he went," said Valentine, "I stayed." She was really saying, I passed the only test that mattered. Why should you doubt me now?

Jakt was abashed. It was one of the best things about him, that when he realized he was wrong he backed down at once. "And when you went," said Jakt, "I came with you." Which she took to mean, I'm with you, I'm really not jealous of Ender anymore, and I'm sorry for sniping at you. Later, when they were alone, they'd say these things again openly. It wouldn't do to reach Lusitania with suspicions and jealousy on either's part.

Miro, of course, was oblivious to the fact that Jakt and Valentine had already declared a truce. He was only aware of the tension between them, and thought he was the cause of it. "I'm sorry," said Miro. "I didn't mean to..."

"It's all right," said Jakt. "I was out of line."

"There is no line," said Valentine, with a smile at her husband. Jakt smiled back.

That was what Miro needed to see; he visibly relaxed.

"Go on," said Valentine.

"Take all that as a given," said the Miro-image.

Valentine couldn't help it-- she laughed out loud. Partly she laughed because this mystical Gangean philote-as-soul business was such an absurdly large premise to swallow. Partly she laughed to release the tension between her and Jakt. "I'm sorry," she said. "That's an awfully big 'given.' If that's the preamble, I can't wait to hear the conclusion."

Miro, understanding her laughter now, smiled back. "I've had a lot of time to think," he said. "That really was my speculation on what life is. That everything in the universe is behavior. But there's something else we want to tell you about. And ask you about, too, I guess." He turned to Jakt. "And it has a lot to do with stopping the Lusitania Fleet."

Jakt smiled and nodded. "I appreciate being tossed a bone now and then."

Valentine smiled her most charming smile. "So-- later you'll be glad when I break a few bones."

Jakt laughed again.

"Go on, Miro," said Valentine.

It was the image-Miro that responded. "If all of reality is the behavior of philotes, then obviously most philotes are only smart enough or strong enough to act as a meson or hold together a neutron. A very few of them have the strength of will to be alive-- to govern an organism. And a tiny, tiny fraction of them are powerful enough to control-- no, to be-- a sentient organism. But still, the most complex and intelligent being-- the hive queen, for instance-- is, at core, just a philote, like all the others. It gains its identity and life from the particular role it happens to fulfill, but what it is is a philote."

"My self-- my will-- is a subatomic particle?" asked Valentine.

Jakt smiled, nodded. "A fun idea," he said. "My shoe and I are brothers."

Miro smiled wanly. The Miro-image, however, answered. "If a star and a hydrogen atom are brothers, then yes, there is a kinship between you and the philotes that make up common objects like your shoe."

Valentine noticed that Miro had not subvocalized anything just before the Miro-image answered. How had the software producing the Miro-image come up with the analogy with stars and hydrogen atoms, if Miro didn't provide it on the spot? Valentine had never heard of a computer program capable of producing such involved yet appropriate conversation on its own.

"And maybe there are other kinships in the universe that you know nothing of till now," said the Miro-image. "Maybe there's a kind of life you haven't met."

Valentine, watching Miro, saw that he seemed worried. Agitated. As if he didn't like what the Miro-image was doing now.

"What kind of life are you talking about?" asked Jakt.

"There's a physical phenomenon in the universe, a very common one, that is completely unexplained, and yet everyone takes it for granted and no one has seriously investigated why and how it happens. This is it: None of the ansible connections has ever broken."

"Nonsense," said Jakt. "One of the ansibles on Trondheim was out of service for six months last year-- it doesn't happen often, but it happens."

Again Miro's lips and jaw were motionless; again the image answered immediately. Clearly he was not controlling it now. "I didn't say that the ansibles never break down. I said that the connections-- the philotic twining between the parts of a split meson-- have never broken. The machinery of the ansible can break down, the software can get corrupted, but never has a meson fragment within an ansible made the shift to allow its philotic ray to entwine with another local meson or even with the nearby planet."

"The magnetic field suspends the fragment, of course," said Jakt.

"Split mesons don't endure long enough in nature for us to know how they naturally act," said Valentine.

"I know all the standard answers," said the image. "All nonsense. All the kind of answers parents give their children when they don't know the truth and don't want to bother finding out. People still treat the ansibles like magic. Everybody's glad enough that the ansibles keep on working; if they tried to figure out why, the magic might go out of it and then the ansibles would stop."

"Nobody feels that way," said Valentine.

"They all do," said the image. "Even if it took hundreds of years, or a thousand years, or three thousand years, one of those connections should have broken by now. One of those meson fragments should have shifted its philotic ray-- but they never have."

"Why?" asked Miro.

Valentine assumed at first that Miro was asking a rhetorical question. But no-- he was looking at the image just like the rest of them, asking it to tell him why.

"I thought this program was reporting your speculations," said Valentine.

"It was," said Miro. "But not now."

"What if there's a being who lives among the philotic connections between ansibles?" asked the image.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Miro. Again he was speaking to the image on the screen.

And the image on the screen changed, to the face of a young woman, one that Valentine had never seen before.

"What if there's a being who dwells in the web of philotic rays connecting the ansibles on every world and every starship in the human universe? What if she is composed of those philotic connections? What if her thoughts take place in the spin and vibration of the split pairs? What if her memories are stored in the computers of every world and every ship?"

"Who are you?" asked Valentine, speaking directly to the image.

"Maybe I'm the one who keeps all those philotic connections alive, ansible to ansible. Maybe I'm a new kind of organism, one that doesn't twine rays together, but instead keeps them twined to each other so that they never break apart. And if that's true, then if those connections ever broke, if the ansibles ever stopped moving-- if the ansibles ever fell silent, then I would die."

"Who are you?" asked Valentine again.

"Valentine, I'd like you to meet Jane," said Miro. "Ender's friend. And mine."

"Jane."

So Jane wasn't the code name of a subversive group within the Starways Congress bureaucracy. Jane was a computer program, a piece of software.

No. If what she had just suggested was true, then Jane was more than a program. She was a being who dwelt in the web of philotic rays, who stored her memories in the computers of every world. If she was right, then the philotic web-- the network of crisscrossing philotic rays that connected ansible to ansible on every world-- was her body, her substance. And the philotic links continued working with never a breakdown because she willed it so.

"So now I ask the great Demosthenes," said Jane. "Am I raman or varelse? Am I alive at all? I need your answer, because I think I can stop the Lusitania Fleet. But before I do it, I have to know: Is it a cause worth dying for?"

Jane's words cut Miro to the heart. She could stop the fleet-- he could see that at once. Congress had sent the M.D. Device with several ships of the fleet, but they had not yet sent the order to use it. They couldn't send the order without Jane knowing it beforehand, and with her complete penetration of all the ansible communications, she could intercept the order before it was sent.

The trouble was that she couldn't do it without Congress realizing that she existed-- or at least that something was wrong. If the fleet didn't confirm the order, it would simply be sent again, and again, and again. The more she blocked the messages, the clearer it would be to Congress that someone had an impossible degree of control over the ansible computers.

She might avoid this by sending a counterfeit confirmation, but then she would have to monitor all the communications between the ships of the fleet, and between the fleet and all planetside stations,

in order to keep up the pretense that the fleet knew something about the kill order. Despite Jane's enormous abilities, this would soon be beyond her-- she could pay some degree of attention to hundreds, even thousands of things at a time, but it didn't take Miro long to realize that there was no way she could handle all the monitoring and alterations this would take, even if she did nothing else.

One way or another, the secret would be out. And as Jane explained her plan, Miro knew that she was right-- her best option, the one with the least chance of revealing her existence, was simply to cut off all ansible communications between the fleet and the planetside stations, and between the ships of the fleet. Let each ship remain isolated, the crew wondering what had happened, and they would have no choice but to abort their mission or continue to obey their original orders. Either they would go away or they would arrive at Lusitania without the authority to use the Little Doctor.

In the meantime, however, Congress would know that something had happened. It was possible that with Congress's normal bureaucratic inefficiency, no one would ever figure out what happened. But eventually somebody would realize that there was no natural or human explanation of what happened. Someone would realize that Jane-- or something like her-- must exist, and that cutting off ansible communications would destroy her. Once they knew this, she would surely die.

"Maybe not," Miro insisted. "Maybe you can keep them from acting. Interfere with interplanetary communications, so they can't give the order to shut down communications."

No one answered. He knew why: she couldn't interfere with ansible communications forever. Eventually the government on each planet would reach the conclusion on its own. She might live on in constant warfare for years, decades, generations. But the more power she used, the more humankind would hate and fear her. Eventually she would be killed.

"A book, then," said Miro. "Like the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. Like the Life of Human. The Speaker for the Dead could write it. To persuade them not to do it."

"Maybe," said Valentine.

"She can't die," said Miro.

"I know that we can't ask her to take that chance," said Valentine. "But if it's the only way to save the hive queen and the pequeninos--"

Miro was furious. "You can talk about her dying! What is Jane to you? A program, a piece of software. But she's not, she's real, she's as real as the hive queen, she's as real as any of the piggies--"

"More real to you, I think," said Valentine.

"As real," said Miro. "You forget-- I know the piggies like my own brothers--"

"But you're able to contemplate the possibility that destroying them may be morally necessary."

"Don't twist my words."

"I'm untwisting them," said Valentine. "You can contemplate losing them, because they're already lost to you. Losing Jane, though--"

"Because she's my friend, does that mean I can't plead for her? Can life-and-death decisions only be made by strangers?"

Jakt's voice, quiet and deep, interrupted the argument. "Calm down, both of you. It isn't your decision. It's Jane's. She has the right to determine the value of her own life. I'm no philosopher, but I know that."

"Well said," Valentine answered.

Miro knew that Jakt was right, that it was Jane's choice. But he couldn't bear that, because he also knew what she would decide. Leaving the choice up to Jane was identical to asking her to do it. And yet, in the end, the choice would be up to her anyway. He didn't even have to ask her what she would decide. Time passed so quickly for her, especially since they were already traveling at near-light speed, that she had probably decided already. It was too much to bear. To lose Jane now would be unbearable; just thinking of it threatened Miro's composure. He didn't want to show such weakness in front of these people. Good people, they were good people, but he didn't want them to see him lose control of himself. So Miro leaned forward, found his balance, and precariously lifted himself from his seat. It was hard, since only a few of his muscles responded to his will, and it took all his concentration just to walk from the bridge to his compartment. No one followed him or even spoke to him. He was glad of that.

Alone in his room, he lay down on his bunk and called to her. But not aloud. He subvocalized, because that was his custom when he talked to her. Even though the others on this ship now knew of her existence, he had no intention of losing the habits that had kept her concealed till now.

"Jane," he said silently.

"Yes," said the voice in his ear. He imagined, as always, that her soft voice came from a woman just out of sight, but close, very close. He shut his eyes, so he could imagine her better. Her breath on his cheek. Her hair dangling over his face as she spoke to him softly, as he answered in silence.

"Talk to Ender before you decide," he said.

"I already did. Just now, while you were thinking about this."

"What did he say?"

"To do nothing. To decide nothing, until the order is actually sent."

"That's right. Maybe they won't do it."

"Maybe. Maybe a new group with different policies will come into power. Maybe this group will change its mind. Maybe Valentine's propaganda will succeed. Maybe there'll be a mutiny on the fleet."

This last was so unlikely that Miro realized Jane absolutely believed that the order would be sent.

"How soon?" asked Miro.

"The fleet should arrive in about fifteen years. A year or less after these two ships get there. That's how I timed your voyage. The order will be sent sometime before. Maybe six months before arrival-- which would be about eight hours ship's time before the fleet drops out of lightspeed and staggers down to normal speeds."

"Don't do it," said Miro.

"I haven't decided."

"Yes you have. You've decided to do it."

She said nothing.

"Don't leave me," he said.

"I don't leave my friends if I don't have to," she said. "Some people do, but I don't."

"Just don't," he said again. He was crying. Could she see that, sense it somehow through the jewel in his ear?

"I'll try."

"Find another way. Find another way to stop them. Find some way to put yourself outside the phlotic net so they can't kill you."

"That's what Ender said."

"Then do it!"

"I can search for such a way, but who knows if it exists?"

"It has to."

"This is why I wonder sometimes whether I'm alive or not. You living creatures, you think that because you want something very much, it has to happen. That wishing something with all your heart will make it so."

"How can you search for something if you don't believe that it exists?"

"Either I search or I don't," said Jane. "I don't get distracted or bored like humans do. I'll try to think of something else."

"Think of this, too," said Miro. "Think of who you are. Of how your mind works. You can't possibly find a way of saving your life until you understand how you came to life in the first place. And once you understand yourself--"

"Then maybe I can make a copy and store it somewhere."

"Maybe."

"Maybe," she echoed.

But he knew she didn't believe it, and neither did he. She existed in the phlotic network of the ansibles; she could store her memories in the network of computers on every world and every ship in space, but there was nowhere that she could put her self, not if it required a network of phlotic links.

Unless.

"What about the fathertrees on Lusitania? They communicate phlotically, don't they?"

"It's not the same thing," said Jane. "It isn't digital. It isn't coded the way the ansibles are."

"It may not be digital, but the information gets transferred somehow, it works phlotically. And the hive queen, too-- she communicates with the buggers that way."

"No chance of that," said Jane. "The structure's too simple. Her communication with them isn't a network. They're all connected only to her."

"How do you know it won't work, when you don't even know for sure how you function?"

"All right. I'll think about it."

"Think hard," he said.

"I only know one way to think," said Jane.

"I mean, pay attention to it."

She could follow many trains of thought at once, but her thoughts were prioritized, with many different levels of attention. Miro didn't want her relegating her self-investigation to some low order of attention.

"I'll pay attention," she said.

"Then you'll think of something," he said. "You will."

She didn't answer for a while. He thought this meant that the conversation was over. His thoughts began to wander. To try to imagine what life would be like, still in this body, only without Jane. It could happen before he even arrived on Lusitania. And if it did, this voyage would have been the most terrible mistake of his life. By traveling at lightspeed, he was skipping thirty years of realtime. Thirty years that might have been spent with Jane. He might be able to deal with losing her then. But losing her now, only a few weeks into knowing her-- he knew that his tears arose from self-pity, but he shed them all the same.

"Miro," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"How can I think of something that's never been thought of before?"

For a moment he didn't understand.

"Miro, how can I figure out something that isn't just the logical conclusion of things that human beings have already figured out and written somewhere?"

"You think of things all the time," said Miro.

"I'm trying to conceive of something inconceivable. I'm trying to find answers to questions that human beings have never even tried to ask."

"Can't you do that?"

"If I can't think original thoughts, does that mean that I'm nothing but a computer program that got out of hand?"

"Hell, Jane, most people never have an original thought in their lives." He laughed softly. "Does that mean they're just ground-dwelling apes that got out of hand?"

"You were crying," she said.

"Yes."

"You don't think I can think of a way out of this. You think I'm going to die."

"I believe you can think of a way. I really do. But that doesn't stop me from being afraid."

"Afraid that I'll die."

"Afraid that I'll lose you."

"Would that be so terrible? To lose me?"

"Oh God," he whispered.

"Would you miss me for an hour?" she insisted. "For a day? For a year?"

What did she want from him? Assurance that when she was gone she'd be remembered? That someone would yearn for her? Why would she doubt that? Didn't she know him yet?

Maybe she was human enough that she simply needed reassurance of things she already knew.

"Forever," he said.

It was her turn to laugh. Playfully. "You won't live that long," she said.

"Now you tell me," he said.

This time when she fell silent, she didn't come back, and Miro was left alone with his thoughts.

Valentine, Jakt, and Plikt had remained together on the bridge, talking through the things they had learned, trying to decide what they might mean, what might happen. The only conclusion they reached was that while the future couldn't be known, it would probably be a good deal better than their worst fears and nowhere near as good as their best hopes. Wasn't that how the world always worked?

"Yes," said Plikt. "Except for the exceptions."

That was Plikt's way. Except when she was teaching, she said little, but when she did speak, it had a way of ending the conversation. Plikt got up to leave the bridge, headed for her miserably uncomfortable bed; as usual, Valentine tried to persuade her to go back to the other starship.

"Varsam and Ro don't want me in their room," said Plikt.

"They don't mind a bit."

"Valentine," said Jakt, "Plikt doesn't want to go back to the other ship because she doesn't want to miss anything."

"Oh," said Valentine.

Plikt grinned. "Good night."

Soon after, Jakt also left the bridge. His hand rested on Valentine's shoulder for a moment as he left. "I'll be there soon," she said. And she meant it at the moment, meant to follow him almost at

once. Instead she remained on the bridge, thinking, brooding, trying to make sense of a universe that would put all the nonhuman species ever known to man at risk of extinction, all at once. The hive queen, the pequeninos, and now Jane, the only one of her kind, perhaps the only one that ever could exist. A veritable profusion of intelligent life, and yet known only to a few. And all of them in line to be snuffed out.

At least Ender will realize at last that this is the natural order of things, that he might not be as responsible for the destruction of the buggers three thousand years ago as he had always thought. Xenocide must be built into the universe. No mercy, not even for the greatest players in the game.

How could she have ever thought otherwise? Why should intelligent species be immune to the threat of extinction that looms over every species that ever came to be?

It must have been an hour after Jakt left the bridge before Valentine finally turned off her terminal and stood up to go to bed. On a whim, though, she paused before leaving and spoke into the air. "Jane?" she said. "Jane?"

No answer.

There was no reason for her to expect one. It was Miro who wore the jewel in his ear. Miro and Ender both. How many people did she think Jane could monitor at one time? Maybe two was the most she could handle.

Or maybe two thousand. Or two million. What did Valentine know of the limitations of a being who existed as a phantom in the phlotic web? Even if Jane heard her, Valentine had no right to expect that she would answer her call.

Valentine stopped in the corridor, directly between Miro's door and the door to the room she shared with Jakt. The doors were not soundproof. She could hear Jakt's soft snoring inside their compartment. She also heard another sound. Miro's breath. He wasn't sleeping. He might be crying. She hadn't raised three children without being able to recognize that ragged, heavy breathing.

He's not my child. I shouldn't meddle.

She pushed open the door; it was noiseless, but it cast a shaft of light across the bed. Miro's crying stopped immediately, but he looked at her through swollen eyes.

"What do you want?" he said.

She stepped into the room and sat on the floor beside his bunk, so their faces were only a few inches apart. "You've never cried for yourself, have you?" she said.

"A few times."

"But tonight you're crying for her."

"Myself as much as her."

Valentine leaned closer, put her arm around him, pulled his head onto her shoulder.

"No," he said. But he didn't pull away. And after a few moments, his arm swung awkwardly around to embrace her. He didn't cry anymore, but he did let her hold him for a minute or two. Maybe it helped. Valentine had no way of knowing.

Then he was done. He pulled away, rolled onto his back. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You're welcome," she said. She believed in answering what people meant, not what they said.

"Don't tell Jakt," he whispered.

"Nothing to tell," she said. "We had a good talk."

She got up and left, closing his door behind her. He was a good boy. She liked the fact that he could admit caring what Jakt thought about him. And what did it matter if his tears tonight had self-pity in them? She had shed a few like that herself. Grief, she reminded herself, is almost always for the mourner's loss.

Chapter 5 -- THE LUSITANIA FLEET

<Ender says that when the war fleet from Starways Congress reaches us, they plan to destroy this world.>

<Interesting.>

<You don't fear death?>

<We don't intend to be here when they arrive.>

Qing-jao was no longer the little girl whose hands had bled in secret. Her life had been transformed from the moment she was proved to be godspoken, and in the ten years since that day she had come to accept the voice of the gods in her life and the role this gave her in society. She learned to accept the privileges and honors given to her as gifts actually meant for the gods; as her father taught her, she did not take on airs, but instead grew more humble as the gods and the people laid ever-heavier burdens on her.

She took her duties seriously, and found joy in them. For the past ten years she had passed through a rigorous, exhilarating course of studies. Her body was shaped and trained in the company of other children-- running, swimming, riding, combat-with-swords, combat-with-sticks, combat-with-bones. Along with other children, her memory was filled with languages-- Stark, the common speech of the stars, which was typed into computers; Old Chinese, which was sung in the throat and drawn in beautiful ideograms on rice paper or in fine sand; and New Chinese, which was merely spoken at the mouth and jotted down with a common alphabet on ordinary paper or in dirt. No one was surprised except Qing-jao herself that she learned all these languages much more quickly and easily and thoroughly than any of the other children.

Other teachers came to her alone. This was how she learned sciences and history, mathematics and music. And every week she would go to her father and spend half a day with him, showing him all that she had learned and listening to what he said in response. His praise made her dance all the way back to her room; his mildest rebuke made her spend hours tracing woodgrain lines in her schoolroom, until she felt worthy to return to studying.

Another part of her schooling was utterly private. She had seen for herself how Father was so strong that he could postpone his obedience to the gods. She knew that when the gods demanded a ritual of purification, the hunger, the need to obey them was so exquisite it could not be denied. And yet Father somehow denied it-- long enough, at least, that his rituals were always in private. Qing-jao longed for such strength herself, and so she began to discipline herself to delay. When the gods made her feel her oppressive unworthiness, and her eyes began to search for woodgrain lines or her hands began to feel unbearably filthy, she would wait, trying to concentrate on what was happening at the moment and put off obedience as long as she could.

At first it was a triumph if she managed to postpone her purification for a full minute-- and when her resistance broke, the gods punished her for it by making the ritual more onerous and difficult than usual. But she refused to give up. She was Han Fei-tzu's daughter, wasn't she? And in time, over the years, she learned what her father had learned: that one could live with the hunger, contain it, often for hours, like a bright fire encased in a box of translucent jade, a dangerous, terrible fire from the gods, burning within her heart.

Then, when she was alone, she could open that box and let the fire out, not in a single, terrible eruption, but slowly, gradually, filling her with light as she bowed her head and traced the lines on the floor, or bent over the sacred laver of her holy washings, quietly and methodically rubbing her hands with pumice, lye, and aloe.

Thus she converted the raging voice of the gods into a private, disciplined worship. Only at rare moments of sudden distress did she lose control and fling herself to the floor in front of a teacher or visitor. She accepted these humiliations as the gods' way of reminding her that their power over her was absolute, that her usual self-control was only permitted for their amusement. She was content with this imperfect discipline. After all, it would be presumptuous of her to equal her father's perfect self-control. His extraordinary nobility came because the gods honored him, and so did not require his public humiliation; she had done nothing to earn such honor.

Last of all, her schooling included one day each week helping with the righteous labor of the common people. Righteous labor, of course, was not the work the common people did every day in their offices and factories. Righteous labor meant the backbreaking work of the rice paddies. Every man and woman and child on Path had to perform this labor, bending and stooping in shin-deep water to plant and harvest the rice-- or forfeit citizenship. "This is how we honor our ancestors," Father explained to her when she was little. "We show them that none of us will ever rise above doing their labor." The rice that was grown by righteous labor was considered holy; it was offered in the temples and eaten on holy days; it was placed in small bowls as offerings to the household gods.

Once, when Qing-jao was twelve, the day was terribly hot and she was eager to finish her work on a research project. "Don't make me go to the rice paddies today," she said to her teacher. "What I'm doing here is so much more important."

The teacher bowed and went away, but soon Father came into her room. He carried a heavy sword, and she screamed in terror when he raised it over his head. Did he mean to kill her for having spoken so sacrilegiously? But he did not hurt her-- how could she have imagined that he might? Instead the sword came down on her computer terminal. The metal parts twisted; the plastic shattered and flew. The machine was destroyed.

Father did not raise his voice. It was in the faintest whisper that he said, "First the gods. Second the ancestors. Third the people. Fourth the rulers. Last the self."

It was the clearest expression of the Path. It was the reason this world was settled in the first place. She had forgotten: If she was too busy to perform righteous labor, she was not on the Path.

She would never forget again. And, in time, she learned to love the sun beating down on her back, the water cool and murky around her legs and hands, the stalks of the rice plants like fingers reaching up from the mud to intertwine with her fingers. Covered with muck in the rice paddies, she never felt unclean, because she knew that she was filthy in the service of the gods.

Finally, at the age of sixteen, her schooling was finished. She had only to prove herself in a grown woman's task-- one that was difficult and important enough that it could be entrusted only to one who was godspoken.

She came before the great Han Fei-tzu in his room. Like hers, it was a large open space; like hers, the sleeping accommodation was simple, a mat on the floor; like hers, the room was dominated by a table with a computer terminal on it. She had never entered her father's room without seeing something floating in the display above the terminal-- diagrams, threedimensional models, realtime simulations, words. Most commonly words. Letters or ideographs floating in the air on simulated pages, moving back and forward, side to side as Father needed to compare them.

In Qing-jao's room, all the rest of the space was empty. Since Father did not trace woodgrain lines, he had no need for that much austerity. Even so, his tastes were simple. One rug-- only rarely one that had much decoration to it. One low table, with one sculpture standing on it. Walls bare except

for one painting. And because the room was so large, each one of these things seemed almost lost, like the faint voice of someone crying out from very far away.

The message of this room to visitors was clear: Han Fei-tzu chose simplicity. One of each thing was enough for a pure soul.

The message to Qing-jao, however, was quite different. For she knew what no one outside the household realized: The rug, the table, the sculpture, and the painting were changed every day. And never in her life had she recognized any one of them. So the lesson she learned was this: A pure soul must never grow attached to any one thing. A pure soul must expose himself to new things every day.

Because this was a formal occasion, she did not come and stand behind him as he worked, studying what appeared in his display, trying to guess what he was doing. This time she came to the middle of the room and knelt on the plain rug, which was today the color of a robin's egg, with a small stain in one corner. She kept her eyes down, not even studying the stain, until Father got up from his chair and came to stand before her.

"Han Qing-jao," he said. "Let me see the sunrise of my daughter's face."

She lifted her head, looked at him, and smiled.

He smiled back. "What I will set before you is not an easy task, even for an experienced adult," said Father.

Qing-jao bowed her head. She had expected that Father would set a hard challenge for her, and she was ready to do his will.

"Look at me, my Qing-jao," said Father.

She lifted her head, looked into his eyes.

"This is not going to be a school assignment. This is a task from the real world. A task that Starways Congress has given me, on which the fate of nations and peoples and worlds may rest."

Qing-jao had been tense already, but now Father was frightening her. "Then you must give this task to someone who can be trusted with it, not to an untried child."

"You haven't been a child in years, Qing-jao. Are you ready to hear your task?"

"Yes, Father."

"What do you know about the Lusitania Fleet?"

"Do you want me to tell you everything I know about it?"

"I want you to tell me all that you think matters."

So-- this was a kind of test, to see how well she could distill the important from the unimportant in her knowledge about a particular subject.

"The fleet was sent to subdue a rebellious colony on Lusitania, where laws concerning noninterference in the only known alien species had been defiantly broken."

Was that enough? No-- Father was still waiting.

"There was controversy, right from the start," she said. "Essays attributed to a person called Demosthenes stirred up trouble."

"What trouble, in particular?"

"To colony worlds, Demosthenes gave warning that the Lusitania Fleet was a dangerous precedent-- it would be only a matter of time before Starways Congress used force to compel their obedience, too. To Catholic worlds and Catholic minorities everywhere, Demosthenes charged that Congress was trying to punish the Bishop of Lusitania for sending missionaries to the pequeninos to save their souls from hell. To scientists, Demosthenes sent warning that the principle of independent research was at stake-- a whole world was under military attack because it dared to prefer the judgment of the scientists on the scene to the judgment of bureaucrats many light-years away. And to everyone, Demosthenes made claims that the Lusitania Fleet carried the Molecular Disruption Device. Of course that is an obvious lie, but some believed it."

"How effective were these essays?" asked Father.

"I don't know."

"They were very effective," said Father. "Fifteen years ago, the earliest essays to the colonies were so effective that they almost caused revolution."

A near-rebellion in the colonies? Fifteen years ago? Qing-jao knew of only one such event, but she had never realized it had anything to do with Demosthenes' essays. She blushed. "That was the time of the Colony Charter-- your first great treaty."

"The treaty was not mine," said Han Fei-tzu. "The treaty belonged equally to Congress and the colonies. Because of it a terrible conflict was avoided. And the Lusitania Fleet continues on its great mission."

"You wrote every word of the treaty, Father."

"In doing so I only found expression for the wishes and desires already in the hearts of the people on both sides of the issue. I was a clerk."

Qing-jao bowed her head. She knew the truth, and so did everyone else. It had been the beginning of Han Fei-tzu's greatness, for he not only wrote the treaty but also persuaded both sides to accept it almost without revision. Ever after that, Han Fei-tzu had been one of the most trusted advisers to Congress; messages arrived daily from the greatest men and women of every world. If he chose to call himself a clerk in that great undertaking, that was only because he was a man of great modesty. Qing-jao also knew that Mother was already dying as he accomplished all this work. That was the kind of man her father was, for he neglected neither his wife nor his duty. He could not save Mother's life, but he could save the lives that might have been lost in war.

"Qing-jao, why do you say that it is an obvious lie that the fleet is carrying the M.D. Device?"

"Because-- because that would be monstrous. It would be like Ender the Xenocide, destroying an entire world. So much power has no right or reason to exist in the universe."

"Who taught you this?"

"Decency taught me this," said Qing-jao. "The gods made the stars and all the planets-- who is man to unmake them?"

"But the gods also made the laws of nature that make it possible to destroy them-- who is man to refuse to receive what the gods have given?"

Qing-jao was stunned to silence. She had never heard Father speak in apparent defense of any aspect of war-- he loathed war in any form.

"I ask you again-- who taught you that so much power has no right or reason to exist in the universe?"

"It's my own idea."

"But that sentence is an exact quotation."

"Yes. From Demosthenes. But if I believe an idea, it becomes my own. You taught me that."

"You must be careful that you understand all the consequences of an idea before you believe it."

"The Little Doctor must never be used on Lusitania, and therefore it should not have been sent."

Han Fei-tzu nodded gravely. "How do you know it must never be used?"

"Because it would destroy the pequeninos, a young and beautiful people who are eager to fulfill their potential as a sentient species."

"Another quotation."

"Father, have you read the Life of Human?"

"I have."

"Then how can you doubt that the pequeninos must be preserved?"

"I said I had read the Life of Human. I didn't say that I believed it."

"You don't believe it?"

"I neither believe it nor disbelieve it. The book first appeared after the ansible on Lusitania had been destroyed. Therefore it is probable that the book did not originate there, and if it didn't originate there then it's fiction. That seems particularly likely because it's signed 'Speaker for the Dead,' which is the same name signed to the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, which are thousands of years old. Someone was obviously trying to capitalize on the reverence people feel toward those ancient works."

"I believe the Life of Human is true."

"That's your privilege, Qing-jao. But why do you believe it?"

Because it sounded true when she read it. Could she say that to Father? Yes, she could say anything. "Because when I read it I felt that it must be true."

"I see."

"Now you know that I'm foolish."

"On the contrary. I know that you are wise. When you hear a true story, there is a part of you that responds to it regardless of art, regardless of evidence. Let it be clumsily told and you will still love the tale, if you love truth. Let it be the most obvious fabrication and you will still believe whatever truth is in it, because you cannot deny truth no matter how shabbily it is dressed."

"Then how is it that you don't believe the Life of Human?"

"I spoke unclearly. We are using two different meanings of the words truth and belief. You believe that the story is true, because you responded to it from that sense of truth deep within you. But that sense of truth does not respond to a story's factuality-- to whether it literally depicts a real event in the real world. Your inner sense of truth responds to a story's causality-- to whether it faithfully shows the way the universe functions, the way the gods work their will among human beings."

Qing-jao thought for only a moment, then nodded her understanding. "So the Life of Human may be universally true, but specifically false."

"Yes," said Han Fei-tzu. "You can read the book and gain great wisdom from it, because it is true. But is that book an accurate representation of the pequeninos themselves? One can hardly believe

that-- a mammaloid species that turns into a tree when it dies? Beautiful as poetry. Ludicrous as science."

"But can you know that, either, Father?"

"I can't be sure, no. Nature has done many strange things, and there is a chance that the Life of Human is genuine and true. Thus I neither believe it nor disbelieve it. I hold it in abeyance. I wait. Yet while I'm waiting, I don't expect Congress to treat Lusitania as if it were populated by the fanciful creatures from the Life of Human. For all we know, the pequeninos may be deadly dangerous to us. They are aliens."

"Ramen."

"In the story. But raman or varelse, we do not know what they are. The fleet carries the Little Doctor because it might be necessary to save mankind from unspeakable peril. It is not up to us to decide whether or not it should be used-- Congress will decide. It is not up to us to decide whether it should have been sent-- Congress has sent it. And it is certainly not up to us to decide whether it should exist-- the gods have decreed that such a thing is possible and can exist."

"So Demosthenes was right. The M.D. Device is with the fleet."

"Yes."

"And the government files that Demosthenes published-- they were genuine."

"Yes.:

"But Father-- you joined many others in claiming that they were forgeries."

"Just as the gods speak only to a chosen few, so the secrets of the rulers must be known only to those who will use the knowledge properly. Demosthenes was giving powerful secrets to people who were not fit to use them wisely, and so for the good of the people those secrets had to be withdrawn. The only way to retrieve a secret, once it is known, is to replace it with a lie; then the knowledge of the truth is once again your secret."

"You're telling me that Demosthenes is not a liar, and Congress is."

"I'm telling you that Demosthenes is the enemy of the gods. A wise ruler would never have sent the Lusitania Fleet without giving it the possibility of responding to any circumstance. But Demosthenes has used his knowledge that the Little Doctor is with the fleet in order to try to force Congress to withdraw the fleet. Thus he wishes to take power out of the hands of those whom the gods have ordained to rule humankind. What would happen to the people if they rejected the rulers given them by the gods?"

"Chaos and suffering," said Qing-jao. History was full of times of chaos and suffering, until the gods sent strong rulers and institutions to keep order.

"So Demosthenes told the truth about the Little Doctor. Did you think the enemies of the gods could never speak the truth? I wish it were so. It would make them much easier to identify."

"If we can lie in the service of the gods, what other crimes can we commit?"

"What is a crime?"

"An act that's against the law."

"What law?"

"I see-- Congress makes the law, so the law is whatever Congress says. But Congress is composed of men and women, who may do good and evil."

"Now you're nearer the truth. We can't do crimes in the service of Congress, because Congress makes the laws. But if Congress ever became evil, then in obeying them we might also be doing evil. That is a matter of conscience. However, if that happened, Congress would surely lose the mandate of heaven. And we, the godspoken, don't have to wait and wonder about the mandate of heaven, as others do. If Congress ever loses the mandate of the gods, we will know at once."

"So you lied for Congress because Congress had the mandate of heaven."

"And therefore I knew that to help them keep their secret was the will of the gods for the good of the people."

Qing-jao had never thought of Congress in quite this way before. All the history books she had studied showed Congress as the great unifier of humanity, and according to the schoolbooks, all its acts were noble. Now, though, she understood that some of its actions might not seem good. Yet that didn't necessarily mean that they were not good. "I must learn from the gods, then, whether the will of Congress is also their will," she said.

"Will you do that?" asked Han Fei-tzu. "Will you obey the will of Congress, even when it might seem wrong, as long as Congress has the mandate of heaven?"

"Are you asking for my oath?"

"I am."

"Then yes, I will obey, as long as they have the mandate of heaven."

"I had to have that oath from you to satisfy the security requirements of Congress," he said. "I couldn't have given you your task without it." He cleared his throat. "But now I ask you for another oath."

"I'll give it if I can."

"This oath is from-- it arises from great love. Han Qing-jao, will you serve the gods in all things, in all ways, throughout your life?"

"Oh, Father, we need no oath for this. Haven't the gods chosen me already, and led me with their voice?"

"Nevertheless I ask you for this oath."

"Always, in all things, in all ways, I will serve the gods."

To her surprise, Father knelt before her and took her hands in his. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "You have lifted from my heart the heaviest burden that was ever laid there."

"How did I do this, Father?"

"Before your mother died, she asked me for my promise. She said that since her entire character was expressed by her devotion to the gods, the only way I could help you to know her was to teach you also to serve the gods. All my life I have still been afraid that I might fail, that you might turn away from the gods. That you might come to hate them. Or that you might not be worthy of their voice."

This struck Qing-jao to the heart. She was always conscious of her deep unworthiness before the gods, of her filthiness in their sight-- even when they weren't requiring her to watch or trace woodgrain lines. Only now did she learn what was at stake: her mother's love for her.

"All my fears are gone now. You are a perfect daughter, my Qing-jao. You already serve the gods well. And now, with your oath, I can be sure you'll continue forever. This will cause great rejoicing in the house in heaven where your mother dwells."

Will it? In heaven they know my weakness. You, Father, you only see that I have not yet failed the gods; Mother must know how close I've come so many times, how filthy I am whenever the gods look upon me.

But he seemed so full of joy that she dared not show him how much she dreaded the day when she would prove her unworthiness for all to see. So she embraced him.

Still, she couldn't help asking him, "Father, do you really think Mother heard me make that oath?"

"I hope so," said Han Fei-tzu. "If she didn't, the gods will surely save the echo of it and put it in a seashell and let her listen to it whenever she puts it to her ear."

This sort of fanciful storytelling was a game they had played together as children. Qing-jao set aside her dread and quickly came up with an answer. "No, the gods will save the touch of our embrace and weave it into a shawl, which she can wear around her shoulders when winter comes to heaven." She was relieved, anyway, that Father had not said yes. He only hoped that Mother had

heard the oath she made. Perhaps she hadn't-- and so she wouldn't be so disappointed when her daughter failed.

Father kissed her, then stood up. "Now you are ready to hear your task," he said.

He took her by the hand and led her to his table. She stood beside him when he sat on his chair; she was not much taller, standing, than he was sitting down. Probably she had not yet reached her adult height, but she hoped she wouldn't grow much more. She didn't want to become one of those large, hulking women who carried heavy burdens in the fields. Better to be a mouse than a hog, that's what Mu-pao had told her years ago.

Father brought a starmap up into the display. She recognized the area immediately. It centered on the Lusitania star system, though the scale was too small for individual planets to be visible. "Lusitania is in the center," she said.

Father nodded. He typed a few more commands. "Now watch this," he said. "Not the display, my fingers. This, plus your voice identification, is the password that will allow you to access the information you'll need."

She watched him type: 4Gang. She recognized the reference at once. Her mother's ancestor-of-the-heart had been Jiang-qing, the widow of the first Communist Emperor, Mao Ze-dong. When Jiang-qing and her allies were driven from power, the Conspiracy of Cowards vilified them under the name "Gang of Four." Qing-jao's mother had been a true daughter-of-the-heart to that great martyred woman of the past. And now Qing-jao would be able to do further honor to her mother's ancestor-of-the-heart every time she typed the access code. It was a gracious thing for her father to arrange.

In the display there appeared many green dots. She quickly counted, almost without thinking: there were nineteen of them, clustered at some distance from Lusitania, but surrounding it in most directions.

"Is that the Lusitania Fleet?"

"Those were their positions five months ago." He typed again. The green dots all disappeared. "And those are their positions today."

She looked for them. She couldn't find a green dot anywhere. Yet Father clearly expected her to see something. "Are they already at Lusitania?"

"The ships are where you see them," said Father. "Five months ago the fleet disappeared."

"Where did it go?"

"No one knows."

"Was it a mutiny?"

"No one knows."

"The whole fleet?"

"Every ship."

"When you say they disappeared, what do you mean?"

Father glanced at her with a smile. "Well done, Qing-jao. You've asked the right question. No one saw them-- they were all in deep space. So they didn't physically disappear. As far as we know, they may be moving along, still on course. They only disappeared in the sense that we lost all contact with them. "

"The ansibles?"

"Silent. All within the same three-minute period. No transmissions were interrupted. One would end, and then the next one-- never came."

"Every ship's connection with every planetside ansible everywhere? That's impossible. Even an explosion-- if there could be one so large-- but it couldn't be a single event, anyway, because they were so widely distributed around Lusitania. "

"Well, it could be, Qing-jao. If you can imagine an event so cataclysmic-- it could be that Lusitania's star became a supernova. It would be decades before we saw the flash even on the closest worlds. The trouble is that it would be the most unlikely supernova in history. Not impossible, but unlikely."

"And there would have been some advance indications. Some changes in the star's condition. Didn't the ships' instruments detect something?"

"No. That's why we don't think it was any known astronomical phenomenon. Scientists can't think of anything to explain it. So we've tried investigating it as sabotage. We've searched for penetrations of the ansible computers. We've raked over all the personnel files from every ship, searching for some possible conspiracy among the shipboard crews. There's been cryptanalysis of every communication by every ship, searching for some kind of messages among conspirators. The military and the government have analyzed everything they can think of to analyze. The police on every planet have conducted inquiries-- we've checked the background on every ansible operator."

"Even though no messages are being sent, are the ansibles still connected?"

"What do you think?"

Qing-jao blushed. "Of course they would be, even if an M.D. Device had been used against the fleet, because the ansibles are linked by fragments of subatomic particles. They'd still be there even if the whole starship were blown to dust."

"Don't be embarrassed, Qing-jao. The wise are not wise because they make no mistakes. They are wise because they correct their mistakes as soon as they recognize them."

However, Qing-jao was blushing now for another reason. The hot blood was pounding in her head because it had only now dawned on her what Father's assignment for her was going to be. But that was impossible. He couldn't give to her a task that thousands of wiser, older people had already failed at.

"Father," she whispered. "What is my task?" She still hoped that it was some minor problem involved with the disappearance of the fleet. But she knew that her hope was in vain even before he spoke.

"You must discover every possible explanation for the disappearance of the fleet," he said, "and calculate the likelihood of each one. Starways Congress must be able to tell how this happened and how to make sure it will never happen again."

"But Father," said Qing-jao, "I'm only sixteen. Aren't there many others who are wiser than I am?"

"Perhaps they're all too wise to accept the task," he said. "But you are young enough not to fancy yourself wise. You're young enough to think of impossible things and discover why they might be possible. Above all, gods speak to you with extraordinary clarity, my brilliant child, my Gloriously Bright."

That was what she was afraid of-- that Father expected her to succeed because of the favor of the gods. He didn't understand how unworthy the gods found her, how little they liked her.

And there was another problem. "What if I succeed? What if I find out where the Lusitania Fleet is, and restore communications? Wouldn't it then be my fault if the fleet destroyed Lusitania?"

"It's good that your first thought is compassion for the people of Lusitania. I assure you that Starways Congress has promised not to use the M.D. Device unless it proves absolutely unavoidable, and that is so unlikely that I can't believe it would happen. Even if it did, though, it's Congress that must decide. As my ancestor-of-the-heart said, 'Though the wise man's punishments may be light, this is not due to his compassion; though his penalties may be severe, this is not because he is cruel; he simply follows the custom appropriate to the time. Circumstances change according to the age, and ways of dealing with them change with the circumstances.' You may be sure that Starways Congress will deal with Lusitania, not according to kindness or cruelty, but according to what is necessary for the good of all humanity. That is why we serve the rulers: because they serve the people, who serve the ancestors, who serve the gods."

"Father, I was unworthy even to think otherwise," said Qing-jao. She felt her filthiness now, instead of just knowing it in her mind. She needed to wash her hands. She needed to trace a line. But she contained it. She would wait.

Whatever I do, she thought, there will be a terrible consequence. If I fail, then Father will lose honor before Congress and therefore before all the world of Path. That would prove to many that Father isn't worthy to be chosen god of Path when he dies.

Yet if I succeed, the result might be xenocide. Even though the choice belongs to Congress, I would still know that I made such a thing possible. The responsibility would be partly mine. No matter what I do, I will be covered with failure and smeared with unworthiness.

Then Father spoke to her as if the gods had shown him her heart. "Yes, you were unworthy," he said, "and you continue to be unworthy in your thoughts even now."

Qing-jao blushed and bowed her head, ashamed, not that her thoughts had been so plainly visible to her father, but that she had had such disobedient thoughts at all.

Father touched her shoulder gently with his hand. "But I believe the gods will make you worthy," said Father. "Starways Congress has the mandate of heaven, but you are also chosen to walk your own path. You can succeed in this great work. Will you try?"

"I will try." I will also fail, but that will surprise no one, least of all the gods, who know my unworthiness.

"All the pertinent archives have been opened up to your searching, when you speak your name and type the password. If you need help, let me know."

She left Father's room with dignity, and forced herself to walk slowly up the stairs to her room. Only when she was inside with the door closed did she throw herself to her knees and creep along the floor. She traced woodgrain lines until she could hardly see. Her unworthiness was so great that even then she didn't quite feel clean; she went to the lavatory and scrubbed her hands until she knew the gods were satisfied. Twice the servants tried to interrupt her with meals or messages-- she cared little which-- but when they saw that she was communing with the gods they bowed and quietly slipped away.

It was not the washing of her hands, though, that finally made her clean. It was the moment when she drove the last vestige of uncertainty from her heart. Starways Congress had the mandate of heaven. She must purge herself of all doubt. Whatever they meant to do with the Lusitania Fleet, it was surely the will of the gods that it be accomplished. Therefore it was her duty to help them accomplish it. And if she was in fact doing the will of the gods, then they would open a way for her to solve the problem that had been set before her. Anytime she thought otherwise, anytime the words of Demosthenes returned to her mind, she would have to blot them out by remembering that she would obey the rulers who have the mandate of heaven.

By the time her mind was calm, her palms were raw and dotted with blood seeping up from the layers of living skin that were now so close to the surface. This is how my understanding of the truth arises, she told herself. If I wash away enough of my mortality, then the truth of the gods will seep upward into the light.

She was clean at last. The hour was late and her eyes were tired. Nevertheless, she sat down before her terminal and began the work. "Show me summaries of all the research that has been conducted so far on the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet," she said, "starting with the most recent." Almost at once words started appearing in the air above her terminal, page upon page lined up like soldiers marching to the front. She would read one, then scroll it out of the way, only to have the page behind it move to the front for her to read it. Seven hours she read until she could read no more; then she fell asleep before the terminal.

Jane watches everything. She can do a million jobs and pay attention to a thousand things at once. Neither of these capacities is infinite, but they're so much greater than our pathetic ability to think about one thing while doing another that they might as well be. She does have a sensory limitation that we don't have, however; or, rather, we are her greatest limitation. She can't see or know anything that hasn't been entered as data in a computer that is tied to the great interworld network.

That's less of a limitation than you might think. She has almost immediate access to the raw inputs of every starship, every satellite, every traffic control system, and almost every electronically-monitored spy device in the human universe. But it does mean that she almost never witnesses lovers' quarrels, bedtime stories, classroom arguments, supper-table gossip, or bitter tears privately shed. She only knows that aspect of our lives that we represent as digital information.

If you asked her the exact number of human beings in the settled worlds, she would quickly give you a number based on census figures combined with birth-and-death probabilities in all our population groups. In most cases, she could match numbers with names, though no human could live long enough to read the list. And if you took a name you just happened to think of-- Han Qing-jao, for instance-- and you asked Jane, "Who is this person?" she'd almost immediately give you the vital statistics-- birth date, citizenship, parentage, height and weight at last medical checkup, grades in school.

But that is all gratuitous information, background noise to her; she knows it's there, but it means nothing. To ask her about Han Qing-jao would be something like asking her a question about a certain molecule of water vapor in a distant cloud. The molecule is certainly there, but there's nothing special to differentiate it from the million others in its immediate vicinity.

That was true until the moment that Han Qing-jao began to use her computer to access all the reports dealing with the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet. Then Qing-jao's name moved many levels upward in Jane's attention. Jane began to keep a log of everything that Qing-jao did with her computer. And it quickly became clear to her that Han Qing-jao, though she was only sixteen, meant to make serious trouble for Jane. Because Han Qing-jao, unconnected as she was to any particular bureaucracy, having no ideological axe to grind or vested interest to protect, was taking a broader and therefore more dangerous look at all the information that had been collected by every human agency.

Why was it dangerous? Had Jane left clues behind that Qing-jao would find?

No, of course not. Jane left no clues. She had thought of leaving some, of trying to make the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet look like sabotage or mechanical failure or some natural disaster. She had to give up on that idea, because she couldn't work up any physical clues. All she could do was leave misleading data in computer memories. None of it would ever have any physical analogue in the real world, and therefore any halfway-intelligent researcher would quickly realize that the clues were all faked-up data. Then he would conclude that the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet had to have been caused by some agency that had unimaginably detailed access to the computer systems that had the false data. Surely that would lead people to discover her far more quickly than if she left no evidence at all.

Leaving no evidence was the best course, definitely; and until Han Qing-jao began her investigation, it had worked very well. Each investigating agency looked only in the places they usually looked. The police on many planets checked out all the known dissident groups (and, in some places, tortured various dissidents until they made useless confessions, at which point the interrogators filed final reports and pronounced the issue closed). The military looked for evidence of military opposition-- especially alien starships, since the military had keen memories of the invasion of the buggers three thousand years before. Scientists looked for evidence of some unexpected invisible astronomical phenomenon that could account for either the destruction of the fleet or the selective breakdown of ansible communication. The politicians looked for somebody else to blame. Nobody imagined Jane, and therefore nobody found her.

But Han Qing-jao was putting everything together, carefully, systematically, running precise searches on the data. She would inevitably turn up the evidence that could eventually prove-- and end-- Jane's existence. That evidence was, simply put, the lack of evidence. Nobody else could see it, because nobody had ever brought an unbiased methodical mind to the investigation.

What Jane couldn't know was that Qing-jao's seemingly inhuman patience, her meticulous attention to detail, her constant rephrasing and reprogramming of computer searches, that all of these were the result of endless hours kneeling hunched over on a wooden floor, carefully following a grain in the wood from one end of a board to the other, from one side of a room to the other. Jane couldn't begin to guess that it was the great lesson taught her by the gods that made Qing-jao her most formidable opponent. All Jane knew was that at some point, this searcher named Qing-jao would probably realize what no one else really understood: that every conceivable explanation for the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet had already been completely eliminated.

At that point only one conclusion would remain: that some force not yet encountered anywhere in the history of humankind had the power either to make a widely scattered fleet of starships disappear simultaneously, or-- just as unlikely-- to make that fleet's ansibles all stop functioning at once. And if that same methodical mind then started listing possible forces that might have such power, eventually it was bound to name the one that was true: an independent entity that dwelt among-- no, that was composed of-- the philotic rays connecting all ansibles together. Because this idea was true, no amount of logical scrutiny or research would eliminate it. Eventually this idea would be left standing alone. And at that point, somebody would surely act on Qing-jao's discovery and set out to destroy Jane.

So Jane watched Qing-jao's research with more and more fascination. This sixteen-year-old daughter of Han Fei-tzu, who weighed 39 kilograms and stood 160 centimeters tall and was in the uppermost social and intellectual class on the Taoist Chinese world of Path, was the first human being Jane had ever found who approached the thoroughness and precision of a computer and, therefore, of Jane herself. And though Jane could conduct in an hour the search that was taking Qing-jao weeks and months to complete, the dangerous truth was that Qing-jao was performing almost exactly the search Jane herself would have conducted; and therefore there was no reason for Jane to suppose that Qing-jao would not reach the conclusion that Jane herself would reach.

Qing-jao was therefore Jane's most dangerous enemy, and Jane was helpless to stop her-- at least physically. Trying to block Qing-jao's access to information would only mean leading her more quickly to the knowledge of Jane's existence. So instead of open opposition, Jane searched for another way to stop her enemy. She did not understand all of human nature, but Ender had taught her this: to stop a human being from doing something, you must find a way to make the person stop wanting to do it.

Chapter 6 -- VARELSE

<How are you able to speak directly into Ender's mind?>

<Now that we know where he is, it's as natural as eating.>

<How did you find him? I've never been able to speak into the mind of anyone who hasn't passed into the third life.>

<We found him through the ansibles, and the electronics connected to them-- found where his body was in space. To reach his mind, we had to reach into chaos and form a bridge.>

<Bridge?>

<A transitional entity, which partly resembled his mind and partly ours.>

<If you could reach his mind, why didn't you stop him from destroying you?>

<The human brain is very strange. Before we could make sense of what we found there, before we could learn how to speak into that twisted space, all my sisters and mothers were gone. We continued to study his mind during all the years we waited, cocooned, until he found us; when he came, then we could speak directly to him.>

<What happened to the bridge you made?>

<We never thought about it. It's probably still out there somewhere.>

The new strain of potatoes was dying. Ender saw the telltale brown circles in the leaves, the plants broken off where the stems had turned so brittle that the slightest breeze bent them till they snapped. This morning they had all been healthy. The onset of this disease was so sudden, its effect so devastating, that it could only be the descolada virus.

Ela and Novinha would be disappointed-- they had had such hopes for this strain of potato. Ela, Ender's stepdaughter, had been working on a gene that would cause every cell in an organism to produce three different chemicals that were known to inhibit or kill the descolada virus. Novinha, Ender's wife, had been working on a gene that would cause cell nuclei to be impermeable to any molecule larger than one-tenth the size of the descolada. With this strain of potato, they had spliced in both genes and, when early tests showed that both traits had taken hold, Ender had brought the seedlings to the experimental farm and planted them. He and his assistants had nurtured them for the past six weeks. All had seemed to be going well.

If the technique had worked, it could have been adapted to all the plants and animals that the humans of Lusitania depended on for food. But the descolada virus was too clever by half-- it saw through all their stratagems, eventually. Still, six weeks was better than the normal two or three days. Maybe they were on the right track.

Or maybe things had already gone too far. Back when Ender first arrived on Lusitania, new strains of Earthborn plants and animals could last as long as twenty years in the field before the descolada decoded their genetic molecules and tore them apart. But in recent years the descolada virus had apparently made a breakthrough that allowed it to decode any genetic molecule from Earth in days or even hours.

These days the only thing that allowed the human colonists to grow their plants and raise their animals was a spray that was immediately fatal to the descolada virus. There were human colonists who wanted to spray the whole planet and wipe out the descolada virus once and for all.

Spraying a whole planet was impractical, but not impossible; there were other reasons for rejecting that option. Every form of native life absolutely depended on the descolada in order to reproduce. That included the piggies-- the pequeninos, the intelligent natives of this world-- whose reproductive cycle was inextricably bound up with the only native species of tree. If the descolada virus were ever destroyed, this generation of pequeninos would be the last. It would be xenocide.

So far, the idea of doing anything that would wipe out the piggies would be immediately rejected by most of the people of Milagre, the village of humans. So far. But Ender knew that many minds would change if a few more facts were widely known. For instance, only a handful of people knew that twice already the descolada had adapted itself to the chemical they were using to kill it. Ela and Novinha had already developed several new versions of the chemical, so that the next time the descolada adapted to one viricide they could switch immediately to another. Likewise, they had once had to change the descolada inhibitor that kept human beings from dying of the descolada viruses that dwelt in every human in the colony. The inhibitor was added to all the colony's food, so that every human being ingested it with every meal.

However, all the inhibitors and viricides worked on the same basic principles. Someday, just as the descolada virus had learned how to adapt to Earthborn genes in general, it would also learn how to handle each class of chemicals, and then it wouldn't matter how many new versions they had-- the descolada would exhaust their resources in days.

Only a few people knew how precarious Milagre's survival really was. Only a few people understood how much was riding on the work that Ela and Novinha, as Lusitania's xenobiologists, were doing; how close their contest was with the descolada; how devastating the consequences would be if they ever fell behind.

Just as well. If the colonists did understand, there would be many who would say, If it's inevitable that someday the descolada will overwhelm us, then let's wipe it out now. If that kills all the piggies then we're sorry, but if it's us or them, we choose us.

It was fine for Ender to take the long view, the philosophical perspective, and say, Better for one small human colony to perish than to wipe out an entire sentient species. He knew this argument would carry no water with the humans of Lusitania. Their own lives were at stake here, and the lives of their children; it would be absurd to expect them to be willing to die for the sake of another species that they didn't understand and that few of them even liked. It would make no sense genetically-- evolution encourages only creatures who are serious about protecting their own genes. Even if the Bishop himself declared it to be the will of God that the human beings of Lusitania lay down their lives for the piggies, there would be precious few who would obey.

I'm not sure I could make such a sacrifice myself, thought Ender. Even though I have no children of my own. Even though I have already lived through the destruction of a sentient species-- even though I triggered that destruction myself, and I know what a terrible moral burden that is to bear-- I'm not sure I could let my fellow human beings die, either by starvation because their food crops have been destroyed, or far more painfully by the return of the descolada as a disease with the power to consume the human body in days.

And yet... could I consent to the destruction of the pequeninos? Could I permit another xenocide?

He picked up one of the broken potato stems with its blotchy leaves. He would have to take this to Novinha, of course. Novinha would examine it, or Ela would, and they'd confirm what was already obvious. Another failure. He put the potato stem into a sterile pouch.

"Speaker."

It was Planter, Ender's assistant and his closest friend among the piggies.

Planter was a son of the pequenino named Human, whom Ender had taken into the "third life," the tree stage of the pequenino life cycle. Ender held up the transparent plastic pouch for Planter to see the leaves inside.

"Very dead indeed, Speaker," said Planter, with no discernible emotion. That had been the most disconcerting thing about working with pequeninos at first-- they didn't show emotions in ways that humans could easily, habitually interpret. It was one of the greatest barriers to their acceptance by most of the colonists. The piggies weren't cute or cuddly; they were merely strange.

"We'll try again," said Ender. "I think we're getting closer."

"Your wife wants you," said Planter. The word wife, even translated into a human language like Stark, was so loaded with tension for a pequenino that it was difficult to speak the word naturally-- Planter almost screeched it. Yet the idea of wifeness was so powerful to the pequeninos that, while they could call Novinha by her name when they spoke to her directly, when they were speaking to Novinha's husband they could only refer to her by her title.

"I was just about to go see her anyway," said Ender. "Would you measure and record these potatoes, please?"

Planter leaped straight up-- like a popcorn, Ender thought. Though his face remained, to human eyes, expressionless, the vertical jump showed his delight. Planter loved working with the electronic equipment, both because machines fascinated him and because it added greatly to his status among the other pequenino males. Planter immediately began unpacking the camera and its computer from the bag he always carried with him.

"When you're done, please prepare this isolated section for flash burning," said Ender.

"Yes yes," said Planter. "Yes yes yes."

Ender sighed. Pequeninos got so annoyed when humans told them things that they already knew. Planter certainly knew the routine when the descolada had adapted to a new crop-- the "educated" virus had to be destroyed while it was still in isolation. No point in letting the whole community of descolada viruses profit from what one strain had learned. So Ender shouldn't have reminded him. And yet that was how human beings satisfied their sense of responsibility-- checking again even when they knew it was unnecessary.

Planter was so busy he hardly noticed that Ender was leaving the field. When Ender was inside the isolation shed at the townward end of the field, he stripped, put his clothes in the purification box, and then did the purification dance-- hands up high, arms rotating at the shoulder, turning in a circle, squatting and standing again, so that no part of his body was missed by the combination of radiation and gases that filled the shed. He breathed deeply through mouth and nose, then coughed-- as always-- because the gases were barely within the limits of human tolerance. Three full minutes with burning eyes and wheezing lungs, while waving his arms and squatting and standing: our ritual of obeisance to the almighty descolada. Thus we humiliate ourselves before the undisputed master of life on this planet.

Finally it was done; I've been roasted to a turn, he thought. As fresh air finally rushed into the shed, he took his clothes out of the box and put them on, still hot. As soon as he left the shed, it would be heated so that every surface was far over the proven heat tolerance of the descolada virus.

Nothing could live in that shed during this final step of purification. Next time someone came to the shed it would be absolutely sterile.

Yet Ender couldn't help but think that somehow the descolada virus would find a way through-- if not through the shed, then through the mild disruption barrier that surrounded the experimental crop area like an invisible fortress wall. Officially, no molecule larger than a hundred atoms could pass through that barrier without being broken up. Fences on either side of the barrier kept humans and piggies from straying into the fatal area-- but Ender had often imagined what it would be like for someone to pass through the disruption field. Every cell in the body would be killed instantly as the nucleic acids broke apart. Perhaps the body would hold together physically. But in Ender's imagination he always saw the body crumbling into dust on the other side of the barrier, the breeze carrying it away like smoke before it could hit the ground.

What made Ender most uncomfortable about the disruption barrier was that it was based on the same principle as the Molecular Disruption Device. Designed to be used against starships and missiles, it was Ender who turned it against the home planet of the buggers when he commanded the human warfleet three thousand years ago. And it was the same weapon that was now on its way from Starways Congress to Lusitania. According to Jane, Starways Congress had already attempted to send the order to use it. She had blocked that by cutting off ansible communications between the fleet and the rest of humanity, but there was no telling whether some overwrought ship's captain, panicked because his ansible wasn't working, might still use it on Lusitania when he got here.

It was unthinkable, but they had done it-- Congress had sent the order to destroy a world. To commit xenocide. Had Ender written the Hive Queen in vain? Had they already forgotten?

But it wasn't "already" to them. It was three thousand years to most people. And even though Ender had written the Life of Human, it wasn't believed widely enough yet. It hadn't been embraced by the people to such a degree that Congress wouldn't dare to act against the pequeninos.

Why had they decided to do it? Probably for exactly the same purpose as the xenobiologists' disruption barrier: to isolate a dangerous infection so it couldn't spread into the wider population. Congress was probably worried about containing the plague of planetary revolt. But when the fleet reached here, with or without orders, they might be as likely to use the Little Doctor as the final solution to the descolada problem: If there were no planet Lusitania, there would be no self-mutating half-intelligent virus itching for a chance to wipe out humanity and all its works.

It wasn't that long a walk from the experimental fields to the new xenobiology station. The path wound over a low hill, skirting the edge of the wood that provided father, mother, and living cemetery to this tribe of pequeninos, and then on to the north gate in the fence that surrounded the human colony.

The fence was a sore point with Ender. There was no reason for it to exist anymore, now that the policy of minimal contact between humans and pequeninos had broken down, and both species passed freely through the gate. When Ender arrived on Lusitania, the fence was charged with a field that caused any person entering it to suffer excruciating pain. During the struggle to win the right to communicate freely with the pequeninos, Ender's oldest stepson, Miro, was trapped in the field for

several minutes, causing irreversible brain damage. Yet Miro's experience was only the most painful and immediate expression of what the fence did to the souls of the humans enclosed within it. The psychobarrier had been shut off thirty years ago. In all that time, there had been no reason to have any barrier between humans and pequeninos-- yet the fence remained. The human colonists of Lusitania wanted it that way. They wanted the boundary between human and pequenino to remain unbreached.

That was why the xenobiology labs had been moved from their old location down by the river. If pequeninos were to take part in the research, the lab had to be close to the fence, and all the experimental fields outside it, so that humans and pequeninos wouldn't have occasion to confront each other unexpectedly.

When Miro left to meet Valentine, Ender had thought he would return to be astonished by the great changes in the world of Lusitania. He had thought that Miro would see humans and pequeninos living side by side, two species living in harmony. Instead, Miro would find the colony nearly unchanged. With rare exceptions, the human beings of Lusitania did not long for the close company of another species.

It was a good thing that Ender had helped the hive queen restore the race of buggers so far from Milagre. Ender had planned to help buggers and humans gradually come to know each other. Instead, he and Novinha and their family had been forced to keep the existence of the buggers on Lusitania a close-held secret. If the human colonists couldn't deal with the mammal-like pequeninos, it was certain that knowing about the insect-like buggers would provoke violent xenophobia almost at once.

I have too many secrets, thought Ender. For all these years I've been a speaker for the dead, uncovering secrets and helping people to live in the light of truth. Now I no longer tell anyone half of what I know, because if I told the whole truth there would be fear, hatred, brutality, murder, war.

Not far from the gate, but outside it, stood two fathertrees, the one named Rooter, the other named Human, planted so that from the gate it would seem that Rooter was on the left hand, Human on the right. Human was the pequenino whom Ender had been required to ritually kill with his own hands, in order to seal the treaty between humans and pequeninos. Then Human was reborn in cellulose and chlorophyll, finally a mature adult male, able to sire children.

At present Human still had enormous prestige, not only among the piggies of this tribe, but in many other tribes as well. Ender knew that he was alive; yet, seeing the tree, it was impossible for him to forget how Human had died.

Ender had no trouble dealing with Human as a person, for he had spoken with this fathertree many times. What he could not manage was to think of this tree as the same person he had known as the pequenino named Human. Ender might understand intellectually that it was will and memory that made up a person's identity, and that will and memory had passed intact from the pequenino into the fathertree. But intellectual understanding did not always bring visceral belief. Human was so alien now.

Yet still he was Human, and he was still Ender's friend; Ender touched the bark of the tree as he passed. Then, taking a few steps out of his way, Ender walked to the older fathertree named Rooter, and touched his bark also. He had never known Rooter as a pequenino-- Rooter had been killed by other hands, and his tree was already tall and well-spread before Ender arrived on Lusitania. There was no sense of loss to trouble him when Ender talked to Rooter.

At Rooter's base, among the roots, lay many sticks. Some had been brought here; some were shed from Rooter's own branches. They were talking sticks. Pequenininos used them to beat a rhythm on the trunk of a fathertree; the fathertree would shape and reshape the hollow areas inside his own trunk to change the sound, to make a slow kind of speech. Ender could beat the rhythm-- clumsily, but well enough to get words from the trees.

Today, though, Ender wanted no conversation. Let Planter tell the fathertrees that another experiment had failed. Ender would talk to Rooter and Human later. He would talk to the hive queen. He would talk to Jane. He would talk to everybody. And after all the talking, they would be no closer to solving any of the problems that darkened Lusitania's future. Because the solution to their problems now did not depend on talk. It depended on knowledge and action-- knowledge that only other people could learn, actions that only other people could perform. There was nothing that Ender could do himself to solve anything.

All he could do, all he had ever done since his final battle as a child warrior, was listen and talk. At other times, in other places, that had been enough. Not now. Many different kinds of destruction loomed over Lusitania, some of them set in motion by Ender himself, and yet not one of them could now be solved by any act or word or thought of Andrew Wiggin. Like all the other citizens of Lusitania, his future was in the hands of other people. The difference between him and them was that Ender knew all the danger, all the possible consequences of every failure or mistake. Who was more cursed, the one who died, unknowing until the very moment of his death, or the one who watched his destruction as it approached, step by step, for days and weeks and years?

Ender left the fathertrees and walked on down the well-beaten path toward the human colony. Through the gate, through the door of the xenobiology lab. The pequenino who served as Ela's most trusted assistant-- named Deaf, though he was definitely not hard of hearing-- led him at once to Novinha's office, where Ela, Novinha, Quara, and Grego were already waiting. Ender held up the pouch containing the fragment of potato plant.

Ela shook her head; Novinha sighed. But they didn't seem half as disappointed as Ender had expected. Clearly there was something else on their minds.

"I guess we expected that," said Novinha.

"We still had to try," said Ela.

"Why did we have to try?" demanded Grego. Novinha's youngest son-- and therefore Ender's stepson-- was in his mid-thirties now, a brilliant scientist in his own right; but he did seem to relish his role as devil's advocate in all the family's discussions, whether they dealt with xenobiology or the color to paint the walls. "All we're doing by introducing these new strains is teaching the

descolada how to get around every strategy we have for killing it. If we don't wipe it out soon, it'll wipe us out. And once the descolada is gone, we can grow regular old potatoes without any of this nonsense."

"We can't!" shouted Quara. Her vehemence surprised Ender. Quara was reluctant to speak out at the best of times; for her to speak so loudly now was out of character. "I tell you that the descolada is alive."

"And I tell you that a virus is a virus," said Grego.

It bothered Ender that Grego was calling for the extermination of the descolada-- it wasn't like him to so easily call for something that would destroy the pequeninos. Grego had practically grown up among the pequenino males-- he knew them better, spoke their language better, than anyone.

"Children, be quiet and let me explain this to Andrew," said Novinha. "We were discussing what to do if the potatoes failed, Ela and I, and she told me-- no, you explain it, Ela."

"It's an easy enough concept. Instead of trying to grow plants that inhibit the growth of the descolada virus, we need to go after the virus itself."

"Right," said Grego.

"Shut up," said Quara.

"As a kindness to us all, Grego, please do as your sister has so kindly asked," said Novinha.

Ela sighed and went on. "We can't just kill it because that would kill all the other native life on Lusitania. So what I propose is trying to develop a new strain of descolada that continues to act as the present virus acts in the reproductive cycles of all the Lusitanian life forms, but without the ability to adapt to new species."

"You can eliminate that part of the virus?" asked Ender. "You can find it?"

"Not likely. But I think I can find all the parts of the virus that are active in the piggies and in all the other plant-animal pairs, keep those, and discard everything else. Then we'd add a rudimentary reproductive ability and set up some receptors so it'll respond properly to the appropriate changes in the host bodies, put the whole thing in a little organelle, and there we have it-- a substitute for the descolada so that the pequeninos and all the other native species are safe, while we can live without worry."

"Then you'll spray all the original descolada virus to wipe them out?" asked Ender. "What if there's already a resistant strain?"

"No, we don't spray them, because spraying wouldn't wipe out the viruses that are already incorporated into the bodies of every Lusitanian creature. This is the really tricky part--"

"As if the rest were easy," said Novinha, "making a new organelle out of nothing--"

"We can't just inject these organelles into a few piggies or even into all of them, because we'd also have to inject them into every other native animal and tree and blade of grass."

"Can't be done," said Ender.

"So we have to develop a mechanism to deliver the organelles universally, and at the same time destroy the old descolada viruses once and for all."

"Xenocide," said Quara.

"That's the argument," said Ela. "Quara says the descolada is sentient."

Ender looked at his youngest stepdaughter. "A sentient molecule?"

"They have language, Andrew."

"When did this happen?" asked Ender. He was trying to imagine how a genetic molecule-- even one as long and complex as the descolada virus-- could possibly speak.

"I've suspected it for a long time. I wasn't going to say anything until I was sure, but--"

"Which means she isn't sure," said Grego triumphantly.

"But I'm almost sure now, and you can't go destroying a whole species until we know."

"How do they speak?" asked Ender.

"Not like us, of course," said Quara. "They pass information back and forth to each other at a molecular level. I first noticed it as I was working on the question of how the new resistant strains of the descolada spread so quickly and replaced all the old viruses in such a short time. I couldn't solve that problem because I was asking the wrong question. They don't replace the old ones. They simply pass messages."

"They throw darts," said Grego.

"That was my own word for it," said Quara. "I didn't understand that it was speech."

"Because it wasn't speech," said Grego.

"That was five years ago," said Ender. "You said the darts they send out carry the needed genes and then all the viruses that receive the darts revise their own structure to include the new gene. That's hardly language."

"But that isn't the only time they send darts," said Quara. "Those messenger molecules are moving in and out all the time, and most of the time they aren't incorporated into the body at all. They get read by several parts of the descolada and then they're passed on to another one."

"This is language?" asked Grego.

"Not yet," said Quara. "But sometimes after a virus reads one of these darts, it makes a new dart and sends it out. Here's the part that tells me it's a language: The front part of the new dart always begins with a molecular sequence similar to the back tag of the dart that it's answering. It holds the thread of the conversation together."

"Conversation," said Grego scornfully.

"Be quiet or die," said Ela. Even after all these years, Ender realized, Ela's voice still had the power to curb Grego's snottiness-- sometimes, at least.

"I've tracked some of these conversations for as many as a hundred statements and answers. Most of them die out much sooner than that. A few of them are incorporated into the main body of the virus. But here's the most interesting thing-- it's completely voluntary. Sometimes one virus will pick up that dart and keep it, while most of the others don't. Sometimes most of the viruses will keep a particular dart. But the area where they incorporate these message darts is exactly that area that has been hardest to map. It's hardest to map because it isn't part of their structure, it's their memory, and individuals are all different from each other. They also tend to weed out a few memory fragments when they've taken on too many darts."

"This is all fascinating," said Grego, "but it isn't science. There are plenty of explanations for these darts and the random bonding and shedding--"

"Not random!" said Quara.

"None of this is language," said Grego.

Ender ignored the argument, because Jane was whispering in his ear through the jewel-like transceiver he wore there. She spoke to him more rarely now than in years past. He listened carefully, taking nothing for granted. "She's on to something," Jane said. "I've looked at her research and there's something going on here that doesn't happen with any other subcellular creature. I've run many different analyses on the data, and the more I simulate and test this particular behavior of the descolada, the less it looks like genetic coding and the more it looks like language. At the moment we can't rule out the possibility that it is voluntary."

When Ender turned his attention back to the argument, Grego was speaking. "Why do we have to turn everything we haven't figured out yet into some kind of mystical experience?" Grego closed his eyes and intoned, "I have found new life! I have found new life!"

"Stop it!" shouted Quara.

"This is getting out of hand," said Novinha. "Grego, try to keep this at the level of rational discussion."

"It's hard to, when the whole thing is so irrational. At, agora quem ja imaginou microbiologista que se torna namorada de uma mol,cula?" Who ever heard of a microbiologist getting a crush on a molecule?

"Enough!" said Novinha sharply. "Quara is as much a scientist as you are, and--"

"She was," muttered Grego.

"And-- if you'll kindly shut up long enough to hear me out-- she has a right to be heard." Novinha was quite angry now, but, as usual, Grego seemed unimpressed. "You should know by now, Grego, that it's often the ideas that sound most absurd and counterintuitive at first that later cause fundamental shifts in the way we see the world."

"Do you really think this is one of those basic discoveries?" asked Grego, looking them in the eye, each in turn. "A talking virus? Se Quara sabe tanto, porque ela nao diz o que e que aqueles bichos dizem?" If she knows so much about it, why doesn't she tell us what these little beasts are saying? It was a sign that the discussion was getting out of hand, that he broke into Portuguese instead of speaking in Stark, the language of science-- and diplomacy.

"Does it matter?" asked Ender.

"Matter!" said Quara.

Ela looked at Ender with consternation. "It's only the difference between curing a dangerous disease and destroying an entire sentient species. I think it matters."

"I meant," said Ender patiently, "does it matter whether we know what they're saying."

"No," said Quara. "We'll probably never understand their language, but that doesn't change the fact that they're sentient. What do viruses and human beings have to say to each other, anyway?"

"How about, 'Please stop trying to kill us'?" said Grego. "If you can figure out how to say that in virus language, then this might be useful."

"But Grego," said Quara, with mock sweetness, "do we say that to them, or do they say that to us?"

"We don't have to decide today," said Ender. "We can afford to wait awhile."

"How do you know?" said Grego. "How do you know that tomorrow afternoon we won't all wake up itching and hurting and puking and burning up with fever and finally dying because overnight the descolada virus figured out how to wipe us out once and for all? It's us or them."

"I think Grego just showed us why we have to wait," said Ender. "Did you hear how he talked about the descolada? It figures out how to wipe us out. Even he thinks the descolada has a will and makes decisions."

"That's just a figure of speech," said Grego.

"We've all been talking that way," said Ender. "And thinking that way, too. Because we all feel it-- that we're at war with the descolada. That it's more than just fighting off a disease-- it's like we have an intelligent, resourceful enemy who keeps countering all our moves. In all the history of medical research, no one has ever fought a disease that had so many ways to defeat the strategies used against it."

"Only because nobody's been fighting a germ with such an oversized and complex genetic molecule," said Grego.

"Exactly," said Ender. "This is a one-of-a-kind virus, and so it may have abilities we've never imagined in any species less structurally complex than a vertebrate."

For a moment Ender's words hung in the air, answered by silence; for a moment, Ender imagined that he might have served a useful function in this meeting after all, that as a mere talker he might have won some kind of agreement.

Grego soon disabused him of this idea. "Even if Quara's right, even if she's dead on and the descolada viruses all have doctorates of philosophy and keep publishing dissertations on screwing-up-humans-till-they're-dead, what then? Do we all roll over and play dead because the virus that's trying to kill us all is so damn smart?"

Novinha answered calmly. "I think Quara needs to continue with her research-- and we need to give her more resources to do it-- while Ela continues with hers."

It was Quara who objected this time. "Why should I bother trying to understand them if the rest of you are still working on ways to kill them?"

"That's a good question, Quara," said Novinha. "On the other hand, why should you bother trying to understand them if they suddenly figure out a way to get past all our chemical barriers and kill us all?"

"Us or them," muttered Grego.

Novinha had made a good decision, Ender knew-- keep both lines of research open, and decide later when they knew more. In the meantime, Quara and Grego were both missing the point, both assuming that everything hinged on whether or not the descolada was sentient. "Even if they're sentient," said Ender, "that doesn't mean they're sacrosanct. It all depends whether they're raman or varelse. If they're raman-- if we can understand them and they can understand us well enough to work out a way of living together-- then fine. We'll be safe, they'll be safe."

"The great peacemaker plans to sign a treaty with a molecule?" asked Grego.

Ender ignored his mocking tone. "On the other hand, if they're trying to destroy us, and we can't find a way to communicate with them, then they're varelse-- sentient aliens, but implacably hostile and dangerous. Varelse are aliens we can't live with. Varelse are aliens with whom we are naturally and permanently engaged in a war to the death, and at that time our only moral choice is to do all that's necessary to win."

"Right," said Grego.

Despite her brother's triumphant tone, Quara had listened to Ender's words, weighed them, and now gave a tentative nod. "As long as we don't start from the assumption that they're varelse," said Quara.

"And even then, maybe there's a middle way," said Ender. "Maybe Ela can find a way to replace all the descolada viruses without destroying this memory-and-language thing."

"No!" said Quara, once again fervent. "You can't-- you don't even have the right to leave them their memories and take away their ability to adapt. That would be like them giving all of us frontal lobotomies. If it's war, then it's war. Kill them, but don't leave them their memories while stealing their will."

"It doesn't matter," said Ela. "It can't be done. As it is, I think I've set myself an impossible task. Operating on the descolada isn't easy. Not like examining and operating on an animal. How do I anesthetize the molecule so that it doesn't heal itself while I'm halfway through the amputation? Maybe the descolada isn't much on physics, but it's a hell of a lot better than I am at molecular surgery."

"So far," said Ender.

"So far we don't know anything," said Grego. "Except that the descolada is trying as hard as it can to kill us all, while we're still trying to figure out whether we ought to fight back. I'll sit tight for a while longer, but not forever. "

"What about the piggies?" asked Quara. "Don't they have a right to vote on whether we transform the molecule that not only allows them to reproduce, but probably created them as a sentient species in the first place?"

"This thing is trying to kill us," said Ender. "As long as the solution Ela comes up with can wipe out the virus without interfering with the reproductive cycle of the piggies, then I don't think they have any right to object."

"Maybe they'd feel different about that."

"Then maybe they'd better not find out what we're doing," said Grego.

"We don't tell people-- human or pequenino-- about the research we're doing here," said Novinha sharply. "It could cause terrible misunderstandings that could lead to violence and death."

"So we humans are the judges of all other creatures," said Quara.

"No, Quara. We scientists are gathering information," said Novinha.

"Until we've gathered enough, nobody can judge anything. So the secrecy rule goes for everybody here. Quara and Grego both. You tell no one until I say so, and I won't say so until we know more."

"Until you say so," asked Grego impudently, "or until the Speaker for the Dead says so?"

"I'm the head xenobiologist," said Novinha. "The decision on when we know enough is mine alone. Is that understood?"

She waited for everyone there to assent. They all did.

Novinha stood up. The meeting was over. Quara and Grego left almost immediately; Novinha gave Ender a kiss on the cheek and then ushered him and Ela out of her office.

Ender lingered in the lab to talk to Ela. "Is there a way to spread your replacement virus throughout the entire population of every native species on Lusitania?"

"I don't know," said Ela. "That's less of a problem than how to get it to every cell of an individual organism fast enough that the descolada can't adapt or escape. I'll have to create some kind of carrier virus, and I'll probably have to model it partly on the descolada itself-- the descolada is the only parasite I've seen that invades a host as quickly and thoroughly as I need the carrier virus to do it. Ironic-- I'll learn how to replace the descolada by stealing techniques from the virus itself."

"It's not ironic," said Ender, "it's the way the world works. Someone once told me that the only teacher who's worth anything to you is your enemy."

"Then Quara and Grego must be giving each other advanced degrees," said Ela.

"Their argument is healthy," said Ender. "It forces us to weigh every aspect of what we're doing."

"It'll stop being healthy if one of them decides to bring it up outside the family," said Ela.

"This family doesn't tell its business to strangers," said Ender. "I of all people should know that."

"On the contrary, Ender. You of all people should know how eager we are to talk to a stranger-- when we think our need is great enough to justify it."

Ender had to admit that she was right. Getting Quara and Grego, Miro and Quim and Olhado to trust him enough to speak to him, that had been hard when Ender first came to Lusitania. But Ela had spoken to him from the start, and so had all of Novinha's other children. So, in the end, had

Novinha herself. The family was intensely loyal, but they were also strong-willed and opinionated and there wasn't a one of them who didn't trust his own judgment above anyone else's. Grego or Quara, either one of them, might well decide that telling somebody else was in the best interests of Lusitania or humanity or science, and there would go the rule of secrecy.

Just the way the rule of noninterference with the piggies had been broken before Ender ever got here.

How nice, thought Ender. One more possible source of disaster that is completely out of my power to control.

Leaving the lab, Ender wished, as he had many times before, that Valentine were here. She was the one who was good at sorting out ethical dilemmas. She'd be here soon-- but soon enough? Ender understood and mostly agreed with the viewpoints put forward by Quara and Grego both. What stung most was the need for such secrecy that Ender couldn't even speak to the pequeninos, not even Human himself, about a decision that would affect them as much as it would affect any colonist from Earth. And yet Novinha was right. To bring the matter out into the open now, before they even knew what was possible-- that would lead to confusion at best, anarchy and bloodshed at worst. The pequeninos were peaceful now-- but the species' history was bloody with war.

As Ender emerged from the gate, heading back toward the experimental fields, he saw Quara standing beside the fathertree Human, sticks in her hand, engaged in conversation. She hadn't actually beat on his trunk, or Ender would have heard it. So she must want privacy. That was all right. Ender would take a longer way around, so he wouldn't come close enough to overhear.

But when she saw Ender looking her way, Quara immediately ended her conversation with Human and took off at a brisk walk down the path toward the gate. Of course this led her right by Ender.

"Telling secrets?" asked Ender. He had meant his remark as mere banter. Only when the words came out of his mouth and Quara got such a furtive look on her face did Ender realize exactly what secret it might have been that Quara had been telling. And her words confirmed his suspicion.

"Mother's idea of fairness isn't always mine," said Quara. "Neither is yours, for that matter."

He had known she might do this, but it never occurred to him she would do it so quickly after promising not to. "But is fairness always the most important consideration?" asked Ender.

"It is to me," said Quara.

She tried to turn away and go on through the gate, but Ender caught her arm.

"Let go of me."

"Telling Human is one thing," said Ender. "He's very wise. But don't tell anybody else. Some of the pequeninos, some of the males, they can be pretty aggressive if they think they have reason."

"They're not just males," said Quara. "They call themselves husbands. Maybe we should call them men." She smiled at Ender in triumph. "You're not half so open-minded as you like to think." Then she brushed past him and went on through the gate into Milagre.

Ender walked up to Human and stood before him. "What did she tell you, Human? Did she tell you that I'll die before I let anyone wipe out the descolada, if doing so would hurt you and your people?"

Of course Human had no immediate answer for him, for Ender had no intention of starting to beat on his trunk with the talking sticks used to produce Father Tongue; if he did, the pequenino males would hear and come running. There was no private speech between pequeninos and fathertrees. If a fathertree wanted privacy, he could always talk silently with the other fathertrees-- they spoke to each other mind to mind, the way the hive queen spoke to the buggers that served as her eyes and ears and hands and feet. If only I were part of that communications network, thought Ender. Instantaneous speech consisting of pure thought, projected anywhere in the universe.

Still, he had to say something to help counteract the sort of thing he knew Quara would have said. "Human, we're doing all we can to save human beings and pequeninos, both. We'll even try to save the descolada virus, if we can. Ela and Novinha are very good at what they do. So are Grego and Quara, for that matter. But for now, please trust us and say nothing to anyone else. Please. If humans and pequeninos come to understand the danger we're in before we're ready to take steps to contain it, the results would be violent and terrible."

There was nothing else to say. Ender went back to the experimental fields. Before nightfall, he and Planter completed the measurements, then burned and flashed the entire field. No large molecules survived inside the disruption barrier. They had done all they could to ensure that whatever the descolada might have learned from this field was forgotten.

What they could never do was get rid of the viruses they carried within their own cells, human and pequenino alike. What if Quara was right? What if the descolada inside the barrier, before it died, managed to "tell" the viruses that Planter and Ender carried inside them about what had been learned from this new strain of potato? About the defenses that Ela and Novinha had tried to build into it? About the ways this virus had found to defeat their tactics?

If the descolada were truly intelligent, with a language to spread information and pass behaviors from one individual to many others, then how could Ender-- how could any of them-- hope to be victorious in the end? In the long run, it might well be that the descolada was the most adaptable species, the one most capable of subduing worlds and eliminating rivals, stronger than humans or piggies or buggers or any other living creatures on any settled worlds. That was the thought that Ender took to bed with him that night, the thought that preoccupied him even as he made love with Novinha, so that she felt the need to comfort him as if he, not she, were the one burdened with the cares of a world. He tried to apologize but soon realized the futility of it. Why add to her worries by telling of his own?

Human listened to Ender's words, but he couldn't agree with what Ender asked of him. Silence? Not when the humans were creating new viruses that might well transform the life cycle of the pequeninos. Oh, Human wouldn't tell the immature males and females. But he could-- and would-- tell all the other fathertrees throughout Lusitania. They had a right to know what was going on, and then decide together what, if anything, to do.

Before nightfall, every fathertree in every wood knew all that Human knew: of the human plans, and of his estimation of how much they could be trusted. Most agreed with him-- we'll let the human beings proceed for now. But in the meantime we'll watch carefully, and prepare for a time that might come, even though we hope it won't, when humans and pequeninos go to war against each other. We cannot fight and hope to win-- but maybe, before they slaughter us, we can find a way for some of us to flee.

So, before dawn, they had made plans and arrangements with the hive queen, the only nonhuman source of high technology on Lusitania. By the next nightfall, the work of building a starship to leave Lusitania had already begun.

Chapter 7 -- SECRET MAID

<Is it true that in the old days, when you sent out your starships to settle many worlds, you could always talk to each other as if you stood in the same forest?>

<We assume that it will be the same for you. When the new fathertrees have grown, they'll be present with you. The phylotic connections are unaffected by distance.>

<But will we be connected? We'll be sending no trees on the voyage. Only brothers, a few wives, and a hundred little mothers to give birth to new generations. The voyage will last decades at least. As soon as they arrive, the best of the brothers will be sent on to the third life, but it will take at least a year before the first of the fathertrees grows old enough to sire young ones. How will the first father on that new world know how to speak to us? How can we greet him, when we don't know where he is?>

Sweat ran down Qing-jao's face. Bent over as she was, the drops trickled along her cheeks, under her eyes, and down to the tip of her nose. From there her sweat dropped into the muddy water of the rice paddy, or onto the new rice plants that rose only slightly above the water's surface.

"Why don't you wipe your face, holy one?"

Qing-jao looked up to see who was near enough to speak to her. Usually the others on her righteous labor crew did not work close by-- it made them too nervous, being with one of the godspoken.

It was a girl, younger than Qing-jao, perhaps fourteen, boyish in the body, with her hair cropped very short. She was looking at Qing-jao with frank curiosity. There was an openness about her, an utter lack of shyness, that Qing-jao found strange and a little displeasing. Her first thought was to ignore the girl.

But to ignore her would be arrogant; it would be the same as saying, Because I am godspoken, I do not need to answer when I am spoken to. No one would ever suppose that the reason she didn't answer was because she was so preoccupied with the impossible task she had been given by the great Han Fei-tzu that it was almost painful to think of anything else.

So she answered-- but with a question. "Why should I wipe my face?"

"Doesn't it tickle? The sweat, dripping down? Doesn't it get in your eyes and sting?"

Qing-jao lowered her face to her work for a few moments, and this time deliberately noticed how it felt. It did tickle, and the sweat in her eyes did sting. In fact it was quite uncomfortable and annoying. Carefully, Qing-jao unbent herself to stand straight-- and now she noticed the pain of it, the way her back protested against the change of posture. "Yes," she said to the girl. "It tickles and stings."

"Then wipe it," the girl said. "With your sleeve."

Qing-jao looked at her sleeve. It was already soaked with the sweat of her arms. "Does wiping help?" she asked.

Now it was the girl's turn to discover something she hadn't thought about. For a moment she looked thoughtful; then she wiped her forehead with her sleeve.

She grinned. "No, holy one. It doesn't help a bit."

Qing-jao nodded gravely and bent down again to her work. Only now the tickling of the sweat, the stinging of her eyes, the pain in her back, it all bothered her very much. Her discomfort took her mind off her thoughts, instead of the other way around. This girl, whoever she was, had just added to her misery by pointing it out-- and yet, ironically, by making Qing-jao aware of the misery of her body, she had freed her from the hammering of the questions in her mind.

Qing-jao began to laugh.

"Are you laughing at me, holy one?" asked the girl.

"I'm thanking you in my own way," said Qing-jao. "You've lifted a great burden from my heart, even if only for a moment."

"You're laughing at me for telling you to wipe your forehead even though it doesn't help."

"I say that is not why I'm laughing," said Qing-jao. She stood again and looked the girl in the eye. "I don't lie."

The girl looked abashed-- but not half so much as she should have. When the godspoken used the tone of voice Qing-jao had just used, others immediately bowed and showed respect. But this girl only listened, sized up Qingjao's words, and then nodded.

There was only one conclusion Qing-jao could reach. "Are you also godspoken?" she asked.

The girl's eyes went wide. "Me?" she said. "My parents are both very low people. My father spreads manure in the fields and my mother washes up in a restaurant."

Of course that was no answer at all. Though the gods most often chose the children of the godspoken, they had been known to speak to some whose parents had never heard the voice of the gods. Yet it was a common belief that if your parents were of very low status, the gods would have no interest in you, and in fact it was very rare for the gods to speak to those whose parents were not well educated.

"What's your name?" asked Qing-jao.

"Si Wang-mu," said the girl.

Qing-jao gasped and covered her mouth, to forbid herself from laughing. But Wang-mu did not look angry-- she only grimaced and looked impatient.

"I'm sorry," said Qing-jao, when she could speak. "But that is the name of--"

"The Royal Mother of the West," said Wang-mu. "Can I help it that my parents chose such a name for me?"

"It's a noble name," said Qing-jao. "My ancestor-of-the-heart was a great woman, but she was only mortal, a poet. Yours is one of the oldest of the gods."

"What good is that?" asked Wang-mu. "My parents were too presumptuous, naming me for such a distinguished god. That's why the gods will never speak to me."

It made Qing-jao sad, to hear Wang-mu speak with such bitterness. If only she knew how eagerly Qing-jao would trade places with her. To be free of the voice of the gods! Never to have to bow to the floor and trace the grain of the wood, never to wash her hands except when they got dirty...

Yet Qing-jao couldn't explain this to the girl. How could she understand? To Wang-mu, the godspoken were the privileged elite, infinitely wise and unapproachable. It would sound like a lie if Qing-jao explained that the burdens of the godspoken were far greater than the rewards.

Except that to Wang-mu, the godspoken had not been unapproachable-- she had spoken to Qing-jao, hadn't she? So Qing-jao decided to say what was in her heart after all. "Si Wang-mu, I would gladly live the rest of my life blind, if only I could be free of the voice of the gods."

Wang-mu's mouth opened in shock, her eyes widened.

It had been a mistake to speak. Qing-jao regretted it at once. "I was joking," said Qing-jao.

"No," said Wang-mu. "Now you're lying. Then you were telling the truth." She came closer, slogging carelessly through the paddy, trampling rice plants as she came. "All my life I've seen the godspoken borne to the temple in their sedan chairs, wearing their bright silks, all people bowing to them, every computer open to them. When they speak their language is music. Who wouldn't want to be such a one?"

Qing-jao could not answer openly, could not say: Every day the gods humiliate me and make me do stupid, meaningless tasks to purify myself, and the next day it starts again. "You won't believe me, Wang-mu, but this life, out here in the fields, this is better."

"No!" cried Wang-mu. "You have been taught everything. You know all that there is to know! You can speak many languages, you can read every kind of word, you can think of thoughts that are as far above mine as my thoughts are above the thoughts of a snail."

"You speak very clearly and well," said Qing-jao. "You must have been to school."

"School!" said Wang-mu scornfully. "What do they care about school for children like me? We learned to read, but only enough to read prayers and street signs. We learned our numbers, but only enough to do the shopping. We memorized sayings of the wise, but only the ones that taught us to be content with our place in life and obey those who are wiser than we are."

Qing-jao hadn't known that schools could be like that. She thought that children in school learned the same things that she had learned from her tutors. But she saw at once that Si Wang-mu must be telling the truth-- one teacher with thirty students couldn't possibly teach all the things that Qing-jao had learned as one student with many teachers.

"My parents are very low," said Wang-mu. "Why should they waste time teaching me more than a servant needs to know? Because that's my highest hope in life, to be washed very clean and become a servant in a rich man's house. They were very careful to teach me how to clean a floor."

Qing-jao thought of the hours she had spent on the floors of her house, tracing woodgrains from wall to wall. It had neer once occurred to her how much work it was for the servants to keep the floors so clean and polished that Qing-jao's gowns never got visibly dirty, despite all her crawling.

"I know something about floors," said Qing-jao.

"You know something about everything," said Wang-mu bitterly. "So don't tell me how hard it is to be godspoken. The gods have never given a thought to me, and I tell you that is worse!"

"Why weren't you afraid to speak to me?" asked Qing-jao.

"I decided not to be afraid of anything," said Wang-mu. "What could you do to me that's worse than my life will already be anyway?"

I could make you wash your hands until they bleed every day of your life.

But then something turned around in Qing-jao's mind, and she saw that this girl might not think that was worse. Perhaps Wang-mu would gladly wash her hands until there was nothing left but a bloody fringe of tattered skin on the stumps of her wrists, if only she could learn all that Qing-jao knew. Qing-jao had felt so oppressed by the impossibility of the task her father had set for her, yet it was a task that, succeed or fail, would change history. Wang-mu would live her whole life and never be set a single task that would not need to be done again the next day; all of Wang-mu's life would be spent doing work that would only be noticed or spoken of if she did it badly. Wasn't the work of a servant almost as fruitless, in the end, as the rituals of purification?

"The life of a servant must be hard," said Qing-jao. "I'm glad for your sake that you haven't been hired out yet."

"My parents are waiting in the hope that I'll be pretty when I become a woman. Then they'll get a better hiring bonus for putting me out for service. Perhaps a rich man's bodyservant will want me for his wife; perhaps a rich lady will want me for her secret maid."

"You're already pretty," said Qing-jao.

Wang-mu shrugged. "My friend Fan-liu is in service, and she says that the ugly ones work harder, but the men of the house leave them alone. Ugly ones are free to think their own thoughts. They don't keep having to say pretty things to their ladies."

Qing-jao thought of the servants in her father's house. She knew her father would never bother any of the serving women. And nobody had to say pretty things to her. "It's different in my house," she said.

"But I don't serve in your house," said Wang-mu.

Now, suddenly, the whole picture became clear. Wang-mu had not spoken to her by impulse. Wang-mu had spoken to her in hopes of being offered a place as a servant in the house of a godspoken lady. For all she knew, the gossip in town was all about the young godspoken lady Han Qing-jao who was through with her tutors and had embarked on her first adult task-- and how she still had neither a husband nor a secret maid. So Wang-mu had probably wangled her way onto the same righteous labor crew as Qing-jao in order to have exactly this conversation.

For a moment Qing-jao was angry. Then she thought: Why shouldn't Wang-mu do exactly as she has done? The worst that could happen to her is that I'd guess what she was doing, become angry, and not hire her. Then she'd be no worse off than before. And if I didn't guess what she was doing, and so started to like her and hired her, she'd be secret maid to a godspoken lady. If I were in her place, wouldn't I do the same?

"Do you think you can fool me?" asked Qing-jao. "Do you think I don't know that you want me to hire you for my servant?"

Wang-mu looked flustered, angry, afraid. Wisely, though, she said nothing.

"Why don't you answer me with anger?" asked Qing-jao. "Why don't you deny that you spoke to me only so I'd hire you?"

"Because it's true," said Wang-mu. "I'll leave you alone now."

That was what Qing-jao hoped to hear-- an honest answer. She had no intention of letting Wang-mu go. "How much of what you told me is true? About wanting a good education? Wanting to do something better in your life than serving work?"

"All of it," Wang-mu said, and there was passion in her voice. "But what is that to you? You bear the terrible burden of the voice of the gods."

Wang-mu spoke her last sentence with such contemptuous sarcasm that Qing-jao almost laughed aloud; but she contained her laughter. There was no reason to make Wang-mu any angrier than she already was. "Si Wang-mu, daughter-of-the-heart to the Royal Mother of the West, I will hire you as my secret maid, but only if you agree to the following conditions. First, you will let me be your teacher, and study all the lessons I assign to you. Second, you will always speak to me as an equal and never bow to me or call me 'holy one.' And third--"

"How could I do that?" said Wang-mu. "If I don't treat you with respect others will say I'm unworthy. They'd punish me when you weren't looking. It would disgrace us both."

"Of course you'll use respect when others can see us," said Qing-jao. "But when we're alone, just you and me, we'll treat each other as equals or I'll send you away."

"The third condition?"

"You'll never tell another soul a single word I say to you."

Wang-mu's face showed her anger plainly. "A secret maid never tells. Barriers are placed in our minds."

"The barriers help you remember not to tell," said Qing-jao. "But if you want to tell, you can get around them. And there are those who will try to persuade you to tell." Qing-jao thought of her father's career, of all the secrets of Congress that he held in his head. He told no one; he had no one

he could speak to except, sometimes, Qing-jao. If Wang-mu turned out to be trustworthy, Qing-jao would have someone. She would never be as lonely as her father was. "Don't you understand me?" Qing-jao asked. "Others will think I'm hiring you as a secret maid. But you and I will know that you're really coming to be my student, and I'm really bringing you to be my friend."

Wang-mu looked at her in wonder. "Why would you do this, when the gods have already told you how I bribed the foreman to let me be on your crew and not to interrupt us while I talked to you?"

The gods had told her no such thing, of course, but Qing-jao only smiled. "Why doesn't it occur to you that maybe the gods want us to be friends?"

Abashed, Wang-mu clasped her hands together and laughed nervously; Qing-jao took the girl's hands in hers and found that Wang-mu was trembling. So she wasn't as bold as she seemed.

Wang-mu looked down at their hands, and Qing-jao followed her gaze. They were covered with dirt and muck, dried on now because they had been standing so long, their hands out of the water. "We're so dirty," said Wang-mu.

Qing-jao had long since learned to disregard the dirtiness of righteous labor, for which no penance was required. "My hands have been much filthier than this," said Qing-jao. "Come with me when our righteous labor is finished. I will tell our plan to my father, and he will decide if you can be my secret maid."

Wang-mu's expression soured. Qing-jao was glad that her face was so easy to read. "What's wrong?" said Qing-jao.

"Fathers always decide everything," said Wang-mu.

Qing-jao nodded, wondering why Wang-mu would bother to say something so obvious. "That's the beginning of wisdom," said Qing-jao. "Besides, my mother is dead."

Righteous labor always ended early in the afternoon. Officially this was to give people who lived far from the fields time to return to their homes. Actually, though, it was in recognition of the custom of making a party at the end of righteous labor. Because they had worked right through the afternoon nap, many people felt giddy after righteous labor, as if they had stayed up all night. Others felt sluggish and surly. Either one was an excuse for drinking and dining with friends and then collapsing into bed hours early to make up for the lost sleep and the hard labor of the day.

Qing-jao was of the kind who felt out of sorts; Wang-mu was obviously of the giddy kind. Or perhaps it was simply the fact that the Lusitania Fleet weighed heavily on Qing-jao's mind, while Wang-mu had just been accepted as secret maid by a godspoken girl. Qing-jao led Wang-mu through the process of applying for employment with the House of Han-- washing, fingerprinting, the security check-- until she finally despaired of listening to Wang-mu's bubbling voice another moment and withdrew.

As she walked up the stairs to her room, Qing-jao could hear Wang-mu asking fearfully, "Have I made my new mistress angry?" And Ju Kung-mei, the guardian of the house, answered, "The godspoken answer to other voices than yours, little one." It was a kind answer. Qing-jao often admired the gentleness and wisdom of those her father had hired into his house. She wondered if she had chosen as wisely in her first hiring.

No sooner did she think of this worry than she knew she had been wicked to make such a decision so quickly, and without consulting with her father beforehand. Wang-mu would be found to be hopelessly unsuitable, and Father would rebuke her for having acted foolishly.

Imagining Father's rebuke was enough to bring the immediate reproof of the gods. Qing-jao felt unclean. She rushed to her room and closed the door. It was bitterly ironic that she could think over and over again how hateful it was to perform the rituals the gods demanded, how empty their worship was-- but let her think a disloyal thought about Father or Starways Congress, and she had to do penance at once.

Usually she would spend a half hour, an hour, perhaps longer, resisting the need for penance, enduring her own filthiness. Today, though, she hungered for the ritual of purification. In its own way, the ritual made sense, it had a structure, a beginning and end, rules to follow. Not at all like the problem of the Lusitania Fleet.

On her knees, she deliberately chose the narrowest, faintest grain in the palest board she could see. This would be a hard penance; perhaps then the gods would judge her clean enough that they could show her the solution to the problem Father had set for her. It took her half an hour to make her way across the room, for she kept losing the grain and had to start over each time.

At the end, exhausted from righteous labor and eyesore from line-tracing, she wanted desperately to sleep; instead, she sat on the floor before her terminal and called up the summary of her work so far. After examining and eliminating all the useless absurdities that had cropped up during the investigation, Qing-jao had come up with three broad categories of possibility. First, that the disappearance was caused by some natural event that, at lightspeed, had simply not become visible yet to the watching astronomers. Second, that the loss of ansible communications was the result of either sabotage or a command decision in the fleet. Third, that the loss of ansible communications was caused by some planetside conspiracy. The first category was virtually eliminated by the way the fleet was traveling. The starships were simply not close enough together for any known natural phenomenon to destroy them all at once. The fleet had not rendezvoused before setting out-- the ansible made such things a waste of time. Instead, all the ships were moving toward Lusitania from wherever they happened to be when they were assigned to the fleet. Even now, with only a year or so of travel left before all were in orbit around Lusitania's star, they were so far apart that no conceivable natural event could possibly have affected them all at once.

The second category was made almost as unlikely by the fact that the entire fleet had disappeared, without exception. Could any human plan possibly work with such perfect efficiency-- and without leaving any evidence of advance planning in any of the databases or personality profiles or communications logs that were maintained in planetside computers? Nor was there the slightest evidence that anyone had altered or hidden any data, or masked any communications to avoid

leaving behind a trail of evidence. If it was a fleetside plan, there was neither evidence nor concealment nor error.

The same lack of evidence made the idea of a planetside conspiracy even more unlikely. And making all these possibilities still less possible was the sheer simultaneity of it. As near as anyone could determine, every single ship had broken off ansible communications at almost exactly the same time. There might have been a time lag of seconds, perhaps even minutes-- but never as long as five minutes, never a gap long enough for someone on one ship to remark about the disappearance of another.

The summary was elegant in its simplicity. There was nothing left. The evidence was as complete as it would ever be, and it made every conceivable explanation inconceivable.

Why would Father do this to me? she wondered, not for the first time.

Immediately-- as usual-- she felt unclean even for asking such a question, for doubting her father's perfect correctness in all his decisions. She needed to wash, just a little, to take away the impurity of her doubt.

But she didn't wash. Instead she let the voice of the gods swell inside her, let their command grow more urgent. This time she wasn't resisting out of a righteous desire to grow more disciplined. This time she was deliberately trying to attract as much attention as possible from the gods. Only when she was panting with the need to cleanse herself, only when she shuddered at the most casual touch of her own flesh-- a hand brushing a knee-- only then did she voice her question.

"You did it, didn't you?" she said to the gods. "What no human being could have done, you must have done. You reached out and cut off the Lusitania Fleet."

The answer came, not in words, but in the ever-increasing need for purification.

"But Congress and the admiralty are not of the Way. They can't imagine the golden door into the City of the Jade Mountain in the West. If Father says to them, 'The gods stole your fleet to punish you for wickedness,' they'll only despise him. If they despise him, our greatest living statesman, they'll despise us as well. And if Path is shamed because of Father, it will destroy him. Is that why you did this thing?"

She began to weep. "I won't let you destroy my father. I'll find another way. I'll find an answer that will satisfy them. I defy you!"

No sooner had she said the words than the gods sent her the most overpowering sense of her own abominable filthiness she had ever felt. It was so strong it took her breath away, and she fell forward, clutching at her terminal. She tried to speak, to plead for forgiveness, but she gagged instead, swallowed hard to keep from retching. She felt as though her hands were spreading slime on everything she touched; as she struggled to her feet, her gown clung across her flesh as if it were covered with thick black grease.

But she did not wash. Nor did she fall to the ground and trace lines in the wood. Instead she staggered to the door, meaning to go downstairs to her father's room.

The doorway caught her, though. Not physically-- the door swung open easily as ever-- but still she could not pass. She had heard of such things, how the gods captured their disobedient servants in doorways, but it had never happened to her before. She couldn't understand how she was being held. Her body was free to move. There was no barrier. But she felt such a sickening dread at the thought of walking through that she knew she couldn't do it, knew that the gods required some sort of penance, some sort of purification or they'd never let her leave the room. Not woodgrain-tracing, not handwashing. What did the gods require?

Then, all at once, she knew why the gods wouldn't let her pass through the door. It was the oath that Father had required of her for her mother's sake. The oath that she would always serve the gods, no matter what. And here she had been on the verge of defiance. Mother, forgive me! I will not defy the gods. But still I must go to Father and explain to him the terrible predicament in which the gods have placed us. Mother, help me pass through this door!

As if in answer to her plea, it came to her how she might pass through the door. All she needed to do was fix her gaze on a point in the air just outside the upper-right corner of the door, and while never letting her gaze move from that spot, step backward through the door with her right foot, place her left hand through, then pivot leftward, bringing her left leg backward through the doorway, then her right arm forward. It was complicated and difficult, like a dance, but by moving very slowly and carefully, she did it.

The door released her. And though she still felt the pressure of her own filthiness, some of the intensity had faded. It was bearable. She could breathe without gasping, speak without gagging.

She went downstairs and rang the little bell outside her father's door.

"Is it my daughter, my Gloriously Bright?" asked Father.

"Yes, noble one," said Qing-jao.

"I'm ready to receive you."

She opened Father's door and stepped through-- no ritual was needed this time. She strode at once to where he sat on a chair before his terminal and knelt before him on the floor.

"I have examined your Si Wang-mu," said Father, "and I believe your first hiring has been a worthy one."

It took a moment for Father's words to make sense. Si Wang-mu? Why did Father speak to her of an ancient god? She looked up in surprise, then looked where Father was looking-- at a serving girl in a clean gray gown, kneeling demurely, looking at the floor. It took a moment to remember the girl from the rice paddy, to remember that she was to be Qing-jao's secret maid. How could she have forgotten? It was only a few hours ago that Qingjao left her. Yet in that time Qing-jao had battled

with the gods, and if she hadn't won, at least she had not yet lost. What was the hiring of a servant compared to a struggle with the gods?

"Wang-mu is impertinent and ambitious," said Father, "but she is also honest and far more intelligent than I would have expected. I assume from her bright mind and sharp ambition that you both intend for her to be your student as well as your secret maid."

Wang-mu gasped, and when Qing-jao glanced over at her, she saw how horrified the girl looked. Oh, yes-- she must think that I think that she told Father of our secret plan. "Don't worry, Wang-mu," said Qing-jao. "Father almost always guesses secrets. I know you didn't tell."

"I wish more secrets were as easy as this one," said Father. "My daughter, I commend you for your worthy generosity. The gods will honor you for it, as I do also."

The words of praise came like unguent to a stinging wound. Perhaps this was why her rebelliousness had not destroyed her, why some god had taken mercy on her and shown her how to get through the door of her room just now. Because she had judged Wang-mu with mercy and wisdom, forgiving the girl's impertinence, Qing-jao herself was being forgiven, at least a little, for her own outrageous daring.

Wang-mu does not repent of her ambition, thought Qing-jao. Neither will I repent of my decision. I must not let Father be destroyed because I can't find-- or invent-- a non-divine explanation for the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet. And yet, how can I defy the purposes of the gods? They have hidden or destroyed the fleet. And the works of the gods must be recognized by their obedient servants, even if they must remain hidden from unbelievers on other worlds.

"Father," said Qing-jao, "I must speak to you about my task."

Father misunderstood her hesitation. "We can speak in front of Wang-mu. She's been hired now as your secret maid. The hiring bonus has been sent to her father, the first barriers of secrecy have been suggested to her mind. We can trust her to hear us and never tell."

"Yes, Father," said Qing-jao. In truth she had again forgotten that Wang-mu was even there. "Father, I know who has hidden the Lusitania Fleet. But you must promise me that you will never tell it to Starways Congress."

Father, who was usually placid, looked mildly distressed. "I can't promise such a thing," he said. "It would be unworthy of me to be such a disloyal servant. "

What could she do, then? How could she speak? And yet how could she keep from speaking? "Who is your master?" she cried. "Congress or the gods?"

"First the gods," said Father. "They are always first."

"Then I must tell you that I have discovered that the gods are the ones who have hidden the fleet from us, Father. But if you tell this to the Congress, they'll mock you and you'll be ruined." Then

another thought occurred to her. "If it was the gods who stopped the fleet, Father, then the fleet must have been against the will of the gods after all. And if Starways Congress sent the fleet against the will of--"

Father held up his hand for her to be silent. She immediately stopped speaking and bowed her head. She waited.

"Of course it's the gods," said Father.

His words came as both a relief and a humiliation. Of course, he had said. Had he known this all along?

"The gods do all things that are done in the universe. But don't assume that you know why. You say they must have stopped the fleet because they oppose its mission. But I say that Congress couldn't have sent the fleet in the first place if the gods hadn't willed it. So why couldn't it be that the gods stopped the fleet because its mission was so great and noble that humanity was not worthy of it? Or what if they hid the fleet because it would provide a difficult test for you? One thing is certain: The gods have permitted Starways Congress to hold sway over most of humanity. As long as they have the mandate of heaven, we of Path will follow their edicts without opposition."

"I didn't mean to oppose ..." She could not finish such an obvious falsehood.

Father understood perfectly, of course. "I hear how your voice fades and your words trail off into nothing. This is because you know your words are not true. You meant to oppose Starways Congress, in spite of all I have taught you." Then his voice grew gentler. "For my sake you meant to do it."

"You're my ancestor. I owe you a higher duty than I owe them."

"I'm your father. I won't become your ancestor until I'm dead."

"For Mother's sake, then. If they ever lose the mandate of heaven, then I will be their most terrible enemy, for I will serve the gods." Yet even as she said this, she knew her words were a dangerous half-truth. Until only a few moments ago-- until she had been caught in the door-- hadn't she been perfectly willing to defy even the gods for her father's sake? I am the most unworthy, terrible daughter, she thought.

"I tell you now, my Gloriously Bright daughter, that opposing Congress will never be for my good. Or yours either. But I forgive you for loving me to excess. It is the gentlest and kindest of vices."

He smiled. It calmed her agitation, to see him smile, though she knew that she didn't deserve his approbation. Qing-jao was able to think again, to return to the puzzle. "You knew that the gods did this, and yet you made me search for the answer."

"But were you asking the right question?" said Father. "The question we need answered is: How did the gods do it?"

"How can I know?" answered Qing-jao. "They might have destroyed the fleet or hidden it, or carried it away to some secret place in the West--"

"Qing-jao! Look at me. Hear me well."

She looked. His stern command helped calm her, give her focus.

"This is something I have tried to teach you all your life, but now you must learn it, Qing-jao. The gods are the cause of everything that happens, but they never act except in disguise. Do you hear me?"

She nodded. She'd heard those words a hundred times.

"You hear and yet you don't understand me, even now," said Father. "The gods have chosen the people of Path, Qing-jao. Only we are privileged to hear their voice. Only we are allowed to see that they are the cause of all that is and was and will be. To all other people their works remain hidden, a mystery. Your task is not to discover the true cause of the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet-- all of Path would know at once that the true cause is that the gods wished it to happen. Your task is to discover the disguise that the gods have created for this event."

Qing-jao felt light-headed, dizzy. She had been so certain that she had the answer, that she had fulfilled her task. Now it was slipping away. The answer was still true, but her task was different now.

"Right now, because we can't find a natural explanation, the gods stand exposed for all of humanity to see, the unbelievers as well as the believers. The gods are naked, and we must clothe them. We must find out the series of events the gods have created to explain the disappearance of the fleet, to make it appear natural to the unbelievers. I thought you understood this. We serve Starways Congress, but only because by serving Congress we also serve the gods. The gods wish us to deceive Congress, and Congress wishes to be deceived."

Qing-jao nodded, numb with disappointment that her task was still not finished.

"Does this sound heartless of me?" asked Father. "Am I dishonest? Am I cruel to the unbeliever?"

"Does a daughter judge her father?" whispered Qing-jao.

"Of course she does," said Father. "Every day all people judge all other people. The question is whether we judge wisely."

"Then I judge that it's no sin to speak to the unbelievers in the language of their unbelief," said Qing-jao.

Was that a smile now at the corners of his mouth? "You do understand," said Father. "If ever Congress comes to us, humbly seeking to know the truth, then we will teach the the Way and they'll become part of Path. Until then, we serve the gods by helping the unbelievers deceive themselves into thinking that all things happen because of natural explanations."

Qing-jao bowed until her head nearly touched the floor. "You have tried to teach me this many times, but until now I never had a task that this principle applied to. Forgive the foolishness of your unworthy daughter."

"I have no unworthy daughter," said Father. "I have only my daughter who is Gloriously Bright. The principle you've learned today is one that few on Path will ever really understand. That's why only a few of us are able to deal directly with people from other worlds without baffling or confusing them. You have surprised me today, Daughter, not because you hadn't yet understood it, but because you have come to understand it so young. I was nearly ten years older than you before I discovered it."

"How can I learn something before you did, Father?" The idea of surpassing one of his achievements was almost unthinkable.

"Because you had me to teach you," said Father, "while I had to discover it for myself. But I see that it frightened you to think that perhaps you learned something younger than I did. Do you think it would dishonor me if my daughter surpassed me? On the contrary-- there can be no greater honor to a parent than to have a child who is greater."

"I can never be greater than you, Father."

"In a sense that's true, Qing-jao. Because you are my child, all your works are included within mine, as a subset of mine, just as all of us are a subset of our ancestors. But you have so much potential for greatness inside you that I believe there'll come a time when I will be counted greater because of your works than because of my own. If ever the people of Path judge me worthy of some singular honor, it will be at least as much because of your achievements as my own."

With that Father bowed to her, not a courteous bow of dismissal, but a deep bow of respect, his head almost touching the floor. Not quite, for that would be outrageous, almost a mockery, if he actually touched his head to the floor in honor to his own daughter. But he came as close as dignity allowed.

It confused her for a moment, frightened her; then she understood. When he implied that his chance of being chosen god of Path depended on her greatness, he wasn't speaking of some vague future event. He was speaking of the here and now. He was speaking of her task. If she could find the gods' disguise, the natural explanation for the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet, then his selection as god of Path would be assured. That was how much he trusted her. That was how important this task was. What was her coming-of-age, compared to her father's godhood? She must work harder, think better, and succeed where all the resources of the military and the Congress had failed. Not for herself, but for Mother, for the gods, and for Father's chance to become one of them.

Qing-jao withdrew from Father's room. She paused in the doorway and glanced at Wang-mu. One glance from the godspoken was enough to tell the girl to follow.

By the time Qing-jao got to her room she was shaking with the pent-up need for purification. All that she had done wrong today-- her rebelliousness toward the gods, her refusal to accept purification earlier, her stupidity at not understanding her true task-- it came together now. Not that she felt dirty; it wasn't washing she wanted, or self-loathing that she felt. After all, her unworthiness had been tempered by her father's praise, by the god who showed her how to pass through the door. And Wang-mu's having proven to be a good choice-- that was a test that Qing-jao had passed, and boldly, too. So it wasn't vileness that made her tremble. She was hungry for purification. She longed for the gods to be with her as she served them. Yet no penance that she knew of would be enough to quell her hunger.

Then she knew: She must trace a line on every board in the room.

At once she chose her starting point, the southeast corner; she would begin each tracing at the eastern wall, so that her rituals would all move westward, toward the gods. Last of all would be the shortest board in the room, less than a meter long, in the northwest corner. It would be her reward, that her last tracing would be so brief and easy.

She could hear Wang-mu enter the room softly behind her, but Qing-jao had no time now for mortals. The gods were waiting. She knelt in the corner, scanned the grains to find the one the gods wanted her to follow. Usually she had to choose for herself, and then she always chose the most difficult one, so the gods wouldn't despise her. But tonight she was filled with instant certainty that the gods were choosing for her. The first line was a thick one, wavy but easy to see. Already they were being merciful! Tonight's ritual would be almost a conversation between her and the gods. She had broken through an invisible barrier today; she had come closer to her father's clear understanding. Perhaps someday the gods would speak to her with the sort of clarity that the common people believed all the godspoken heard.

"Holy one," said Wang-mu.

It was as though Qing-jao's joy were made of glass, and Wang-mu had deliberately shattered it. Didn't she know that when a ritual was interrupted, it had to begin again? Qing-jao rose up on her knees and turned to face the girl.

Wang-mu must have seen the fury on Qing-jao's face, but didn't understand it. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said at once, falling to her knees and bowing her head to the floor. "I forgot that I'm not to call you 'holy one.' I only meant to ask you what you were looking for, so I could help you search."

It almost made Qing-jao laugh, that Wang-mu was so mistaken. Of course Wang-mu had no notion that Qing-jao was being spoken to by the gods. And now, her anger interrupted, Qing-jao was ashamed to see how Wang-mu feared her anger; it felt wrong for the girl to be touching her head to the floor. Qing-jao didn't like seeing another person so humiliated.

How did I frighten her so much? I was filled with joy, because the gods were speaking so clearly to me; but my joy was so selfish that when she innocently interrupted me, I turned a face of hate to her. Is this how I answer the gods? They show me a face of love, and I translate it into hatred toward the people, especially one who is in my power? Once again the gods have found a way to show me my unworthiness.

"Wang-mu, you mustn't interrupt me when you find me bowed down on the floor like that." And she explained to Wang-mu about the ritual of purification that the gods required of her.

"Must I do this also?" said Wang-mu.

"Not unless the gods tell you to."

"How will I know?"

"If it hasn't happened to you at your age, Wang-mu, it probably never will. But if it did happen, you'd know, because you wouldn't have the power to resist the voice of the gods in your mind."

Wang-mu nodded gravely. "How can I help you, ... Qing-jao?" She tried out her mistress's name carefully, reverently. For the first time Qing-jao realized that her name, which sounded sweetly affectionate when her father said it, could sound exalted when it was spoken with such awe. To be called Gloriously Bright at a moment when Qing-jao was keenly aware of her lack of luster was almost painful. But she would not forbid Wang-mu to use her name-- the girl had to have something to call her, and Wang-mu's reverent tone would serve Qing-jao as a constant ironic reminder of how little she deserved it.

"You can help me by not interrupting," said Qing-jao.

"Should I leave, then?"

Qing-jao almost said yes, but then realized that for some reason the gods wanted Wang-mu to be part of this penance. How did she know? Because the thought of Wang-mu leaving felt almost as unbearable as the knowledge of her unfinished tracing. "Please stay," said Qing-jao. "Can you wait in silence? Watching me?"

"Yes, ... Qing-jao."

"If it goes on so long that you can't bear it, you may leave," said Qingjao. "But only when you see me moving from the west to the east. That means I'm between tracings, and it won't distract me for you to leave, though you mustn't speak to me."

Wang-mu's eyes widened. "You're going to do this with every grain of wood in every board of the floor?"

"No," said Qing-jao. The gods would never be so cruel as that! But even as she thought this, Qing-jao knew that someday there might come a time when the gods would require exactly that penance. It made her sick with dread. "Only one line in each board in the room. Watch with me, will you?"

She saw Wang-mu glance at the time message that glowed in the air over her terminal. It was already the hour for sleep, and both of them had missed their afternoon nap. It wasn't natural for human beings to go so long without sleeping. The days on Path were half again as long as those on Earth, so that they never worked out quite evenly with the internal cycles of the human body. To miss the nap and then delay the sleep was a very hard thing.

But Qing-jao had no choice. And if Wang-mu couldn't stay awake, she'd have to leave now, however the gods resisted that idea. "You must stay awake," said Qing-jao. "If you fall asleep, I'll have to speak to you so you'll move and uncover some of the lines I have to trace. And if I speak to you, I'll have to begin again. Can you stay awake, silent and unmoving?"

Wang-mu nodded. Qing-jao believed that she meant it; she did not really believe the girl could do it. Yet the gods insisted that she let her new secret maid remain-- who was Qing-jao to refuse what the gods required of her?

Qing-jao returned to the first board and started her tracing over again. To her relief, the gods were still with her. On board after board she was given the boldest, easiest grain to follow; and when, now and then, she was given a harder one, it invariably happened that the easy grain faded or disappeared off the edge of the board partway along. The gods were caring for her.

As for Wang-mu, the girl struggled mightily. Twice, on the passage back from the west to begin again in the east, Qing-jao glanced at Wang-mu and saw her sleeping. But when Qing-jao began passing near to the place where Wang-mu had lain, she found that her secret maid had wakened and moved so quietly to a place where Qing-jao had already traced that Qing-jao hadn't even heard her movements. A good girl. A worthy choice for a secret maid.

At last, at long last Qing-jao reached the beginning of the last board, a short one in the very corner. She almost spoke aloud in joy, but caught herself in time. The sound of her own voice and Wang-mu's inevitable answer would surely send her back to start again-- it would be an unbelievable folly. Qing-jao bent over the beginning of the board, already less than a meter from the northwest corner of the room, and began tracing the boldest line. It led her, clear and true, right to the wall. It was done.

Qing-jao slumped against the wall and began laughing in relief. But she was so weak and tired that her laughter must have sounded like weeping to Wang-mu. In moments the girl was with her, touching her shoulder. "Qing-jao," she said. "Are you in pain?"

Qing-jao took the girl's hand and held it. "Not in pain. Or at least no pain that sleeping won't cure. I'm finished. I'm clean."

Clean enough, in fact, that she felt no reluctance in letting her hand clasp Wang-mu's hand, skin to skin, without filthiness of any kind. It was a gift from the gods, that she had someone's hand to hold

when her ritual was done. "You did very well," said Qing-jao. "It was easier for me to concentrate on the tracing, with you in the room."

"I think I fell asleep once, Qing-jao."

"Perhaps twice. But you woke when it mattered, and no harm was done."

Wang-mu began to weep. She closed her eyes but didn't take her hand away from Qing-jao to cover her face. She simply let the tears flow down her cheeks.

"Why are you weeping, Wang-mu?"

"I didn't know," she said. "It really is a hard thing to be godspoken. I didn't know."

"And a hard thing to be a true friend to the godspoken, as well," said Qing-jao. "That's why I didn't want you to be my servant, calling me 'holy one' and fearing the sound of my voice. That kind of servant I'd have to send out of my room when the gods spoke to me."

If anything, Wang-mu's tears flowed harder.

"Si Wang-mu, is it too hard for you to be with me?" asked Qing-jao.

Wang-mu shook her head.

"If it's ever too hard, I'll understand. You can leave me then. I was alone before. I'm not afraid to be alone again."

Wang-mu shook her head, fiercely this time. "How could I leave you, now that I see how hard it is for you?"

"Then it will be written one day, and told in a story, that Si Wang-mu never left the side of Han Qing-jao during her purifications."

Suddenly Wang-mu's smile broke across her face, and her eyes opened into the squint of laughter, despite the tears still shining on her cheeks. "Don't you hear the joke you told?" said Wang-mu. "My name-- Si Wang-mu. When they tell that story, they won't know it was your secret maid with you. They'll think it was the Royal Mother of the West."

Qing-jao laughed then, too. But an idea also crossed her mind, that perhaps the Royal Mother was a true ancestor-of-the-heart to Wang-mu, and by having Wang-mu by her side, as her friend, Qing-jao also had a new closeness with this god who was almost the oldest of them all.

Wang-mu laid out their sleeping mats, though Qing-jao had to show her how; it was Wang-mu's proper duty, and Qing-jao would have to let her do it every night, though she had never minded doing it herself. As they lay down, their mats touching edge-to-edge so that no woodgrain lines showed between them, Qing-jao noticed that there was gray light shining through the slats of the

windows. They had stayed awake together all through the day and now all through the night. Wang-mu's sacrifice was a noble one. She would be a true friend.

A few minutes later, though, when Wang-mu was asleep and Qing-jao was on the brink of dozing, it occurred to Qing-jao to wonder exactly how it was that Wang-mu, a girl with no money, had managed to bribe the foreman of the righteous labor crew to let her speak to Qing-jao today without interruption. Could some spy have paid the bribe for her, so she could infiltrate the house of Han Fei-tzu? No-- Ju Kung-mei, the guardian of the House of Han, would have found out about such a spy and Wang-mu would never have been hired. Wang-mu's bribe wouldn't have been paid in money. She, was only fourteen, but Si Wang-mu was already a very pretty girl. Qing-jao had read enough of history and biography to know how women were usually required to pay such bribes.

Grimly Qing-jao decided that the matter must be discreetly investigated, and the foreman dismissed in unnamed disgrace if it were found to be true; through the investigation, Wang-mu's name would never be mentioned in public, so that she would be protected from all harm. Qing-jao had only to mention it to Ju Kung-mei and he'd see that it was done.

Qing-jao looked at the sweet face of her sleeping servant, her worthy new friend, and felt overcome by sadness. What most saddened Qing-jao, however, was not the price Wang-mu had paid to the foreman, but rather that she had paid it for such a worthless, painful, terrible job as that of being secret maid to Han Qing-jao. If a woman must sell the doorway to her womb, as so many women had been forced to do through all of human history, surely the gods must let her receive something of value in return.

That is why Qing-jao went to sleep that morning even firmer in her resolve to devote herself to the education of Si Wang-mu. She could not let Wang-mu's education interfere with her struggle with the riddle of the Lusitania Fleet, but she would take all other possible time and give Wangmu a fit blessing in honor of her sacrifice. Surely the gods must expect no less of her, in return for their having sent her such a perfect secret maid.

Chapter 8 -- MIRACLES

<Ender has been plaguing us lately. Insisting that we think of a way to travel faster than light.>

<You said it couldn't be done.>

<That's what we think. That's what human scientists think. But Ender insists that if ansibles can transmit information, we should be able to transmit matter at the same velocity. Of course that's nonsense-- there's no comparison between information and physical reality.>

<Why does he want so badly to travel faster than light?>

<It's a silly idea, isn't it-- to arrive somewhere before your image does. Like stepping through a mirror in order to try to meet yourself on the other side.>

<Ender and Rooter have talked about this a lot-- I've heard them. Ender thinks that perhaps matter and energy are composed of nothing but information. That physical reality is nothing but the message that pilotes are transmitting to each other.>

<What does Rooter say?>

<He says that Ender is half right. Rooter says that physical reality is a message-- and the message is a question that the pilotes are continually asking God.>

<What is the question?>

<One word: Why?>

<And how does God answer them?>

<With life. Rooter says that life is how God gives purpose to the universe.>

Miro's whole family came to meet him when he returned to Lusitania. After all, they loved him. And he loved them, too, and after a month in space he was looking forward to their company. He knew-- intellectually, at least-- that his month in space had been a quarter-century to them. He had prepared himself for the wrinkles in Mother's face, for even Grego and Quara to be adults in their thirties. What he had not anticipated, not viscerally, anyway, was that they would be strangers. No, worse than strangers. They were strangers who pitied him and thought they knew him and looked down on him like a child. They were all older than him. All of them. And all younger, because pain and loss hadn't touched them the way it had touched him.

Ela was the best of them, as usual. She embraced him, kissed him, and said, "You make me feel so mortal. But I'm glad to see you young." At least she had the courage to admit that there was an immediate barrier between them, even though she pretended that the barrier was his youth. True, Miro was exactly as they remembered him-- his face, at least. The long-lost brother returned from the dead; the ghost who comes to haunt the family, eternally young. But the real barrier was the way he moved. The way he spoke.

They had obviously forgotten how disabled he was, how badly his body responded to his damaged brain. The shuffling step, the twisted, difficult speech-- their memories had excised all that unpleasantness and had remembered him the way he was before his accident. After all, he had only been disabled for a few months before leaving on his time-dilating voyage. It was easy to forget that, and recall instead the Miro they had known for so many years before. Strong, healthy, the only one able to stand up to the man they had called Father. They couldn't conceal their shock. He could

see it in their hesitations, their darting glances, the attempt to ignore the fact that his speech was so hard to understand, that he walked so slowly.

He could sense their impatience. Within minutes he could see how some, at least, were maneuvering to get away. So much to do this afternoon. See you at dinner. This whole thing was making them so uncomfortable they had to escape, take time to assimilate this version of Miro who had just returned to them, or perhaps plot how to avoid him as much as possible in the future. Grego and Quara were the worst, the most eager to get away, which stung him-- once they had worshiped him. Of course he understood that this was why it was so hard for them to deal with the broken Miro that stood before them. Their vision of the old Miro was the most naive and therefore the most painfully contradicted.

"We thought of a big family dinner," said Ela. "Mother wanted to, but I thought we should wait. Give you some time."

"Hope you haven't been waiting dinner all this time for me," said Miro.

Only Ela and Valentine seemed to realize he was joking; they were the only ones to respond naturally, with a mild chuckle. The others-- for all Miro knew, they hadn't even understood his words at all.

They stood in the tall grass beside the landing field, all his family: Mother, now in her sixties, hair steely-gray, her face grim with intensity, the way it had always been. Only now the expression was etched deep in the lines of her forehead, the creases beside her mouth. Her neck was a ruin. He realized that she would die someday. Not for thirty or forty years, probably, but someday. Had he ever realized how beautiful she was, before? He had thought somehow that marrying the Speaker for the Dead would soften her, would make her young again. And maybe it had, maybe Andrew Wiggin had made her young at heart. But the body was still what time had made it. She was old.

Ela, in her forties. No husband with her, but maybe she was married and he simply hadn't come. More likely not. Was she married to her work? She seemed to be so genuinely glad to see him, but even she couldn't hide the look of pity and concern. What, had she expected that a month of lightspeed travel would somehow heal him? Had she thought he would stride off the shuttle as strong and bold as a spacefaring god from some romance?

Quim, now in priestly robes. Jane had told Miro that his next-younger brother was a great missionary. He had converted more than a dozen forests of pequeninos, had baptized them, and, under authority from Bishop Peregrino, ordained priests from among them, to administer the sacraments to their own people. They baptized all the pequeninos that emerged from the mothertrees, all the mothers before they died, all the sterile wives who tended the little mothers and their younglings, all the brothers searching for a glorious death, and all the trees. However, only the wives and brothers could take communion, and as for marriage, it was difficult to think of a meaningful way to perform such a rite between a fathertree and the blind, mindless slugs who were mated with them. Yet Miro could see in Quim's eyes a kind of exaltation. It was the glow of power well used; alone of the Ribeira family, Quim had known all his life what he wanted to do. Now he

was doing it. Never mind the theological difficulties-- he was St. Paul to the piggies, and it filled him with constant joy. You served God, little brother, and God has made you his man.

Olhado, his silver eyes gleaming, his arm around a beautiful woman, surrounded by six children-- the youngest a toddler, the oldest in her teens. Though the children all watched with natural eyes, they still had picked up their father's detached expression. They didn't watch, they simply gazed. With Olhado that had been natural; it disturbed Miro to think that perhaps Olhado had spawned a family of observers, walking recorders taking up experience to play it back later, but never quite involved. But no, that had to be a delusion. Miro had never been comfortable with Olhado, and so whatever resemblance Olhado's children had to their father was bound to make Miro just as uncomfortable with them, too. The mother was pretty enough. Probably not forty yet. How old had she been when Olhado married her? What kind of woman was she, to accept a man with artificial eyes? Did Olhado record their lovemaking, and play back images for her of how she looked in his eyes?

Miro was immediately ashamed of the thought. Is that all I can think of when I look at Olhado-- his deformity? After all the years I knew him? Then how can I expect them to see anything but my deformities when they look at me?

Leaving here was a good idea. I'm glad Andrew Wiggin suggested it. The only part that makes no sense is coming back. Why am I here?

Almost against his will, Miro turned to face Valentine. She smiled at him, put her arm around him, hugged him. "It's not so bad," she said.

Not so bad as what?

"I have only the one brother left to greet me," she said. "All your family came to meet you."

"Right," said Miro.

Only then did Jane speak up, her voice taunting him in his ear. "Not all."

Shut up, Miro said silently.

"Only one brother?" said Andrew Wiggin. "Only me?" The Speaker for the Dead stepped forward and embraced his sister. But did Miro see awkwardness there, too? Was it possible that Valentine and Andrew Wiggin were shy with each other? What a laugh. Valentine, bold as brass-- she was Demosthenes, wasn't she? --and Wiggin, the man who had broken into their lives and remade their family without so much as a dd licenVa. Could they be timid? Could they feel strange?

"You've aged miserably," said Andrew. "Thin as a rail. Doesn't Jakt provide a decent living for you?"

"Doesn't Novinha cook?" asked Valentine. "And you look stupider than ever. I got here just in time to witness your complete mental vegetation."

"And here I thought you came to save the world."

"The universe. But you first."

She put her arm around Miro again, and around Andrew on the other side. She spoke to the others. "So many of you, but I feel like I know you all. I hope that soon you'll feel that way about me and my family."

So gracious. So able to put people at ease. Even me, thought Miro. She simply handles people. The way Andrew Wiggin does. Did she learn it from him, or did he learn it from her? Or was it born into their family? After all, Peter was the supreme manipulator of all time, the original Hegemon. What a family. As strange as mine. Only theirs is strange because of genius, while mine is strange because of the pain we shared for so many years, because of the twisting of our souls. And I the strangest, the most damaged one of all. Andrew Wiggin came to heal the wounds between us, and did it well. But the inner twisting-- can that ever be healed?

"How about a picnic?" asked Miro.

This time they all laughed. How was that, Andrew, Valentine? Did I put them at their ease? Did I help things go smoothly? Have I helped everyone pretend that they're glad to see me, that they have some idea of who I am?

"She wanted to come," said Jane in Miro's ear.

Shut up, said Miro again. I didn't want her to come anyway.

"But she'll see you later."

No.

"She's married. She has four children."

That's nothing to me now.

"She hasn't called out your name in her sleep for years."

I thought you were my friend.

"I am. I can read your mind."

You're a meddling old bitch and you can't read anything.

"She'll come to you tomorrow morning. At your mother's house."

I won't be there.

"You think you can run away from this?"

During his conversation with Jane, Miro hadn't heard anything that the others around him were saying, but it didn't matter. Valentine's husband and children had come from the ship, and she was introducing them all around. Particularly to their uncle, of course. It surprised Miro to see the awe with which they spoke to him. But then, they knew who he really was. Ender the Xenocide, yes, but also the Speaker for the Dead, the one who wrote the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. Miro knew that now, of course, but when he had first met Wiggin it was with hostility-- he was just an itinerant speaker for the dead, a minister of a humanist religion who seemed determined to turn Miro's family inside out. Which he had done. I think I was luckier than they are, thought Miro. I got to know him as a person before I ever knew him as a great figure in human history. They'll probably never know him as I do.

And I don't really know him at all. I don't know anybody, and nobody knows me. We spend our lives guessing at what's going on inside everybody else, and when we happen to get lucky and guess right, we think we "understand." Such nonsense. Even a monkey at a computer will type a word now and then.

You don't know me, none of you, he said silently. Least of all the meddling old bitch who lives in my ear. You hear that?

"All that high-pitched whining-- how can I miss it?"

Andrew was putting luggage onto the car. There'd be room for only a couple of passengers. "Miro-- you want to ride with Novinha and me?"

Before he could answer, Valentine had taken his arm. "Oh, don't do that," said Valentine. "Walk with Jakt and me. We've all been cooped up on the ship for so long. "

"That's right," said Andrew. "His mother hasn't seen him in twenty-five years, but you want him to take a stroll. You're the soul of thoughtfulness."

Andrew and Valentine were keeping up the bantering tone they had established from the first, so that no matter which way Miro decided, they would laughingly turn it into a choice between the two Wiggins. At no point would he have to say, I need to ride because I'm a cripple. Nor would he have any excuse to take offense because somebody had singled him out for special treatment. It was so gracefully done that Miro wondered if Valentine and Andrew had discussed it in advance. Maybe they didn't have to discuss things like this. Maybe they had spent so many years together that they knew how to cooperate to smooth things for other people without even thinking about it. Like actors who have performed the same roles together so often that they can improvise without the slightest confusion.

"I'll walk," said Miro. "I'll take the long way. The rest of you go on ahead."

Novinha and Ela started to protest, but Miro saw Andrew put his hand on Novinha's arm, and as for Ela, she was silenced by Quim's arm around her shoulder.

"Come straight home," said Ela. "However long it takes you, do come home."

"Where else?" asked Miro.

Valentine didn't know what to make of Ender. It was only her second day on Lusitania, but already she was sure that something was wrong. Not that there weren't grounds for Ender to be worried, distracted. He had filled her in on the problems the xenobiologists were having with the *descolada*, the tensions between Grego and Quara, and of course there was always the Congress fleet, death looming over them from every sky. But Ender had faced worries and tensions before, many times in his years as a speaker for the dead. He had plunged into the problems of nations and families, communities and individuals, struggling to understand and then to purge and heal the diseases of the heart. Never had he responded the way he was acting now.

Or perhaps he had, once.

When they were children, and Ender was being groomed to command the fleets being sent against all the bugged worlds, they had brought Ender back to Earth for a season-- the lull before the final storm, as it turned out. Ender and Valentine had been apart since he was five years old, not allowed so much as an unsupervised letter between them. Then, suddenly, they changed their policy, and brought Valentine to him. He was being kept at a large private estate near their home town, spending his days swimming and-- more often-- floating in utter languor on a private lake.

At first Valentine had thought all was well, and she was merely glad to see him at last. But soon she understood that something was deeply wrong. Only in those days she hadn't known Ender so well-- after all, he'd been apart from her for more than half his life. Yet she knew that it was wrong for him to seem so preoccupied. No, that wasn't really it. He wasn't preoccupied, he was unoccupied. He had detached himself from the world. And her job was to reconnect him. To bring him back and show him his place in the web of humanity.

Because she succeeded, he was able to go back into space and command the fleets that utterly destroyed the buggers. Ever since that time, his connection with the rest of humanity seemed secure.

Now again she had been apart from him for half a lifetime. Twenty-five years for her, thirty for him. And again he seemed to be detached. She studied him as he took her and Miro and Plikt out by car, skimming over the endless prairies of capim.

"We're like a little boat on the ocean," said Ender.

"Not really," she said, remembering the time that Jakt had taken her out on one of the small net-laying launches. The three-meter waves that lifted them high, then plunged them down into the

trench between. On the large fishing boat those waves had barely jostled them as they nestled comfortably in the sea, but in the tiny launch the waves were overwhelming. Literally breathtaking - she had to slide down from her seat onto the deck, embracing the plank bench with both arms, before she could catch her breath. There was no comparison between the heaving, pitching ocean and this placid grassy plain.

Then again, maybe to Ender there was. Maybe when he saw the acres of capim, he saw within it the descolada virus, malevolently adapting itself to slaughter humankind and all its companion species. Maybe to him this prairie rolled and shrugged every bit as brutally as the ocean.

The sailors had laughed at her, not mockingly but tenderly, like parents laughing at the fears of a child. "These seas are nothing," they said. "You should try doing this in twenty-meter seas."

Ender was as calm, outwardly, as the sailors had been. Calm, unconnected. Making conversation with her and Miro and silent Plikt, but still holding something back. Is there something wrong between Ender and Novinha? Valentine hadn't seen them together long enough to know what was natural between them and what was strained-certainly there were no obvious quarrels. So perhaps Ender's problem was a growing barrier between him and the community of Milagre. That was possible. Valentine certainly remembered how hard it had been for her to win acceptance from the Trondheimers, and she had been married to a man with enormous prestige among them. How was it for Ender, married to a woman whose whole family had already been alienated from the rest of Milagre? Could it be that his healing of this place was not as complete as anyone supposed?

Not possible. When Valentine met with the Mayor, Kovano Zeljezo, and with old Bishop Peregrino that morning, they had shown genuine affection for Ender. Valentine had attended too many meetings not to know the difference between formal courtesies, political hypocrisies, and genuine friendship. If Ender felt detached from these people, it wasn't by their choice.

I'm reading too much into this, thought Valentine. If Ender seems to be strange and detached, it's because we have been apart so long. Or perhaps because he feels shy with this angry young man, Miro; or perhaps it's Plikt, with her silent, calculating worship of Ender Wiggin, who makes him choose to be distant with us. Or maybe it's nothing more than my insistence that I must meet the hive queen today, at once, even before meeting any of the leaders of the piggies. There's no reason to look beyond present company for the cause of his unconnection.

They first located the hive queen's city by the pall of smoke. "Fossil fuels," said Ender. "She's burning them up at a disgusting rate. Ordinarily she'd never do that-- the hive queens tend their worlds with great care, and they never make such a waste and a stink. But there's a great hurry these days, and Human says that they've given her permission to burn and pollute as much as necessary."

"Necessary for what?" asked Valentine.

"Human won't say, and neither will the hive queen, but I have my guesses, and I imagine you will, too."

"Are the piggies hoping to jump to a fully technological society in a single generation, relying on the hive queen's work?"

"Hardly," said Ender. "They're far too conservative for that. They want to know everything there is to know-- but they aren't terribly interested in surrounding themselves with machines. Remember that the trees of the forest freely and gently give them every useful tool. What we call industry still looks like brutality to them."

"What then? Why all this smoke?"

"Ask her," said Ender. "Maybe she'll be honest with you."

"Will we actually see her?" asked Miro.

"Oh yes," said Ender. "Or at least-- we'll be in her presence. She may even touch us. But perhaps the less we see the better. It's usually dark where she lives, unless she's near to egg-laying. At that time she needs to see, and the workers open tunnels to bring in daylight."

"They don't have artificial light?" asked Miro.

"They never used it," said Ender, "even on the starships that came to Sol System back during the Bigger Wars. They see heat the way we see light. Any source of warmth is clearly visible to them. I think they even arrange their heat sources in patterns that could only be interpreted aesthetically. Thermal painting."

"So why do they use light for egg-laying?" asked Valentine.

"I'd hesitate to call it a ritual-- the hive queen has such scorn for human religion. Let's just say it's part of their genetic heritage. Without sunlight there's no egg-laying."

Then they were in the bigger city.

Valentine wasn't surprised at what they found-- after all, when they were young, she and Ender had been with the first colony on Rov, a former bigger world. But she knew that the experience would be surprising and alien to Miro and Plikt, and in fact some of the old disorientation came back to her, too. Not that there was anything obviously strange about the city. There were buildings, most of them low, but based on the same structural principles as any human buildings. The strangeness came in the careless way that they were arranged. There were no roads and streets, no attempt to line up the buildings to face the same way. Nor did buildings rise out of the ground to any common height. Some were nothing but a roof resting on the ground; others rose to a great height. Paint seemed to be used only as a preservative-- there was no decoration. Ender had suggested that heat might be used aesthetically; it was a sure thing that nothing else was.

"It makes no sense," said Miro.

"Not from the surface," said Valentine, remembering Rov. "But if you could travel the tunnels, you'd realize that it all makes sense underground. They follow the natural seams and textures of the rock. There's a rhythm to geology, and the buggers are sensitive to it."

"What about the tall buildings?" asked Miro.

"The water table is their downward limit. If they need greater height, they have to go up."

"What are they doing that requires a building so tall?" asked Miro.

"I don't know," said Valentine. They were skirting a building that was at least three hundred meters high; in the near distance they could see more than a dozen others.

For the first time on this excursion, Plikt spoke up. "Rockets," she said.

Valentine caught a glimpse of Ender smiling a bit and nodding slightly. So Plikt had confirmed his own suspicions.

"What for?" asked Miro.

Valentine almost said, To get into space, of course! But that wasn't fair-- Miro had never lived on a world that was struggling to get into space for the first time. To him, going offplanet meant taking the shuttle to the orbiting station. But the single shuttle used by the humans of Lusitania would hardly do for transporting material outward for any kind of major deepspace construction program. And even if it could do the job, the hive queen was unlikely to ask for human help.

"What's she building, a space station?" asked Valentine.

"I think so," said Ender. "But so many rockets, and such large ones-- I think she's planning to build it all at once. Probably cannibalizing the rockets themselves. What do you think the throw might be?"

Valentine almost answered with exasperation-- how should I know? Then she realized that he wasn't asking her. Because almost at once he supplied the answer himself. Which meant that he must have been asking the computer in his ear. No, not a "computer." Jane. He was asking Jane. It was still hard for Valentine to get used to the idea that even though there were only four people in the car, there was a fifth person present, looking and listening through the jewels Ender and Miro both wore.

"She could do it all at once," said Ender. "In fact, given what's known about the chemical emissions here, the hive queen has smelted enough metal to construct not only a space station but also two small long-range starships of the sort that the first bugger expedition brought. Their version of a colony ship."

"Before the fleet arrives," said Valentine. She understood at once. The hive queen was preparing to emigrate. She had no intention of letting her species be trapped on a single planet when the Little Doctor came again.

"You see the problem," said Ender. "She won't tell us what she's doing, and so we have to rely on what Jane observes and what we can guess. And what I'm guessing isn't a very pretty picture."

"What's wrong with the buggers getting offplanet?" asked Valentine.

"Not just the buggers," said Miro.

Valentine made the second connection. That's why the pequeninos had given permission for the hive queen to pollute so badly. That's why there were two ships planned, right from the first. "A ship for the hive queen and a ship for the pequeninos."

"That's what they intend," said Ender. "But the way I see it is-- two ships for the descolada."

"Nossa Senhora," whispered Miro.

Valentine felt a chill go through her. It was one thing for the hive queen to seek the salvation of her species. But it was quite another thing for her to carry the deadly self-adapting virus to other worlds.

"You see my quandary," said Ender. "You see why she won't tell me directly what she's doing."

"But you couldn't stop her anyway, could you?" asked Valentine.

"He could warn the Congress fleet," said Miro.

That's right. Dozens of heavily armed starships, converging on Lusitania from every direction-- if they were warned about two starships leaving Lusitania, if they were given their original trajectories, they could intercept them. Destroy them.

"You can't," said Valentine.

"I can't stop them and I can't let them go," said Ender. "To stop them would be to risk destroying the buggers and the piggies alike. To let them go would be to risk destroying all of humanity."

"You have to talk to them. You have to reach some kind of agreement."

"What would an agreement with us be worth?" asked Ender. "We don't speak for humanity in general. And if we make threats, the hive queen will simply destroy all our satellites and probably our ansible as well. She may do that anyway, just to be safe."

"Then we'd really be cut off," said Miro.

"From everything," said Ender.

It took Valentine a moment to realize that they were thinking of Jane. Without an ansible, they couldn't speak to her anymore. And without the satellites that orbited Lusitania, Jane's eyes in space would be blinded.

"Ender, I don't understand," said Valentine. "Is the hive queen our enemy?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" asked Ender. "That's the trouble with restoring her species. Now that she has her freedom again, now that she's not bundled up in a cocoon hidden in a bag under my bed, the hive queen will act in the best interest of her species-- whatever she thinks that is."

"But Ender, it can't be that there has to be war between humans and buggers again."

"If there were no human fleet heading toward Lusitania, the question wouldn't come up."

"But Jane has disrupted their communications," said Valentine. "They can't receive the order to use the Little Doctor."

"For now," said Ender. "But Valentine, why do you think Jane risked her own life in order to cut off their communications?"

"Because the order was sent."

"Starways Congress sent the order to destroy this planet. And now that Jane has revealed her power, they'll be all the more determined to destroy us. Once they find a way to get Jane out of the way, they'll be even more certain to act against this world."

"Have you told the hive queen?"

"Not yet. But then, I'm not sure how much she can learn from my mind without my wanting her to. It's not exactly a means of communication that I know how to control."

Valentine put her hand on Ender's shoulder. "Was this why you tried to persuade me not to come see the hive queen? Because you didn't want her to learn the real danger?"

"I just don't want to face her again," said Ender. "Because I love her and I fear her. Because I'm not sure whether I should help her or try to destroy her. And because once she gets those rockets into space, which could be any day now, she could take away our power to stop her. Take away our connection with the rest of humanity."

And, again, what he didn't say: She could cut Ender and Miro off from Jane.

"I think we definitely need to have a talk with her," said Valentine.

"Either that or kill her," said Miro.

"Now you understand my problem," said Ender.

They rode on in silence.

The entrance to the hive queen's burrow was a building that looked like any other. There was no special guard-- indeed, in their whole excursion they hadn't seen a single bugger. Valentine remembered when she was young, on her first colony world, trying to imagine what the bugger cities had looked like when they were fully inhabited. Now she knew-- they looked exactly the way they did when they were dead. No scurrying buggers; like ants swarming over the hills. Somewhere, she knew, there were fields and orchards being tended under the open sun, but none of that was visible from here.

Why did this make her feel so relieved?

She knew the answer to the question even as she asked it. She had spent her childhood on Earth during the Bugger Wars; the insectoid aliens had haunted her nightmares, as they had terrified every other child on Earth. Only a handful of human beings, however, had ever seen a bugger in person, and few of those were still alive when she was a child. Even in her first colony, where the ruins of bugger civilization surrounded her, they had found not even one desiccated corpse. All her visual images of the buggers were the horrifying images from the vids.

Yet wasn't she the first person to have read Ender's book, the Hive Queen? Wasn't she the first, besides Ender, to come to think of the hive queen as a person of alien grace and beauty?

She was the first, yes, but that meant little. Everyone else alive today had grown up in a moral universe shaped in part by the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. While she and Ender were the only two left alive who had grown up with the steady campaign of loathing toward the buggers. Of course she felt irrational relief at not having to see the buggers. To Miro and Plikt, the first sight of the hive queen and her workers wouldn't have the same emotional tension that it had for her.

I am Demosthenes, she reminded herself. I'm the theorist who insisted that the buggers were ramen, aliens who could be understood and accepted. I must simply do my best to overcome the prejudices of my childhood. In due time all of humanity will know of the reemergence of the hive queen; it would be shameful if Demosthenes were the one person who could not receive the hive queen as ramen.

Ender took the car in a circle around a smallish building. "This is the right place," he said. He pulled the car to a stop, then slowed the fan to settle it onto the capim near the building's single door. The door was very low-- an adult would have to go through on hands and knees.

"How do you know?" asked Miro.

"Because she says so," said Ender.

"Jane?" asked Miro. He looked puzzled, because of course Jane had said nothing of the sort to him.

"The hive queen," said Valentine. "She speaks directly into Ender's mind."

"Nice trick," said Miro. "Can I learn it?"

"We'll see," said Ender. "When you meet her."

As they clambered off the car and dropped into the tall grass, Valentine noticed how Miro and Ender both kept glancing at Plikt. Of course it bothered them that Plikt was so quiet. Or rather, seemed so quiet. Valentine thought of Plikt as a loquacious, eloquent woman. But she had also got used to the way Plikt played the mute at certain times. Ender and Miro, of course, were only discovering her perverse silence for the first time, and it bothered them. Which was one of the main reasons Plikt did it. She believed that people revealed themselves most when they were vaguely anxious, and few things brought out nonspecific anxieties like being in the presence of a person who never speaks.

Valentine didn't think much of the technique as a way of dealing with strangers, but she had watched how, as a tutor, Plikt's silences forced her students-- Valentine's children-- to deal with their own ideas. When Valentine and Ender taught, they challenged their students with dialogue, questions, arguments. But Plikt forced her students to play both sides of an argument, proposing their own ideas, then attacking them in order to refute their own objections. The method probably wouldn't work for most people. Valentine had concluded that it worked so well for Plikt because her wordlessness was not complete noncommunication. Her steady, penetrating gaze was in itself an eloquent expression of skepticism. When a student was confronted with that unblinking regard, he soon succumbed to all his own insecurities. Every doubt that the student had managed to put aside and ignore now forced itself forward, where the student had to discover within himself the reasons for Plikt's apparent doubt.

Valentine's oldest, Syfte, had called these one-sided confrontations "staring into the sun." Now Ender and Miro were taking their own turn at blinding themselves in a contest with the all-seeing eye and the naught-saying mouth. Valentine wanted to laugh at their unease, to reassure them. She also wanted to give Plikt a gentle little slap and tell her not to be difficult.

Instead of doing either, Valentine strode to the door of the building and pulled it open. There was no bolt, just a handle to grasp. The door opened easily. She held it open as Ender dropped to his knees and crawled through. Plikt followed immediately. Then Miro sighed and slowly sank to his knees. He was more awkward in crawling than he was in walking-- each movement of an arm or leg was made individually, as if it took a second to think of how to make it go. At last he was through, and now Valentine ducked down and squat-walked through the door. She was the smallest, and she didn't have to crawl.

Inside, the only light came from the door. The room was featureless, with a dirt floor. Only as Valentine's eyes became used to the darkness did she realize that the darkest shadow was a tunnel sloping down into the earth.

"There aren't any lights down in the tunnels," Ender said. "She'll direct me. You'll have to hold onto each other's hands. Valentine, you go last, all right?"

"Can we go down standing up?" asked Miro. The question clearly mattered.

"Yes," said Ender. "That's why she chose this entrance."

They joined hands, Plikt holding Ender's hand, Miro between the two women. Ender led them a few steps down the slope into the tunnel. It was steep, and the utter blackness ahead was daunting. But Ender stopped before the darkness became absolute.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Valentine.

"Our guide," said Ender.

At that moment, the guide arrived. In the darkness, Valentine could barely see the black-reed arm with a single finger and thumb as it nudged Ender's hand. Immediately Ender enclosed the finger within his left hand; the black thumb closed like a pincer over his hand. Looking up the arm, Valentine tried to see the bugger it belonged to. All she could actually make out, though, was a child-size shadow, and perhaps a slight gleam of reflection off a carapace.

Her imagination supplied all that was missing, and against her will she shuddered.

Miro muttered something in Portuguese. So he, too, was affected by the presence of the bugger. Plikt, however, remained silent, and Valentine couldn't tell whether she trembled or remained entirely unaffected. Then Miro took a shuffling forward step, pulling on Valentine's hand, leading her forward into the darkness.

Ender knew how hard this passage would be for the others. So far only he, Novinha, and Ela had ever visited the hive queen, and Novinha had come only the once. The darkness was too unnerving, to move endlessly downward without help of eyes, knowing from small sounds that there was life and movement, invisible but nearby.

"Can we talk?" asked Valentine. Her voice sounded very small.

"It's a good idea," said Ender. "You won't bother them. They don't take much notice of sound."

Miro said something. Without being able to see his lips move, Ender found it harder to understand Miro's speech.

"What?" asked Ender.

"We both want to know how far it is," Valentine said.

"I don't know," said Ender. "From here, anyway. And she might be almost anywhere down here. There are dozens of nurseries. But don't worry. I'm pretty sure I could find my way out."

"So could I," said Valentine. "With a flashlight, anyway."

"No light," said Ender. "The egg-laying requires sunlight, but after that light only retards the development of the eggs. And at one stage it can kill the larvae."

"But you could find your way out of this nightmare in the dark?" asked Valentine.

"Probably," said Ender. "There are patterns. Like spider webs-- when you sense the overall structure, each section of tunnel makes more sense."

"These tunnels aren't random?" Valentine sounded skeptical.

"It's like the tunneling on Eros," said Ender. He really hadn't had that much chance to explore when he lived on Eros as a child-soldier. The asteroid had been honeycombed by the buggers when they made it their forward base in the Sol System; it became fleet headquarters for the human allies after it was captured during the first Bugger War. During his months there, Ender had devoted most of his time and attention to learning to control fleets of starships in space. Yet he must have noticed much more about the tunnels than he realized at the time, because the first time the hive queen brought him into her burrows on Lusitania, Ender found that the bends and turns never seemed to take him by surprise. They felt right-- no, they felt inevitable.

"What's Eros?" asked Miro.

"An asteroid near Earth," said Valentine. "The place where Ender lost his mind."

Ender tried to explain to them something about the way the tunnel system was organized. But it was too complicated. Like fractals, there were too many possible exceptions to grasp the system in detail-- it kept eluding comprehension the more closely you pursued it. Yet to Ender it always seemed the same, a pattern that repeated over and over. Or maybe it was just that Ender had got inside the hivemind somehow, when he was studying them in order to defeat them. Maybe he had simply learned to think like a bugger. In which case Valentine was right-- he had lost part of his human mind, or at least added onto it a bit of the hivemind.

Finally when they turned a corner there came a glimmer of light. "Gracias a deus," whispered Miro. Ender noted with satisfaction that Plikt-- this stone woman who could not possibly be the same person as the brilliant student he remembered-- also let out a sigh of relief. Maybe there was some life in her after all.

"Almost there," said Ender. "And since she's laying, she'll be in a good mood."

"Doesn't she want privacy?" asked Miro.

"It's like a minor sexual climax that goes on for several hours," said Ender. "It makes her pretty cheerful. Hive queens are usually surrounded only by workers and drones that function as part of themselves. They never learn shyness."

In his mind, though, he could feel the intensity of her presence. She could communicate with him anytime, of course. But when he was close, it was as if she were breathing into his brainpan; it became heavy, oppressive. Did the others feel it? Would she be able to speak to them? With Ela there had been nothing-- Ela never caught a glimmer of the silent conversation. As for Novinha-- she refused to speak of it and denied having heard anything, but Ender suspected that she had simply rejected the alien presence. The hive queen said she could hear both their minds clearly enough, as long as they were present, but couldn't make herself "heard." Would it be the same with these, today?

It would be such a good thing, if the hive queen could speak to another human. She claimed to be able to do it, but Ender had learned over the past thirty years that the hive queen was unable to distinguish between her confident assessments of the future and her sure memories of the past. She seemed to trust her guesses every bit as much as she trusted her memories; and yet when her guesses turned out wrong, she seemed not to remember that she had ever expected a different future from the one that now was past.

It was one of the quirks of her alien mind that disturbed Ender most. Ender had grown up in a culture that judged people's maturity and social fitness by their ability to anticipate the results of their choices. In some ways the hive queen seemed markedly deficient in this area; for all her great wisdom and experience, she seemed as boldly and unjustifiably confident as a small child.

That was one of the things that frightened Ender about dealing with her. Could she keep a promise? If she failed to keep one, would she even realize what she had done?

Valentine tried to concentrate on what the others were saying, but she couldn't take her eyes off the silhouette of the bugger leading them. It was smaller than she had ever imagined-- no taller than a meter and a half, probably less. Looking past the others, she could only glimpse parts of the bugger, but that was almost worse than seeing it whole. She couldn't keep herself from thinking that this shiny black enemy had a death grip on Ender's hand.

Not a death grip. Not an enemy. Not even a creature, in itself. It had as much individual identity as an ear or a toe-- each bugger was just another of the hive queen's organs of action and sensation. In a sense the hive queen was already present with them-- was present wherever one of her workers or drones might be, even hundreds of light-years away. This is not a monster. This is the very hive queen written of in Ender's book. This is the one he carried with him and nurtured during all our years together, though I didn't know it. I have nothing to fear.

Valentine had tried suppressing her fear, but it wasn't working. She was sweating; she could feel her hand slipping in Miro's palsied grip. As they got closer and closer to the hive queen's lair-- no, her home, her nursery-- she could feel herself getting more and more frightened. If she couldn't handle it alone, there was no choice but to reach out for help. Where was Jakt? Someone else would have to do.

"I'm sorry, Miro," she whispered. "I think I've got the sweats."

"You?" he said. "I thought it was my sweat."

That was good. He laughed. She laughed with him-- or at least giggled nervously.

The tunnel suddenly opened wide, and now they stood blinking in a large chamber with a shaft of bright sunlight stabbing through a hole in the vault of the ceiling. The hive queen was smack in the center of the light. There were workers all around, but now, in the light, in the presence of the queen, they all looked so small and fragile. Most of them were closer to one meter than a meter and a half in height, while the queen herself was surely three meters long. And height wasn't the half of it. Her wing-covers looked vast, heavy, almost metallic, with a rainbow of colors reflecting sunlight. Her abdomen was long and thick enough to contain the corpse of an entire human. Yet it narrowed, funnel-like, to an ovipositor at the quivering tip, glistening with a yellowish translucent fluid, gluey, stringy; it dipped into a hole in the floor of the room, deep as it could go, and then came back up, the fluid trailing away like unnoticed spittle, down into the hole.

Grotesque and frightening as this was, a creature so large acting so much like an insect, it did not prepare Valentine for what happened next. For instead of simply dipping her ovipositor into the next hole, the queen turned and seized one of the workers hovering nearby. Holding the quivering bugger between her large forelegs, she drew it close and bit off its legs, one by one. As each leg was bitten off, the remaining legs gesticulated ever more wildly, like a silent scream. Valentine found herself desperately relieved when the last leg was gone, so that the scream was at last gone from her sight.

Then the hive queen pushed the unlimbed worker headfirst down the next hole. Only then did she position her ovipositor over the hole. As Valentine watched, the fluid at the ovipositor's tip seemed to thicken into a ball. But it wasn't fluid after all, or not entirely; within the large drop was a soft, jellylike egg. The hive queen maneuvered her body so that her face was directly in the sunlight, her multiplex eyes shining like hundreds of emerald stars. Then the ovipositor plunged downward. When it came up, the egg still clung to the end, but on the next emergence the egg was gone. Several times more her abdomen dipped downward, each time coming up with more strands of fluid stringing downward from the tip.

"Nossa Senhora," said Miro. Valentine recognized it from its Spanish equivalent-- Nuestra Señora, Our Lady. It was usually an almost meaningless expression, but now it took on a repulsive irony. Not the Holy Virgin, here in this deep cavern. The hive queen was Our Lady of the Darkness. Laying eggs over the bodies of lying workers, to feed the larvae when they hatched.

"It can't always be this way," said Plikt.

For a moment Valentine was simply surprised to hear Plikt's voice. Then she realized what Plikt was saying, and she was right. If a living worker had to be sacrificed for every bugger that hatched, it would be impossible for the population to increase. In fact, it would have been impossible for this

hive to exist in the first place, since the hive queen had to give life to her first eggs without the benefit of any legless workers to feed them.

<Only a new queen.>

It came into Valentine's mind as if it were her own idea. The hive queen only had to place a living worker's body into the egg casing when the egg was supposed to grow into a new hive queen. But this wasn't Valentine's own idea; it felt too certain for that. There was no way she could know this information, and yet the idea came clearly, unquestionably, all at once. As Valentine had always imagined that ancient prophets and mystics heard the voice of God.

"Did you hear her? Any of you?" asked Ender.

"Yes," said Plikt.

"I think so," said Valentine.

"Hear what?" asked Miro.

"The hive queen," said Ender. "She explained that she only has to place a worker into the egg casing when she's laying the egg of a new hive queen. She's laying five-- there are two already in place. She invited us to come to see this. It's her way of telling us that she's sending out a colony ship. She lays five queen-eggs, and then waits to see which is strongest. That's the one she sends."

"What about the others?" asked Valentine.

"If any of them is worth anything, she cocoons the larva. That's what they did to her. The others she kills and eats. She has to-- if any trace of a rival queen's body should touch one of the drones that hasn't yet mated with this hive queen, it would go crazy and try to kill her. Drones are very loyal mates."

"Everybody else heard this?" asked Miro. He sounded disappointed. The hive queen wasn't able to talk to him.

"Yes," said Plikt.

"Only a bit of it," said Valentine.

"Empty your mind as best you can," said Ender. "Get some tune going in your head. That helps."

In the meantime, the hive queen was nearly done with the next set of amputations. Valentine imagined stepping on the growing pile of legs around the queen; in her imagination, they broke like twigs with hideous snapping sounds.

<Very soft. Legs don't break. Bend.>

The queen was answering her thoughts.

<You are part of Ender. You can hear me.>

The thoughts in her mind were clearer. Not so intrusive now, more controlled. Valentine was able to feel the difference between the hive queen's communications and her own thoughts.

"Ouvi," whispered Miro. He had heard something at last. "Fala mais, escuto. Say more, I'm listening."

<Philotic connections. You are bound to Ender. When I talk to him through the philotic link, you overhear. Echoes. Reverberations.>

Valentine tried to conceive how the hive queen was managing to speak Stark into her mind. Then she realized that the hive queen was almost certainly doing nothing of the kind-- Miro was hearing her in his native language, Portuguese; and Valentine wasn't really hearing Stark at all, she was hearing the English that it was based on, the American English that she had grown up with. The hive queen wasn't sending language to them, she was sending thought, and their brains were making sense of it in whatever language lay deepest in their minds. When Valentine heard the word echoes followed by reverberations, it wasn't the hive queen struggling for the right word, it was Valentine's own mind grasping for words to fit the meaning.

<Bound to him. Like my people. Except you have free will. Independent philote. Rogue people, all of you.>

"She's making a joke," whispered Ender. "Not a judgment."

Valentine was grateful for his interpretation. The visual image that came with the phrase rogue people was of an elephant stomping a man to death. It was an image out of her childhood, the story from which she had first learned the word rogue. It frightened her, that image, the way it had frightened her as a child. She already hated the hive queen's presence in her mind. Hated the way she could dredge up forgotten nightmares. Everything about the hive queen was a nightmare. How could Valentine ever have imagined that this being was raman? Yes, there was communication. Too much of it. Communication like mental illness.

And what she was saying-- that they heard her so well because they were philotically connected to Ender. Valentine thought back to what Miro and Jane had said during the voyage-- was it possible that her philotic strand was twined into Ender, and through him to the hive queen? But how could such a thing have happened? How could Ender ever have become bound to the hive queen in the first place?

<We reached for him. He was our enemy. Trying to destroy us. We wanted to tame him. Like a rogue.>

The understanding came suddenly, like a door opening. The buggers weren't all born docile. They could have their own identity. Or at least a breakdown of control. And so the hive queens had evolved a way of capturing them, binding them philotically to get them under control.

<Found him. Couldn't bind him. Too strong.>

And no one guessed the danger Ender was in. That the hive queen expected to be able to capture him, make him the same kind of mindless tool of her will as any bugger.

<Set up a web for him. Found the thing he yearned for. We thought. Got into it. Gave it a philotic core. Bonded with him. But it wasn't enough. Now you. You.>

Valentine felt the word like a hammer inside her mind. She means me. She means me, me, me... she struggled to remember who me was. Valentine. I'm Valentine. She means Valentine.

<You were the one. You. Should have found you. What he longed for most. Not the other thing.>

It gave her a sick feeling inside. Was it possible that the military was correct all along? Was it possible that only their cruel separation of Valentine and Ender saved him? That if she had been with Ender, the buggers could have used her to get control of him?

<No. Could not do it. You are also too strong. We were doomed. We were dead. He couldn't belong to us. But not to you either. Not anymore. Couldn't tame him, but we twined with him.>

Valentine thought of the picture that had come to her mind on the ship. Of people twined together, families tied by invisible cords, children to parents, parents to each other, or to their own parents. A shifting network of strings tying people together, wherever their allegiance belonged. Only now the picture was of herself, tied to Ender. And then of Ender, tied... to the hive queen... the queen shaking her ovipositor, the strands quivering, and at the end of the strand, Ender's head, wagging, bobbing ...

She shook her head, trying to clear away the image.

<We don't control him. He's free. He can kill me if he wants. I won't stop him. Will you kill me?>

This time the you was not Valentine; she could feel the question recede from her. And now, as the hive queen waited for an answer, she felt another thought in her mind. So close to her own way of thinking that if she hadn't been sensitized, if she hadn't been waiting for Ender to answer, she would have assumed it was her own natural thought.

Never, said the thought in her mind. I will never kill you. I love you.

And along with this thought came a glimmer of genuine emotion toward the hive queen. All at once her mental image of the hive queen included no loathing at all. Instead she seemed majestic, royal, magnificent. The rainbows from her wing-covers no longer seemed like an oily scum on water; the light reflecting from her eyes was like a halo; the glistening fluids at the tip of her

abdomen were the threads of life, like milk at the nipple of a woman's breast, stringing with saliva to her baby's suckling mouth. Valentine had been fighting nausea till now, yet suddenly she almost worshipped the hive queen.

It was Ender's thought in her mind, she knew that; that's why the thoughts felt so much like her own. And with his vision of the hive queen, she knew at once that she had been right all along, when she wrote as Demosthenes so many years before. The hive queen was raman, strange but still capable of understanding and being understood.

As the vision faded, Valentine could hear someone weeping. Plikt. In all their years together, Valentine had never heard Plikt show such frailty.

"Bonita," said Miro. Pretty.

Was that all he had seen? The hive queen was pretty? The communication must be weak indeed between Miro and Ender-- but why shouldn't it be? He hadn't known Ender that long or that well, while Valentine had known Ender all her life.

But if that was why Valentine's reception of Ender's thought was so much stronger than Miro's, how could she explain the fact that Plikt had so clearly received far more than Valentine? Was it possible that in all her years of studying Ender, of admiring him without really knowing him, Plikt had managed to bind herself more tightly to Ender than even Valentine was bound?

Of course she had. Of course. Valentine was married. Valentine had a husband. She had children. Her philotic connection to her brother was bound to be weaker. While Plikt had no allegiance strong enough to compete. She had given herself wholly to Ender. So with the hive queen making it possible for the philotic twines to carry thought, of course Plikt received Ender most perfectly. There was nothing to distract. No part of herself withheld.

Could even Novinha, who after all was tied to her children, have such a complete devotion to Ender? It was impossible. And if Ender had any inkling of this, it had to be disturbing to him. Or attractive? Valentine knew enough of men and women to know that worship was the most seductive of attributes. Have I brought a rival with me, to trouble Ender's marriage?

Can Ender and Plikt read my thoughts, even now?

Valentine felt deeply exposed, frightened. As if in answer, as if to calm her, the hive queen's mental voice returned, drowning out any thoughts that Ender might be sending.

<I know what you're afraid of. But my colony won't kill anyone. When we leave Lusitania, we can kill all the descolada virus on our starship.>

Maybe, thought Ender.

<We'll find a way. We won't carry the virus. We don't have to die to save humans. Don't kill us don't kill us.>

I'll never kill you. Ender's thought came like a whisper, almost drowned out in the hive queen's pleading.

We couldn't kill you anyway, thought Valentine. It's you who could easily kill us. Once you build your starships. Your weapons. You could be ready for the human fleet. Ender isn't commanding them this time.

<Never. Never kill anybody. Never we promised.>

Peace, came Ender's whisper. Peace. Be at peace, calm, quiet, rest. Fear nothing. Fear no man.

Don't build a ship for the piggies, thought Valentine. Build a ship for yourself, because you can kill the descolada you carry. But not for them.

The hive queen's thoughts abruptly changed from pleading to harsh rebuke.

<Don't they also have a right to live? I promised them a ship. I promised you never to kill. Do you want me to break promises?>

No, thought Valentine. She was already ashamed of herself for having suggested such a betrayal. Or were those the hive queen's feelings? Or Ender's? Was she really sure which thoughts and feelings were her own, and which were someone else's?

The fear she felt-- it was her own, she was almost certain of that.

"Please," she said. "I want to leave."

"Eu tambem," said Miro.

Ender took a single step toward the hive queen, reached out a hand toward her. She didn't extend her arms-- she was using them to jam the last of her sacrifices into the egg chamber. Instead the queen raised a wing-cover, rotated it, moved it toward Ender until at last his hand rested on the black rainbow surface.

Don't touch it! cried Valentine silently. She'll capture you! She wants to tame you!

"Hush," said Ender aloud.

Valentine wasn't sure whether he was speaking in answer to her silent cries, or was trying to silence something the hive queen was saying only to him. It didn't matter. Within moments Ender had hold of a bugger's finger and was leading them back into the dark tunnel. This time he had Valentine second, Miro third, and Plikt bringing up the rear. So that it was Plikt: who cast the last look backward toward the hive queen; it was Plikt who raised her hand in farewell.

All the way up to the surface, Valentine struggled to make sense of what had happened. She had always thought that if only people could communicate mind-to-mind, eliminating the ambiguities of language, then understanding would be perfect and there'd be no more needless conflicts. Instead she had discovered that rather than magnifying differences between people, language might just as easily soften them, minimize them, smooth things over so that people could get along even though they really didn't understand each other. The illusion of comprehension allowed people to think they were more alike than they really were. Maybe language was better.

They crawled out of the building into the sunlight, blinking, laughing in relief, all of them. "Not fun," said Ender. "But you insisted, Val. Had to see her right away."

"So I'm a fool," said Valentine. "Is that news?"

"It was beautiful," said Plikt.

Miro only lay on his back in the capim and covered his eyes with his arm.

Valentine looked at him lying there and caught a glimpse of the man he used to be, the body he used to have. Lying there, he didn't stagger; silent, there was no halting in his speech. No wonder his fellow xenologer had fallen in love with him. Ouanda. So tragic to discover that her father was also his father. That was the worst thing revealed when Ender spoke for the dead in Lusitania thirty years ago. This was the man that Ouanda had lost; and Miro had also lost this man that he was. No wonder he had risked death crossing the fence to help the piggies. Having lost his sweetheart, he counted his life as worthless. His only regret was that he hadn't died after all. He had lived on, broken on the outside as he was broken on the inside.

Why did she think of these things, looking at him? Why did it suddenly seem so real to her?

Was it because this was how he was thinking of himself right now? Was she capturing his image of himself? Was there some lingering connection between their minds?

"Ender," she said, "what happened down there?"

"Better than I hoped," said Ender.

"What was?"

"The link between us."

"You expected that?"

"Wanted it." Ender sat on the side of the car, his feet dangling in the tall grass. "She was hot today, wasn't she?"

"Was she? I wouldn't know how to compare."

"Sometimes she's so intellectual-- it's like doing higher mathematics in my head, just talking to her. This time-- like a child. Of course, I've never been with her when she was laying queen eggs. I think she may have told us more than she meant to."

"You mean she didn't mean her promise?"

"No, Val, no, she always means her promises. She doesn't know how to lie."

"Then what did you mean?"

"I was talking about the link between me and her. How they tried to tame me. That was really something, wasn't it? She was furious there for a moment, when she thought that you might have been the link they needed. You know what that would have meant to them-- they wouldn't have been destroyed. They might even have used me to communicate with the human governments. Shared the galaxy with us. Such a lost opportunity."

"You would have been-- like a bugger. A slave to them."

"Sure. I wouldn't have liked it. But all the lives that would have been saved-- I was a soldier, wasn't I? If one soldier, dying, can save the lives of billions ..."

"But it couldn't have worked. You have an independent will," said Valentine.

"Sure," said Ender. "Or at least, more independent than the hive queen can deal with. You too. Comforting, isn't it?"

"I don't feel very comforted right now," said Valentine. "You were inside my head down there. And the hive queen-- I feel so violated--"

Ender looked surprised. "It never feels that way to me."

"Well, it's not just that," said Valentine. "It was exhilarating, too. And frightening. She's so-- large inside my head. Like I'm trying to contain someone bigger than myself."

"I guess," said Ender. He turned to Plikt. "Was it like that for you, too?"

For the first time Valentine realized how Plikt was looking at Ender, with eyes full, a trembling gaze. But Plikt said nothing.

"That strong, huh?" said Ender. He chuckled and turned to Miro.

Didn't he see? Plikt had already been obsessed with Ender. Now, having had him inside her mind, it might have been too much for her. The hive queen talked of taming rogue workers. Was it possible that Plikt had been "tamed" by Ender? Was it possible that she had lost her soul inside his?

Absurd. Impossible. I hope to God it isn't so.

"Come on, Miro," said Ender.

Miro allowed Ender to help him to his feet. Then they climbed back onto the car and headed home to Milagre.

Miro had told them that he didn't want to go to mass. Ender and Novinha went without him. But as soon as they were gone, he found it impossible to remain in the house. He kept getting the feeling that someone was just outside his range of vision. In the shadows, a smallish figure, watching him. Encased in smooth hard armor, only two clawlike fingers on its slender arms, arms that could be bitten off and cast down like brittle kindling wood. Yesterday's visit to the hive queen had bothered him more than he dreamed possible.

I'm a xenologer, he reminded himself. My life has been devoted to dealing with aliens. I stood and watched as Ender flayed Human's mammaloid body and I didn't even flinch, because I'm a dispassionate scientist. Sometimes maybe I identify too much with my subjects. But I don't have nightmares about them, I don't start seeing them in shadows.

Yet here he was, standing outside the door of his mother's house because in the grassy fields, in the bright sunlight of a Sunday morning, there were no shadows where a bugger could wait to spring.

Am I the only one who feels this way?

The hive queen isn't an insect. She and her people are warm-blooded, just like the pequeninos. They respire, they sweat like mammals. They may carry with them the structural echoes of their evolutionary link with insects, just as we have our resemblances to lemurs and shrews and rats, but they created a bright and beautiful civilization. Or at least a dark and beautiful one. I should see them the way Ender does, with respect, with awe, with affection.

And all I managed, barely, was endurance.

There's no doubt that the hive queen is raman, capable of comprehending and tolerating us. The question is whether I am capable of comprehending and tolerating her. And I can't be the only one. Ender was so right to keep the knowledge of the hive queen from most of the people of Lusitania. If they once saw what I saw, or even caught a glimpse of a single bugger, the fear would spread, each one's terror would feed on everyone else's dread, until-- until something. Something bad. Something monstrous.

Maybe we're the varelse. Maybe xenocide is built into the human psyche as into no other species. Maybe the best thing that could happen for the moral good of the universe is for the descolada to get loose, to spread throughout the human universe and break us down to nothing. Maybe the descolada is God's answer to our unworthiness.

Miro found himself at the door of the cathedral. In the cool morning air it stood open. Inside, they had not yet come to the eucharist. He shuffled in, took his place near the back. He had no desire to commune with Christ today. He simply needed the sight of other people. He needed to be surrounded by human beings. He knelt, crossed himself, then stayed there, clinging to the back of the pew in front of him, his head bowed. He would have prayed, but there was nothing in the Pai Nosso to deal with his fear. Give us this day our daily bread? Forgive us our trespasses? Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven? That would be good. God's kingdom, in which the lion could dwell with the lamb.

Then there came to his mind an image of St. Stephen's vision: Christ sitting at the right hand of God. But on the left hand was someone else. The Queen of Heaven. Not the Holy Virgin but the hive queen, with whitish slime quivering on the tip of her abdomen. Miro clenched his hands on the wood of the pew before him. God take this vision from me. Get thee behind me, Enemy.

Someone came and knelt beside him. He didn't dare to open his eyes. He listened for some sound that would declare his companion to be human. But the rustling of cloth could just as easily be wing casings sliding across a hardened thorax.

He had to force this image away. He opened his eyes. With his peripheral vision he could see that his companion was kneeling. From the slightness of the arm, from the color of the sleeve, it was a woman.

"You can't hide from me forever," she whispered.

The voice was wrong. Too husky. A voice that had spoken a hundred thousand times since last he heard it. A voice that had crooned to babies, cried out in the throes of love, shouted at children to come home, come home. A voice that had once, when it was young, told him of a love that would last forever.

"Miro, if I could have taken your cross upon myself, I would have done it."

My cross? Is that what it is I carry around with me, heavy and sluggish, weighing me down? And here I thought it was my body.

"I don't know what to tell you, Miro. I grieved-- for a long time. Sometimes I think I still do. Losing you-- our hope for the future, I mean-- it was better anyway-- that's what I realized. I've had a good family, a good life, and so will you. But losing you as my friend, as my brother, that was the hardest thing, I was so lonely, I don't know if I ever got over that."

Losing you as my sister was the easy part. I didn't need another sister.

"You break my heart, Miro. You're so young. You haven't changed, that's the hardest thing, you haven't changed in thirty years."

It was more than Miro could bear in silence. He didn't lift his head, but he did raise his voice. Far too loudly for the middle of mass, he answered her: "Haven't I?"

He rose to his feet, vaguely aware that people were turning around to look at him.

"Haven't I?" His voice was thick, hard to understand, and he was doing nothing to make it any clearer. He took a halting step into the aisle, then turned to face her at last. "This is how you remember me?"

She looked up at him, aghast-- at what? At Miro's speech, his palsied movements? Or simply that he was embarrassing her, that it didn't turn into the tragically romantic scene she had imagined for the past thirty years?

Her face wasn't old, but it wasn't Ouanda, either. Middle-aged, thicker, with creases at the eyes. How old was she? Fifty now? Almost. What did this fifty-year-old woman have to do with him?

"I don't even know you," said Miro. Then he lurched his way to the door and passed out into the morning.

Some time later he found himself resting in the shade of a tree. Which one was this, Rooter or Human? Miro tried to remember-- it was only a few weeks ago that he left here, wasn't it? --but when he left, Human's tree was still only a sapling, and now both trees looked to be about the same size and he couldn't remember for sure whether Human had been killed uphill or downhill from Rooter. It didn't matter-- Miro had nothing to say to a tree, and they had nothing to say to him.

Besides, Miro had never learned tree language; they hadn't even known that all that beating on trees with sticks was really a language until it was too late for Miro. Ender could do it, and Ouanda, and probably half a dozen other people, but Miro would never learn, because there was no way Miro's hands could hold the sticks and beat the rhythms. Just one more kind of speech that was now useless to him.

"Que dia chato, meu filho."

That was one voice that would never change. And the attitude was unchanging as well: What a rotten day, my son. Pious and snide at the same time-- and mocking himself for both points of view.

"Hi, Quim."

"Father Estevao now, I'm afraid." Quim had adopted the full regalia of a priest, robes and all; now he gathered them under himself and sat on the worn-down grass in front of Miro.

"You look the part," said Miro. Quim had matured well. As a kid he had looked pinched and pious. Experience with the real world instead of theological theory had given him lines and creases, but the face that resulted had compassion in it. And strength. "Sorry I made a scene at mass."

"Did you?" asked Miro. "I wasn't there. Or rather, I was at mass-- I just wasn't at the cathedral."

"Communion for the ramen?"

"For the children of God. The church already had a vocabulary to deal with strangers. We didn't have to wait for Demosthenes."

"Well, you don't have to be smug about it, Quim. You didn't invent the terms."

"Let's not fight."

"Then let's not butt into other people's meditations."

"A noble sentiment. Except that you have chosen to rest in the shade of a friend of mine, with whom I need to have a conversation. I thought it was more polite to talk to you first, before I start beating on Rooter with sticks."

"This is Rooter?"

"Say hi. I know he was looking forward to your return."

"I never knew him."

"But he knew all about you. I don't think you realize, Miro, what a hero you are among the pequeninos. They know what you did for them, and what it cost you."

"And do they know what it's probably going to cost us all, in the end?"

"In the end we'll all stand before the judgment bar of God. If a whole planetful of souls is taken there at once, then the only worry is to make sure no one goes unchristened whose soul might have been welcomed among the saints."

"So you don't even care?"

"I care, of course," said Quim. "But let's say that there's a longer view, in which life and death are less important matters than choosing what kind of life and what kind of death we have."

"You really do believe all this, don't you," said Miro.

"Depending on what you mean by 'all this,' yes, I do."

"I mean all of it. A living God, a resurrected Christ, miracles, visions, baptism, transubstantiation."

"Yes."

"Miracles. Healing."

"Yes."

"Like at the shrine to Grandfather and Grandmother."

"Many healings have been reported there."

"Do you believe in them?"

"Miro, I don't know-- some of them might have been hysterical. Some might have been a placebo effect. Some purported healings might have been spontaneous remissions or natural recoveries."

"But some were real."

"Might have been."

"You believe that miracles are possible."

"Yes."

"But you don't think any of them actually happen."

"Miro, I believe that they do happen. I just don't know if people accurately perceive which events are miracles and which are not. There are no doubt many miracles claimed which were not miracles at all. There are also probably many miracles that no one recognized when they occurred."

"What about me, Quim?"

"What about you?"

"Why no miracle for me?"

Quirn ducked his head, pulled at the short grass in front of him. It was a habit when he was a child, trying to avoid a hard question; it was the way he responded when their supposed father, Marcao, was on a drunken rampage.

"What is it, Quim? Are miracles only for other people?"

"Part of the miracle is that no one knows why it happens."

"What a weasel you are, Quim."

Quim flushed. "You want to know why you don't get a miraculous healing? Because you don't have faith, Miro."

"What about the man who said, Yes Master, I believe-- forgive my unbelief?"

"Are you that man? Have you even asked for a healing?"

"I'm asking now," said Miro. And then, unbidden, tears came to his eyes. "O God," he whispered. "I'm so ashamed."

"Of what?" asked Quim. "Of having asked God for help? Of crying in front of your brother? Of your sins? Of your doubts?"

Miro shook his head. He didn't know. These questions were all too hard. Then he realized that he did know the answer. He held out his arms from his sides. "Of this body," he said.

Quirn reached out and took his arms near the shoulder, drew them toward him, his hands sliding down Miro's arms until he was clasping Miro's wrists. "This is my body which is given for you, he told us. The way you gave your body for the pequeninos. For the little ones."

"Yeah, Quim, but he got his body back, right?"

"He died, too."

"Is that how I get healed? Find a way to die?"

"Don't be an ass," said Quim. "Christ didn't kill himself. That was Judas's ploy."

Miro's anger exploded. "All those people who get their colds cured, who get their migraines miraculously taken from them-- are you telling me they deserve more from God than I do?"

"Maybe it isn't based on what you deserve. Maybe it's based on what you need."

Miro lunged forward, seizing the front of Quim's robe between his halfspastic fingers. "I need my body back!"

"Maybe," said Quim.

"What do you mean maybe, you simpering smug asshole!"

"I mean," said Quim mildly, "that while you certainly want your body back, it may be that God, in his great wisdom, knows that for you to become the best man you can be, you need to spend a certain amount of time as a cripple."

"How much time?" Miro demanded.

"Certainly no longer than the rest of your life."

Miro grunted in disgust and released Quim's robe.

"Maybe less," said Quim. "I hope so."

"Hope," said Miro contemptuously.

"Along with faith and pure love, it's one of the great virtues. You should try it."

"I saw Ouanda."

"She's been trying to speak to you since you arrived."

"She's old and fat. She's had a bunch of babies and lived thirty years and some guy she married has plowed her up one side and down the other all that time. I'd rather have visited her grave!"

"How generous of you."

"You know what I mean! Leaving Lusitania was a good idea, but thirty years wasn't long enough."

"You'd rather come back to a world where no one knows you."

"No one knows me here, either."

"Maybe not. But we love you, Miro."

"You love what I used to be."

"You're the same man, Miro. You just have a different body."

Miro struggled to his feet, leaning against Rooter for support as he got up. "Talk to your tree friend, Quim. You've got nothing to say that I want to hear."

"So you think," said Quim.

"You know what's worse than an asshole, Quim?"

"Sure," said Quim. "A hostile, bitter, self-pitying, abusive, miserable, useless asshole who has far too high an opinion of the importance of his own suffering."

It was more than Miro could bear. He screamed in fury and threw himself at Quim, knocking him to the ground. Of course Miro lost his own balance and fell on top of his brother, then got tangled in Quim's robes. But that was all right; Miro wasn't trying to get up, he was trying to beat some pain into Quim, as if by doing that he would remove some from himself.

After only a few blows, though, Miro stopped hitting Quim and collapsed in tears, weeping on his brother's chest. After a moment he felt Quim's arms around him. Heard Quim's soft voice, intoning a prayer.

"Pai Nosso, que estas no ceu." From there, however, the incantation stopped and the words turned new and therefore real. "O teu filho esta com dor, o meu irmao precisa a resurreicao da alma, ele merece o refresco da esperanca."

Hearing Quim give voice to Miro's pain, to his outrageous demands, made Miro ashamed again. Why should Miro imagine that he deserved new hope? How could he dare to demand that Quim pray for a miracle for him, for his body to be made whole? It was unfair, Miro knew, to put Quim's faith on the line for a self-pitying unbeliever like him.

But the prayer went on. "Ele deu tudo aos pequeninos, e tu nos disseste, Salvador, que qualquer coisa que fazemos a estes pequeninos, fazemos a ti."

Miro wanted to interrupt. If I gave all to the pequeninos, I did it for them, not for myself. But Quim's words held him silent: You told us, Savior, that whatever we do to these little ones, we do to you. It was as if Quim were demanding that God hold up his end of a bargain. It was a strange sort of relationship that Quim must have with God, as if he had a right to call God to account.

"Ele nao , como Jc, perfeito na coracao."

No, I'm not as perfect as Job. But I've lost everything, just as Job did. Another man fathered my children on the woman who should have been my wife. Others have accomplished my accomplishments. And where Job had boils, I have this lurching half-paralysis-- would Job trade with me?

"Restabelece ele como restabeleceste Jc. Em nome do Pai, e do Filho, e do Espirito Santo. Amem." Restore him as you restored Job.

Miro felt his brother's arms release him, and as if it were those arms, not gravity, that held him on his brother's chest, Miro rose up at once and stood looking down on his brother. A bruise was growing on Quim's cheek. His lip was bleeding.

"I hurt you," said Miro. "I'm sorry."

"Yes," said Quim. "You did hurt me. And I hurt you. It's a popular pastime here. Help me up."

For a moment, just one fleeting moment, Miro forgot that he was crippled, that he could barely maintain his balance himself. For just that moment he began to reach out a hand to his brother. But then he staggered as his balance slipped, and he remembered. "I can't," he said.

"Oh, shut up about being crippled and give me a hand."

So Miro positioned his legs far apart and bent down over his brother. His younger brother, who now was nearly three decades his senior, and older still in wisdom and compassion. Miro reached out his hand. Quim gripped it, and with Miro's help rose up from the ground. The effort was exhausting for Miro; he hadn't the strength for this, and Quim wasn't faking it, he was relying on Miro to lift him. They ended up facing each other, shoulder to shoulder, hands still together.

"You're a good priest," said Miro.

"Yeah," said Quim. "And if I ever need a sparring partner, you'll get a call."

"Will God answer your prayer?"

"Of course. God answers all prayers."

It took only a moment for Miro to realize what Quim meant. "I mean, will he say yes."

"Ah. That's the part I'm never sure about. Tell me later if he did."

Quim walked-- rather stiffly, limping-- to the tree. He bent over and picked up a couple of talking sticks from the ground.

"What are you talking to Rooter about?"

"He sent word that I need to talk to him. There's some kind of heresy in one of the forests a long way from here."

"You convert them and then they go crazy, huh?" said Miro.

"No, actually," said Quim. "This is a group that I never preached to. The fathertrees all talk to each other, so the ideas of Christianity are already everywhere in the world. As usual, heresy seems to spread faster than truth. And Rooter's feeling guilty because it's based on a speculation of his."

"I guess that's a serious business for you," said Miro.

Quim winced. "Not just for me."

"I'm sorry. I meant, for the church. For believers."

"Nothing so parochial as that, Miro. These pequeninos have come up with a really interesting heresy. Once, not long ago, Rooter speculated that, just as Christ came to human beings, the Holy Ghost might someday come to the pequeninos. It's a gross misinterpretation of the Holy Trinity, but this one forest took it quite seriously."

"Sounds pretty parochial to me."

"Me too. Till Rooter told me the specifics. You see, they're convinced that the descolada virus is the incarnation of the Holy Ghost. It makes a perverse kind of sense-- since the Holy Ghost has always dwelt everywhere, in all God's creations, it's appropriate for its incarnation to be the descolada virus, which also penetrates into every part of every living thing."

"They worship the virus?"

"Oh, yes. After all, didn't you scientists discover that the pequeninos were created, as sentient beings, by the descolada virus? So the virus is endowed with the creative power, which means it has a divine nature."

"I guess there's as much literal evidence for that as for the incarnation of God in Christ."

"No, there's a lot more. But if that were all, Miro, I'd regard it as a church matter. Complicated, difficult, but-- as you said-- parochial."

"So what is it?"

"The descolada is the second baptism. By fire. Only the pequeninos can endure that baptism, and it carries them into the third life. They are clearly closer to God than humans, who have been denied the third life."

"The mythology of superiority. We could expect that, I guess," said Miro.

"Most communities attempting to survive under irresistible pressure from a dominant culture develop a myth that allows them to believe they are somehow a special people. Chosen. Favored by the gods. Gypsies, Jews-- plenty of historical precedents.

"Try this one, Senhor Zenador. Since the pequeninos are the ones chosen by the Holy Ghost, it's their mission to spread this second baptism to every tongue and every people."

"Spread the descolada?"

"To every world. Sort of a portable judgment day. They arrive, the descolada spreads, adapts, kills-- and everybody goes to meet their Maker."

"God help us."

"So we hope."

Then Miro made a connection with something he had learned only the day before. "Quim, the buggers are building a ship for the pequeninos."

"So Ender told me. And when I confronted Father Daymaker about it--"

"He's a pequenino?"

"One of Human's children. He said, 'Of course,' as if everyone knew about it. Maybe that's what he thought-- that if the pequeninos know it, then it's known. He also told me that this heretic group is angling to try to get command of the ship."

"Why?"

"So they can take it to an inhabited world, of course. Instead of finding an uninhabited planet to terraform and colonize."

"I think we'd have to call it lusiforming."

"Funny." Quim wasn't laughing, though. "They might get their way. This idea of pequeninos being a superior species is popular, especially among non-Christian pequeninos. Most of them aren't very sophisticated. They don't catch on to the fact that they're talking about xenocide. About wiping out the human race."

"How could they miss a little fact like that?"

"Because the heretics are stressing the fact that God loves the humans so much that he sent his only beloved son. You remember the scripture."

"Whoever believes in him will not perish."

"Exactly. Those who believe will have eternal life. As they see it, the third life."

"So those who die must have been the unbelievers."

"Not all the pequeninos are lining up to volunteer for service as itinerant destroying angels. But enough of them are that it has to be stopped. Not just for the sake of Mother Church."

"Mother Earth."

"So you see, Miro, sometimes a missionary like me takes on a great deal of importance in the world. Somehow I have to persuade these poor heretics of the error of their ways and get them to accept the doctrine of the church."

"Why are you talking to Rooter now?"

"To get the one piece of information the pequeninos never give us."

"What's that?"

"Addresses. There are thousands of pequenino forests on Lusitania. Which one is the heretic community? Their starship will be long gone before I find it by random forest-hopping on my own."

"You're going alone?"

"I always do. I can't take any of the little brothers with me, Miro. Until a forest has been converted, they have a tendency to kill pequenino strangers. One case where it's better to be raman than utlanning."

"Does Mother know you're going?"

"Please be practical, Miro. I have no fear of Satan, but Mother ..."

"Does Andrew know?"

"Of course. He insists on going with me. The Speaker for the Dead has enormous prestige, and he thinks he could help me."

"So you won't be alone."

"Of course I will. When has a man clothed in the whole armor of God ever needed the help of a humanist?"

"Andrew's a Catholic."

"He goes to mass, he takes communion, he confesses regularly, but he's still a speaker for the dead and I don't think he really believes in God. I'll go alone."

Miro looked at Quim with new admiration. "You're one tough son of a bitch, aren't you?"

"Welders and smiths are tough. Sons of bitches have problems of their own. I'm just a servant of God and of the church, with a job to do. I think recent evidence suggests that I'm in more danger from my brother than I am among the most heretical of pequeninos. Since the death of Human, the pequeninos have kept the worldwide oath-- not one has ever raised a hand in violence against a human being. They may be heretics, but they're still pequeninos. They'll keep the oath."

"I'm sorry I hit you."

"I received it as if it were an embrace, my son."

"I wish it had been one, Father Estevao."

"Then it was."

Quim turned to the tree and began to beat out a tattoo. Almost at once, the sound began to shift, changing in pitch and tone as the hollow spaces within the tree changed shape. Miro waited a few moments, listening, even though he didn't understand the language of the fathertrees. Rooter was speaking with the only audible voice the fathertrees had. Once he had spoken with a voice, once had articulated lips with and tongue and teeth. There was more than one way to lose your body. Miro had passed through an experience that should have killed him. He had come out of it crippled. But he could still move, however clumsily, could still speak, however slowly. He thought he was suffering like Job. Rooter and Human, far more crippled than he, thought they had received eternal life.

"Pretty ugly situation," said Jane in his ear.

Yes, said Miro silently.

"Father Estevao shouldn't go alone," she said. "The pequeninos used to be devastatingly effective warriors. They haven't forgotten how."

So tell Ender, said Miro. I don't have any power here.

"Bravely spoken, my hero," said Jane. "I'll talk to Ender while you wait around here for your miracle."

Miro sighed and walked back down the hill and through the gate.

Chapter 9 -- PINEHEAD

<I've been talking to Ender and his sister, Valentine. She's a historian.>

<Explain this.>

<She searches through the books to find out the stories of humans, and then writes stories about what she finds and gives them to all the other humans.>

<If the stories are already written down, why does she write them again?>

<Because they aren't well understood. She helps people understand them.>

<If the people closer to that time didn't understand them, how can she, coming later, understand them better?>

<I asked this myself, and Valentine said that she doesn't always understand them better. But the old writers understood what the stories meant to the people of their time, and she understands what the stories mean to people of her time.>

<So the story changes.>

<Yes.>

<And yet each time they still think of the story as a true memory?>

<Valentine explained something about some stories being true and others being truthful. I didn't understand any of it.>

<Why don't they just remember their stories accurately in the first place? Then they wouldn't have to keep lying to each other.>

Qing-jao sat before her terminal, her eyes closed, thinking. Wang-mu was brushing Qing-jao's hair; the tugs, the strokes, the very breath of the girl was a comfort to her.

This was a time when Wang-mu could speak freely, without fear of interrupting her. And, because Wang-mu was Wang-mu, she used hair-brushing time for questions. She had so many questions.

The first few days her questions had all been about the speaking of the gods. Of course, Wang-mu had been greatly relieved to learn that almost always tracing a single woodgrain line was enough-- she had been afraid after that first time that Qing-jao would have to trace the whole floor every day.

But she still had questions about everything to do with purification. Why don't you just get up and trace a line every morning and have done with it? Why don't you just have the floor covered in carpet? It was so hard to explain that the gods can't be fooled by silly stratagems like that.

What if there were no wood at all in the whole world? Would the gods burn you up like paper? Would a dragon come and carry you off?

Qing-jao couldn't answer Wang-mu's questions except to say that this is what the gods required of her. If there were no woodgrain, the gods wouldn't require her to trace it. To which Wang-mu replied that they should make a law against wooden floors, then, so that Qing-jao could be shut of the whole business.

Those who hadn't heard the voice of the gods simply couldn't understand.

Today, though, Wang-mu's question had nothing to do with the gods-- or, at least, had nothing to do with them at first.

"What is it that finally stopped the Lusitania Fleet?" asked Wang-mu.

Almost, Qing-jao simply took the question in stride; almost she answered with a laugh: If I knew that, I could rest! But then she realized that Wang-mu probably shouldn't even know that the Lusitania Fleet had disappeared.

"How would you know anything about the Lusitania Fleet?"

"I can read, can't I?" said Wang-mu, perhaps a little too proudly.

But why shouldn't she be proud? Qing-jao had told her, truthfully, that Wang-mu learned very quickly indeed, and figured out many things for herself. She was very intelligent, and Qing-jao knew she shouldn't be surprised if Wang-mu understood more than was told to her directly.

"I can see what you have on your terminal," said Wang-mu, "and it always has to do with the Lusitania Fleet. Also you discussed it with your father the first day I was here. I didn't understand most of what you said, but I knew it had to do with the Lusitania Fleet." Wang-mu's voice was suddenly filled with loathing. "May the gods piss in the face of the man who launched that fleet."

Her vehemence was shocking enough; the fact that Wang-mu was speaking against Starways Congress was unbelievable.

"Do you know who it was that launched the fleet?" asked Qing-jao.

"Of course. It was the selfish politicians in Starways Congress, trying to destroy any hope that a colony world could win its independence."

So Wang-mu knew she was speaking treasonously. Qing-jao remembered her own similar words, long ago, with loathing; to have them said again in her presence-- and by her own secret maid-- was outrageous. "What do you know of these things? These are matters for Congress, and here you are speaking of independence and colonies and--"

Wang-mu was on her knees, head bowed to the floor. Qing-jao was at once ashamed for speaking so harshly.

"Oh, get up, Wang-mu."

"You're angry with me."

"I'm shocked to hear you talk like that, that's all. Where did you hear such nonsense?"

"Everybody says it," said Wang-mu.

"Not everybody," said Qing-jao. "Father never says it. On the other hand, Demosthenes says that sort of thing all the time." Qing-jao remembered how she had felt when she first read the words of Demosthenes-- how logical and right and fair he had sounded. Only later, after Father had explained to her that Demosthenes was the enemy of the rulers and therefore the enemy of the gods, only then did she realize how oily and deceptive the traitor's words had been, which had almost seduced her into believing that the Lusitania Fleet was evil. If Demosthenes had been able to come so close to fooling an educated godspoken girl like Qing-jao, no wonder that she was hearing his words repeated like truth in the mouth of a common girl.

"Who is Demosthenes?" asked Wang-mu.

"A traitor who is apparently succeeding better than anyone thought." Did Starways Congress realize that Demosthenes' ideas were being repeated by people who had never heard of him? Did anyone understand what this meant? Demosthenes' ideas were now the common wisdom of the common people. Things had reached a more dangerous turn than Qing-jao had imagined. Father was wiser; he must know already. "Never mind," said Qingjao. "Tell me about the Lusitania Fleet."

"How can I, when it will make you angry?"

Qing-jao waited patiently.

"All right then," said Wang-mu, but she still looked wary. "Father says-- and so does Pan Ku-wei, his very wise friend who once took the examination for the civil service and came very very close to passing--"

"What do they say?"

"That it's a very bad thing for Congress to send a huge fleet-- and so huge-- all to attack the tiniest colony simply because they refused to send away two of their citizens for trial on another world. They say that justice is completely on the side of Lusitania, because to send people from one planet to another against their will is to take them away from family and friends forever. That's like sentencing them before the trial."

"What if they're guilty?"

"That's for the courts to decide on their own world, where people know them and can measure their crime fairly, not for Congress to decide from far away where they know nothing and understand less." Wang-mu ducked her head. "That's what Pan Ku-wei says."

Qing-jao stilled her own revulsion at Wang-mu's traitorous words; it was important to know what the common people thought, even if the very hearing of it made Qing-jao sure the gods would be angry with her for such disloyalty. "So you think that the Lusitania Fleet should never have been sent?"

"If they can send a fleet against Lusitania for no good reason, what's to stop them from sending a fleet against Path? We're also a colony, not one of the Hundred Worlds, not a member of Starways Congress. What's to stop them from declaring that Han Fei-tzu is a traitor and making him travel to some faraway planet and never come back for sixty years?"

The thought was a terrible one, and it was presumptuous of Wang-mu to bring her father into the discussion, not because she was a servant, but because it would be presumptuous of anyone to imagine the great Han Fei-tzu being convicted of a crime. Qing-jao's composure failed her for a moment, and she spoke her outrage: "Starways Congress would never treat my father like a criminal!"

"Forgive me, Qing-jao. You told me to repeat what my father said."

"You mean your father spoke of Han Fei-tzu?"

"All the people of Jonlei know that Han Fei-tzu is the most honorable man of Path. It's our greatest pride, that the House of Han is part of our city."

So, thought Qing-jao, you knew exactly how ambitious you were being when you set out to become his daughter's maid.

"I meant no disrespect, nor did they. But isn't it true that if Starways Congress wanted to, they could order Path to send your father to another world to stand trial?"

"They would never--"

"But could they?" insisted Wang-mu.

"Path is a colony," said Qing-jao. "The law allows it, but Starways Congress would never--"

"But if they did it to Lusitania, why wouldn't they do it to Path?"

"Because the xenologers on Lusitania were guilty of crimes that--"

"The people of Lusitania didn't think so. Their government refused to send them off for trial."

"That's the worst part. How can a planetary government dare to think they know better than Congress?"

"But they knew everything," said Wang-mu, as if this idea were so natural that everyone must know it. "They knew those people, those xenologers. If Starways Congress ordered Path to send Han Fei-tzu to go stand trial on another world for a crime we know he didn't commit, don't you think we would also rebel rather than send such a great man? And then they would send a fleet against us."

"Starways Congress is the source of all justice in the Hundred Worlds." Qing-jao spoke with finality. The discussion was over.

Impudently, Wang-mu didn't fall silent. "But Path isn't one of the Hundred Worlds yet, is it?" she said. "We're just a colony. They can do what they want, and that's not right."

Wang-mu nodded her head at the end, as if she thought she had utterly prevailed. Qing-jao almost laughed. She would have laughed, in fact, if she hadn't been so angry. Partly she was angry because Wang-mu had interrupted her many times and had even contradicted her, something that her teachers had always been very careful not to do. Still, Wang-mu's audacity was probably a good thing, and Qing-jao's anger was a sign that she had become too used to the undeserved respect people showed to her ideas simply because they fell from the lips of the godspoken. Wang-mu must be encouraged to speak to her like this. That part of Qing-jao's anger was wrong, and she must get rid of it.

But much of Qing-jao's anger was because of the way Wang-mu had spoken about Starways Congress. It was as if Wang-mu didn't think of Congress as the supreme authority over all of humanity; as if Wang-mu imagined that Path was more important than the collective will of all the worlds. Even if the inconceivable happened and Han Fei-tzu were ordered to stand trial on a world

a hundred lightyears away, he would do it without murmur-- and he would be furious if anyone on Path made the slightest resistance. To rebel like Lusitania? Unthinkable. It made Qing-jao feel dirty just to think of it.

Dirty. Impure. To hold such a rebellious thought made her start searching for a woodgrain line to trace.

"Qing-jao!" cried Wang-mu, as soon as Qing-jao knelt and bowed over the floor. "Please tell me that the gods aren't punishing you for hearing the words I said!"

"They aren't punishing me," said Qing-jao. "They're purifying me."

"But they weren't even my words, Qing-jao. They were the words of people who aren't even here."

"They were impure words, whoever said them."

"But that's not fair, to make you cleanse yourself for ideas that you never even thought of or believed in!"

Worse and worse! Would Wang-mu never stop? "Now must I hear you tell me that the gods themselves are unfair?"

"They are, if they punish you for other people's words!"

The girl was outrageous. "Now you are wiser than the gods?"

"They might as well punish you for being pulled on by gravity, or being fallen on by rain!"

"If they tell me to purify myself for such things, then I'll do it, and call it justice," said Qing-jao.

"Then justice has no meaning!" cried Wang-mu. "When you say the word, you mean whatever-the-gods-happen-to-decide. But when I say the word, I mean fairness, I mean people being punished only for what they did on purpose, I mean--"

"It's what the gods mean by justice that I must listen to."

"Justice is justice, whatever the gods might say!"

Almost Qing-jao rose up from the floor and slapped her secret maid. It would have been her right, for Wang-mu was causing her as much pain as if she had struck her. But it was not Qing-jao's way to strike a person who was not free to strike back. Besides, there was a far more interesting puzzle here. After all, the gods had sent Wang-mu to her--Qing-jao was already sure of that. So instead of arguing with Wang-mu directly, Qing-jao should try to understand what the gods meant by sending her a servant who would say such shameful, disrespectful things.

The gods had caused Wang-mu to say that it was unjust to punish Qing-jao for simply hearing another person's disrespectful opinions. Perhaps Wang-mu's statement was true. But it was also true that the gods could not be unjust. Therefore it must be that Qing-jao was not being punished for simply hearing the treasonous opinions of the people. No, Qing-jao had to purify herself because, in her heart of hearts, some part of her must believe those opinions. She must cleanse herself because deep inside she still doubted the heavenly mandate of Starways Congress; she still believed they were not just.

Qing-jao immediately crawled to the nearest wall and began looking for the right woodgrain line to follow. Because of Wang-mu's words, Qing-jao had discovered a secret filthiness inside herself. The gods had brought her another step closer to knowing the darkest places inside herself, so that she might someday be utterly filled with light and thus earn the name that even now was still only a mockery. Some part of me doubts the righteousness of Starways Congress. O Gods, for the sake of my ancestors, my people, and my rulers, and last of all for me, purge this doubt from me and make me clean!

When she finished tracing the line-- and it took only a single line to make her clean, which was a good sign that she had learned something true-- there sat Wang-mu, watching her. All of Qing-jao's anger was gone now, and indeed she was grateful to Wang-mu for having been an unwitting tool of the gods in helping her learn new truth. But still, Wang-mu had to understand that she had been out of line.

"In this house, we are loyal servants of Starways Congress," said Qingjao, her voice soft, her expression as kind as she could make it. "And if you're a loyal servant of this house, you'll also serve Congress with all your heart." How could she explain to Wang-mu how painfully she had learned that lesson herself-- how painfully she was still learning it? She needed Wang-mu to help her, not make it harder.

"Holy one, I didn't know," said Wang-mu, "I didn't guess. I had always heard the name of Han Fei-tzu mentioned as the noblest servant of Path. I thought it was the Path that you served, not Congress, or I never would have..."

"Never would have come to work here?"

"Never would have spoken harshly about Congress," said Wang-mu. "I would serve you even if you lived in the house of a dragon."

Maybe I do, thought Qing-jao. Maybe the god who purifies me is a dragon, cold and hot, terrible and beautiful.

"Remember, Wang-mu, that the world called Path is not the Path itself, but only was named so to remind us to live the true Path every day. My father and I serve Congress because they have the mandate of heaven, and so the Path requires that we serve them even above the wishes or needs of the particular world called Path."

Wang-mu looked at her with wide eyes, unblinking. Did she understand? Did she believe? No matter-- she would come to believe in time.

"Go away now, Wang-mu. I have to work."

"Yes, Qing-jao." Wang-mu immediately got up and backed away, bowing. Qing-jao turned back to her terminal. But as she began to call up more reports into the display, she became aware that someone was in the room with her. She whirled around on her chair; there in the doorway stood Wang-mu.

"What is it?" asked Qing-jao.

"Is it the duty of a secret maid to tell you whatever wisdom comes to her mind, even if it turns out to be foolishness?"

"You can say whatever you like to me," said Qing-jao. "Have I ever punished you?"

"Then please forgive me, my Qing-jao, if I dare to say something about this great task you are working on."

What did Wang-mu know of the Lusitania Fleet? Wang-mu was a quick student, but Qing-jao was still teaching her at such a primitive level in every subject that it was absurd to think Wang-mu could even grasp the problems, let alone think of an answer. Nevertheless, Father had taught her: Servants are always happier when they know their voices are heard by their master. "Please tell me," said Qing-jao. "How can you say anything more foolish than the things I have already said?"

"My beloved elder sister," said Wang-mu, "I really got this idea from you. You've said so many times that nothing known to all of science and history could possibly have caused the fleet to disappear so perfectly, and all at once."

"But it happened," said Qing-jao, "and so it must be possible after all."

"What came to my mind, my sweet Qing-jao," said Wang-mu, "is some thing you explained to me as we studied logic. About first and final cause. All this time you have been looking for first causes-- how the fleet was made to disappear. But have you looked for final causes-- what someone hoped to accomplish by cutting off the fleet, or even destroying it?"

"Everyone knows why people want the fleet stopped. They're trying to protect the rights of colonies, or else they have some ridiculous idea that Congress means to destroy the pequeninos along with the whole colony. There are billions of people who want the fleet to stop. All of them are seditious in their hearts, and enemies of the gods."

"But somebody actually did it," said Wang-mu. "I only thought that since you can't find out what happened to the fleet directly, then maybe if you find out who made it happen, that will lead you to find out how they did it."

"We don't even know that it was done by a who," said Qing-jao. "It could have been a what. Natural phenomena don't have purposes in mind, since they don't have minds."

Wang-mu bowed her head. "I did waste your time, then, Qing-jao. Please forgive me. I should have left when you told me to go."

"It's all right," said Qing-jao.

Wang-mu was already gone; Qing-jao didn't know whether her servant had even heard her reassurance. Never mind, thought Qing-jao. If Wangmu was offended, I'll make it up to her later. It was sweet of the girl to think she could help me with my task; I'll make sure she knows I'm glad she has such an eager heart.

With Wang-mu out of the room, Qing-jao went back to her terminal. She idly flipped the reports through her terminal's display. She had looked at all of them before, and she had found nothing useful. Why should this time be different? Maybe these reports and summaries showed her nothing because there was nothing to show. Maybe the fleet disappeared because of some god-gone-berserk; there were stories of such things in ancient times. Maybe there was no evidence of human intervention because a human didn't do it. What would Father say about that, she wondered. How would Congress deal with a lunatic deity? They couldn't even track down that seditious writer Demosthenes-- what hope did they have of tracking and trapping a god?

Whoever Demosthenes is, he's laughing right now, thought Qing-jao. All his work to persuade people that the government was wrong to send the Lusitania Fleet, and now the fleet has stopped, just as Demosthenes wanted.

Just as Demosthenes wanted. For the first time, Qing-jao made a mental connection that was so obvious she couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it before. It was so obvious, in fact, that the police in many a city had assumed that those who were already known to follow Demosthenes must surely have been involved in making the fleet disappear. They had rounded up everyone suspected of sedition and tried to force confessions out of them. But of course they hadn't actually questioned Demosthenes, because nobody knew who he was.

Demosthenes, so clever he has evaded discovery for years, despite all the searching of the Congress Police; Demosthenes, who is every bit as elusive as the cause of the disappearance of the fleet. If he could work the one trick, why not the other? Maybe if I find Demosthenes, I'll find out how the fleet was cut off. Not that I have any idea even where to start looking. But at least it's a different avenue of approach. At least it won't mean reading the same empty, useless reports over and over again.

Suddenly Qing-jao remembered who had said almost exactly the same thing, only moments before. She felt herself blushing, the blood hot in her cheeks. How arrogant I was, to condescend to Wang-mu, to patronize her for imagining she could help me with my lofty task. And now, not five minutes later, the thought she planted in my mind has blossomed into a plan. Even if the plan fails, she was the one who gave it to me, or at least started me thinking of it. Thus I was the fool to think her foolish. Tears of shame filled Qing-jao's eyes.

Then she thought of some famous lines from a song by her ancestor-of-the-heart:

I want to call back the blackberry flowers that have fallen though pear blossoms remain

The poet Li Qing-jiao knew the pain of regretting words that have already fallen from our lips and can never be called back. But she was wise enough to remember that even though those words are gone, there are still new words waiting to be said, like the pear blossoms.

To comfort herself for the shame of having been so arrogant, Qing-jiao repeated all the words of the song; or at least she started to. But when she got to the line

dragon boats on the river

her mind drifted to the Lusitania Fleet, imagining all those starships like riverboats, painted so fiercely, and yet drifting now with the current, so far from the shore that they can no longer be heard no matter how loud they shout.

From dragon boats her thoughts turned to dragon kites, and now she thought of the Lusitania Fleet as kites with broken strings, carried along by the wind, no longer tethered to the child who first gave them flight. How beautiful, to see them free; yet how terrifying it must be for them, who never wished for freedom.

I did not fear the mad winds and violent rain

The words of the song came back to her again. I did not fear. Mad winds. Violent rain. I did not fear as

we drank to good fortune with warm blackberry wine now I cannot conceive how to retrieve that time

My ancestor-of-the-heart could drink away her fear, thought Qing-jiao, because she had someone to drink with. And even now,

alone on my mat with a cup gazing sadly into nothingness

the poet remembers her gone companion. Whom do I remember now? thought Qing-jiao. Where is my tender love? What an age it must have been then, when the great Li Qing-jiao was still mortal, and men and women could be together as tender friends without any worry about who was godspoken and who was not. Then a woman could live such a life that even in her loneliness she had memories. I can't even remember my mother's face. Only the flat pictures; I can't remember seeing her face turn and move while her eyes looked at me. I have only my Father, who is like a god; I can worship him and obey him and even love him but I can never be playful with him, not really; when I tease him I'm always watching to be sure he approves of the way I tease him. And Wang-mu; I talked so firmly about how we would be friends, and yet I treat her like a servant, I

never for a moment forget who is godspoken and who is not. It's a wall that can never be crossed. I'm alone now and I'm alone forever.

a clear cold comes through the window curtains crescent moon beyond the golden bars

She shivered. I and the moon. Didn't the Greeks think of their moon as a cold virgin, a huntress? Is that not what I am now? Sixteen years old and untouched

and a flute sounds as if someone were coming

I listen and listen but never hear the melody of someone coming ...

No. What she heard were the distant sounds of a meal being readied; a clattering of bowls and spoons, laughter from the kitchen. Her reverie broken, she reached up and wiped the foolish tears from her cheeks. How could she think of herself as lonely, when she lived in this full house where everyone had cared for her all her life? I sit here reciting to myself scraps of old poetry when I have work to do.

At once she began to call up the reports that had been made about investigations into the identity of Demosthenes.

The reports made her think for a moment that this was a dead end, too. More than three dozen writers on almost as many worlds had been arrested for producing seditious documents under that name. Starways Congress had reached the obvious conclusion: Demosthenes was simply the catchall name used by any rebel who wanted to get attention. There was no real Demosthenes, not even an organized conspiracy.

But Qing-jao had doubts about that conclusion. Demosthenes had been remarkably successful in stirring up trouble on every world. Could there possibly be someone of so much talent among the traitors on every planet? Not likely.

Besides, thinking back to when she had read Demosthenes, Qing-jao, remembered noticing the coherence of his writings. The singularity and consistency of his vision-- that was part of what made him so seductive. Everything seemed to fit, to make sense together.

Hadn't Demosthenes also devised the Hierarchy of Foreignness? Utlanning, framling, raman, varelse. No; that had been written many years ago-- it had to be a different Demosthenes. Was it because of that earlier Demosthenes' hierarchy that the traitors were using the name? They were writing in support of the independence of Lusitania, the only world where intelligent nonhuman life had been found. It was only appropriate to use the name of the writer who had first taught humanity to realize that the universe wasn't divided between humans and nonhumans, or between intelligent and non-intelligent species.

Some strangers, the earlier Demosthenes had said, were framlings-- humans from another world. Some were ramen-- of another intelligent species, yet able to communicate with human beings, so that we could work out differences and make decisions together. Others were varelse, "wise

beasts," clearly intelligent and yet completely unable to reach a common ground with humankind. Only with varelse would war ever be justified; with raman, humans could make peace and share the habitable worlds. It was an open way of thinking, full of hope that strangers might still be friends. People who thought that way could never have sent a fleet with Dr. Device to a world inhabited by an intelligent species.

This was a very uncomfortable thought: that the Demosthenes of the hierarchy would also disapprove of the Lusitania Fleet. Almost at once Qing-jao had to counter it. It didn't matter what the old Demosthenes thought, did it? The new Demosthenes, the seditious one, was no wise philosopher trying to bring peoples together. Instead he was trying to sow dissension and discontent among the worlds-- provoke quarrels, perhaps even wars between framblings.

And seditious Demosthenes was not just a composite of many rebels working on different worlds. Her computer search soon confirmed it. True, many rebels were found who had published on their own planet using the name Demosthenes, but they were always linked to small, ineffective, useless little publications-- never to the really dangerous documents that seemed to turn up simultaneously on half the worlds at once. Each local police force, however, was very happy to declare their own petty "Demosthenes" the perpetrator of all the writings, take their bows, and close the case.

Starways Congress had been only too happy to do the same thing with their own investigation. Having found several dozen cases where local police had arrested and convicted rebels who had incontrovertibly published something under the name Demosthenes, the Congress investigators sighed contentedly, declared that Demosthenes had proved to be a catchall name and not one person at all, and then stopped investigating.

In short, they had all taken the easy way out. Selfish, disloyal-- Qing-jao felt a surge of indignation that such people were allowed to continue in their high offices. They should be punished, and severely, too, for having let their private laziness or their desire for praise lead them to abandon the investigation of Demosthenes. Didn't they realize that Demosthenes was truly dangerous? That his writings were now the common wisdom of at least one world, and if one, then probably many? Because of him, how many people on how many worlds would rejoice if they knew that the Lusitania Fleet had disappeared? No matter how many people the police had arrested under the name Demosthenes, his works kept appearing, and always in that same voice of sweet reasonableness. No, the more she read the reports, the more certain Qing-jao became that Demosthenes was one man, as yet undiscovered. One man who knew how to keep secrets impossibly well.

From the kitchen came the sound of the flute; they were being called to dinner. She gazed into the display space over her terminal, where the latest report still hovered, the name Demosthenes repeated over and over. "I know you exist, Demosthenes," she whispered, "and I know you are very clever, and I will find you. When I do, you will stop your war against the rulers, and you will tell me what has happened to the Lusitania Fleet. Then I will be done with you, and Congress will punish you, and Father will become the god of Path and live forever in the Infinite West. That is the task that I was born for, the gods have chosen me for it, you might just as well show yourself to me now as later, for eventually all men and women lay their heads under the feet of the gods."

The flute played on, a breathy low melody, drawing Qing-jao out of herself and toward the company of the household. To her, this half-whispered music was the song of the inmost spirit, the quiet conversation of trees over a still pond, the sound of memories arising unbidden into the mind of a woman in prayer. Thus were they called to dine in the house of the noble Han Fei-tzu.

Having heard Qing-jao's challenge, Jane thought: This is what fear of death tastes like. Human beings feel this all the time, and yet somehow they go on from day to day, knowing that at any moment they may cease to be. But this is because they can forget something and still know it; I can never forget, not without losing the knowledge entirely. I know that Han Qing-jao is on the verge of finding secrets that have stayed hidden only because no one has looked hard for them. And when those secrets are known, I will die.

"Ender," she whispered.

Was it day or night on Lusitania? Was he awake or asleep? For Jane, to ask a question is either to know or not-know. So she knew at once that it was night. Ender had been asleep, but now he was awake; he was still attuned to her voice, she realized, even though many silences had passed between them in the past thirty years.

"Jane," he whispered.

Beside him his wife, Novinha, stirred in her sleep. Jane heard her, felt the vibration of her movement, saw the changing shadows through the sensor that Ender wore in his ear. It was good that Jane had not yet learned to feel jealousy, or she might have hated Novinha for lying there, a warm body beside Ender's own. But Novinha, being human, was gifted at jealousy, and Jane knew how Novinha seethed whenever she saw Ender speaking to the woman who lived in the jewel in his ear. "Hush," said Jane. "Don't wake people up."

Ender answered by moving his lips and tongue and teeth, without letting anything louder than a breath pass his lips. "How fare our enemies in flight?" he said. He had greeted her this way for many years.

"Not well," said Jane.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have blocked them. We would have found a way. Valentine's writings--"

"Are about to have their true authorship uncovered."

"Everything's about to be uncovered." He didn't say: because of you.

"Only because Lusitania was marked for destruction," she answered. She also didn't say: because of you. There was plenty of blame to go around.

"So they know about Valentine?"

"A girl is finding out. On the world of Path."

"I don't know the place."

"A fairly new colony, a couple of centuries. Chinese. Dedicated to preserving an odd mix of old religions. The gods speak to them."

"I lived on more than one Chinese world," said Ender. "People believed in the old gods on all of them. Gods are alive on every world, even here in the smallest human colony of all. They still have miracles of healing at the shrine of Os Venerados. Rooter has been telling us of a new heresy out in the hinterland somewhere. Some pequeninos who commune constantly with the Holy Ghost."

"This business with gods is something I don't understand," said Jane. "Hasn't anyone caught on yet that the gods always say what people want to hear?"

"Not so," said Ender. "The gods often ask us to do things we never desired, things that require us to sacrifice everything on their behalf. Don't underestimate the gods."

"Does your Catholic God speak to you?"

"Maybe he does. I never hear him, though. Or if I do, I never know that it's his voice I'm hearing."

"And when you die, do the gods of every people really gather them up and take them off somewhere to live forever?"

"I don't know. They never write."

"When I die, will there be some god to carry me away?"

Ender was still for a moment, and then he began to address her in his storytelling manner. "There's an old tale of a dollmaker who never had a son. So he made a puppet that was so lifelike that it looked like a real boy, and he would hold the wooden boy on his lap and talk to it and pretend it was his son. He wasn't crazy-- he still knew it was a doll-- he called it Pinehead. But one day a god came and touched the puppet and it came to life, and when the dollmaker spoke to it, Pinehead answered. The dollmaker never told anyone about this. He kept his wooden son at home, but he brought the boy every tale he could gather and news of every wonder under heaven. Then one day the dollmaker was coming home from the wharf with tales of a far-off land that had just been discovered, when he saw that his house was on fire. Immediately he tried to run into the house, crying out, 'My son! My son!' But his neighbors stopped him, saying, 'Are you mad? You have no son!' He watched the house burn to the ground, and when it was over he plunged into the ruins and covered himself with hot ashes and wept bitterly. He refused to be comforted. He refused to rebuild his shop. When people asked him why, he said his son was dead. He stayed alive by doing odd jobs for other people, and they pitied him because they were sure the fire had made him a lunatic. Then one day, three years later, a small orphan boy came to him and tugged on his sleeve and said, 'Father, don't you have a tale for me?'"

Jane waited, but Ender said no more. "That's the whole story?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"Why did you tell me this? It's all dreams and wishes. What does it have to do with me?"

"It was the story that came to mind."

"Why did it come to mind?"

"Maybe that's how God speaks to me," said Ender. "Or maybe I'm sleepy and I don't have what you want from me."

"I don't even know what I want from you."

"I know what you want," said Ender. "You want to be alive, with your own body, not dependent on the philitic web that binds the ansibles together. I'd give you that gift if I could. If you can figure out a way for me to do it, I'll do it for you. But Jane, you don't even know what you are. Maybe when you know how you came to exist, what makes you yourself, then maybe we can save you from the day when they shut down the ansibles to kill you. "

"So that's your story? Maybe I'll burn down with the house, but somehow my soul will end up in a three-year-old orphan boy?"

"Find out who you are, what you are, your essence, and we'll see if we can move you somewhere safer until all this is over. We've got an ansible. Maybe we can put you back."

"There aren't computers enough on Lusitania to contain me."

"You don't know that. You don't know what your self is."

"You're telling me to find my soul." She made her voice sound derisive as she said the word.

"Jane, the miracle wasn't that the doll was reborn as a boy. The miracle was the fact that the puppet ever came to life at all. Something happened to turn meaningless computer connections into a sentient being. Something created you. That's what makes no sense. After that one, the other part should be easy."

His speech was slurring. He wants me to go away so he can sleep, she thought. "I'll work on this."

"Good night," he murmured.

He dropped off to sleep almost at once. Jane wondered: Was he ever really awake? Will he remember in the morning that we talked?

Then she felt the bed shift. Novinha; her breathing was different. Only then did Jane realize: Novinha woke up while Ender and I were talking. She knows what those almost inaudible clicking and smacking noises always mean, that Ender was subvocalizing in order to talk with me. Ender may forget that we spoke tonight, but Novinha will not. As if she had caught him sharing a bed with a lover. If only she could think of me another way. As a daughter. As Ender's bastard daughter by a liaison long ago. His child by way of the fantasy game. Would she be jealous then?

Am I Ender's child?

Jane began to search back in her own past. She began to study her own nature. She began to try to discover who she was and why she was alive.

But because she was Jane, and not a human being, that was not all she was doing. She was also tracking Qing-jao's searches through the data dealing with Demosthenes, watching her come closer and closer to the truth.

Jane's most urgent activity, however, was searching for a way to make Qing-jao want to stop trying to find her. This was the hardest task of all, for despite all Jane's experience with human minds, despite all her conversations with Ender, individual human beings were still mysterious. Jane had concluded: No matter how well you know what a person has done and what he thought he was doing when he did it and what he now thinks of what he did, it is impossible to be certain of what he will do next. Yet she had no choice but to try. So she began to watch the house of Han Fei-tzu in a way that she had watched no one but Ender and, more recently, his stepson Miro. She could no longer wait for Qing-jao and her father to enter data into the computer and try to understand them from that. Now she had to take control of the house computer in order to use the audio and video receptors on the terminals in almost every room to be her ears and eyes. She watched them. Alone and apart, she devoted a considerable part of her attention to them, studying and analyzing their words, their actions, trying to discern what they meant to each other.

It did not take her long to realize that Qing-jao could best be influenced, not by confronting her with arguments, but rather by persuading her father first and then letting him persuade Qing-jao. That was more in harmony with the Path; Han Qing-jao would never disobey Starways Congress unless Han Fei-tzu told her to; and then she would be bound to do it.

In a way, this made Jane's task much easier. Persuading Qing-jao, a volatile and passionate adolescent who did not yet understand herself at all, would be chancy at best. But Han Fei-tzu was a man of settled character, a rational man, yet a man of deep feeling; he could be persuaded by arguments, especially if Jane could convince him that opposing Congress was for the good of his world and of humanity at large. All she needed was the right information to let him reach that conclusion.

By now Jane already understood as much of the social patterns of Path as any human knew, because she had absorbed every history, every anthropological report, and every document produced by the people of Path. What she learned was disturbing: the people of Path were far more deeply controlled by their gods than any other people in any other place or time. Furthermore, the way that the gods spoke to them was disturbing. It was clearly the well-known brain defect called

obsessive-compulsive disorder-- OCD. Early in the history of Path-- seven generations before, when the world was first being settled-- the doctors had treated the disorder accordingly. But they discovered at once that the godspoken of Path did not respond at all to the normal drugs that in all other OCD patients restored the chemical balance of "enoughness," that sense in a person's mind that a job is completed and there is no need to worry about it anymore. The godspoken exhibited all the behaviors associated with OCD, but the well-known brain defect was not present. There must be another, an unknown cause.

Now Jane explored more deeply into this story, and found documents on other worlds, not on Path at all, that told more of the story. The researchers had immediately concluded that there must have been a new mutation that caused a related brain defect with similar results. But as soon as they issued their preliminary report, all the research ended and the researchers were assigned to another world.

To another world-- that was almost unthinkable. It meant uprooting them and disconnecting them from time, carrying them away from all friends and family that didn't go with them. And yet not one of them refused-- which surely meant that enormous pressure had been brought to bear on them. They all left Path and no one had pursued research along those lines in the years since then.

Jane's first hypothesis was that one of the government agencies on Path itself had exiled them and cut off their research; after all, the followers of the Path wouldn't want their faith to be disrupted by finding the physical cause of the speaking of the gods in their own brains. But Jane found no evidence that the local government had ever been aware of the full report. The only part of it that had ever circulated on Path was the general conclusion that the speaking of the gods was definitely not the familiar, and treatable, OCD. The people of Path had learned only enough of the report to feel confirmed that the speaking of the gods had no known physical cause. Science had "proved" that the gods were real. There was no record of anyone on Path taking any action to cause further information or research to be suppressed. Those decisions had all come from outside. From Congress.

There had to be some key information hidden even from Jane, whose mind easily reached into every electronic memory that was connected with the ansible network. That would only happen if those who knew the secret had feared its discovery so much they kept it completely out of even the most top-secret and restricted computers of government.

Jane could not let that stop her. She would have to piece together the truth from the scraps of information that would have been left inadvertently in unrelated documents and databases. She would have to find other events that helped fill in the missing parts of the picture. In the long run, human beings could never keep secrets from someone with Jane's unlimited time and patience. She would find out what Congress was doing with Path, and when she had the information, she would use it, if she could, to turn Han Qing-jao away from her destructive course. For Qing-jao, too, was opening up secrets-- older ones, secrets that had been hidden for three thousand years.

Chapter 10 -- MARTYR

<Ender says that we're at the fulcrum of history, here on Lusitania. That in the next few months or years this will be the place where either death or understanding came to every sentient species.>

<How thoughtful of him, to bring us here just in time for our possible demise.>

<You're teasing me, of course.>

<If we knew how to tease, perhaps we'd do it to you.>

<Lusitania is the fulcrum of history in part because you're here. You carry a fulcrum with you wherever you go.>

<We discard it. We give it to you. It's yours.>

<Wherever strangers meet is the fulcrum.>

<Then let's not be strangers anymore.>

<Humans insist on making strangers of us-- it's built into their genetic material. But we can be friends.>

<This word is too strong. Say that we are fellow-citizens.>

<At least as long as our interests coincide.>

<As long as the stars shine, our interests will coincide.>

<Maybe not so long. Maybe only as long as human beings are stronger and more numerous than we are.>

<That will do for now.>

Quim came to the meeting without protest, though it might well set him back a full day in his journey. He had learned patience long ago. No matter how urgent he felt his mission to the heretics to be, he could accomplish little, in the long run, if he didn't have the support of the human colony behind him. So if Bishop Peregrino asked him to attend a meeting with Kovano Zeljezo, the mayor of Milagre and governor of Lusitania, Quim would go.

He was surprised to see that the meeting was also being attended by Ouanda Saavedra, Andrew Wiggin, and most of Quim's own family. Mother and Ela-- their presence made sense, if the meeting were being called to discuss policy concerning the heretic pequeninos. But what were

Quara and Grego doing here? There was no reason they should be involved in any serious discussions. They were too young, too ill-informed, too impetuous. From what he had seen of them, they still quarreled like little children. They weren't as mature as Ela, who was able to set aside her personal feelings in the interest of science. Of course, Quim worried sometimes that Ela did this far too well for her own good-- but that was hardly the worry with Quara and Grego.

Especially Quara. From what Rooter had said, the whole trouble with these heretics really took off when Quara told the pequeninos about the various contingency plans for dealing with the descolada virus. The heretics wouldn't have found so many allies in so many different forests if it weren't for the fear among the pequeninos that the humans might unleash some virus, or poison Lusitania with a chemical that would wipe out the descolada and, with it, the pequeninos themselves. The fact that the humans would even consider the indirect extermination of the pequeninos made it seem like mere turnabout for the piggies to contemplate the extermination of humanity.

All because Quara couldn't keep her mouth shut. And now she was at a meeting where policy would be discussed. Why? What constituency in the community did she represent? Did these people actually imagine that government or church policy was now the province of the Ribeira family? Of course, Olhado and Miro weren't there, but that meant nothing-- since both were cripples, the rest of the family unconsciously treated them like children, though Quim knew well that neither of them deserved to be so callously dismissed.

Still, Quim was patient. He could wait. He could listen. He could hear them out. Then he'd do something that would please both God and the Bishop. Of course, if that wasn't possible, pleasing God would do well enough.

"This meeting wasn't my idea," said Mayor Kovano. He was a good man, Quim knew. A better mayor than most people in Milagre realized. They kept reelecting him because he was grandfatherly and worked hard to help individuals and families who were having trouble. They didn't care much whether he also set good policies-- that was too abstract for them. But it happened that he was as wise as he was politically astute. A rare combination that Quim was glad of. Perhaps God knew that these would be trying times, and gave us a leader who might well help us get through it all without too much suffering.

"But I'm glad to have you all together. There's more strain in the relationship between piggies and people than ever before, or at least since the Speaker here arrived and helped us make peace with them."

Wiggin shook his head, but everyone knew his role in those events and there was little point in his denying it. Even Quim had had to admit, in the end, that the infidel humanist had ended up doing good works on Lusitania. Quim had long since shed his deep hatred of the Speaker for the Dead; indeed, he sometimes suspected that he, as a missionary, was the only person in his family who really understood what it was that Wiggin had accomplished. It takes one evangelist to understand another.

"Of course, we owe no small part of our worries to the misbehavior of two very troublesome young hotheads, whom we have invited to this meeting so they can see some of the dangerous consequences of their stupid, self-willed behavior."

Quim almost laughed out loud. Of course, Kovano had said all this in such mild, pleasant tones that it took a moment for Grego and Quara to realize they had just been given a tongue-lashing. But Quim understood at once. I shouldn't have doubted you, Kovano; you would never have brought useless people to a meeting.

"As I understand it, there is a movement among the piggies to launch a starship in order to deliberately infect the rest of humanity with the descolada. And because of the contribution of our young parrot, here, many other forests are giving heed to this idea."

"If you expect me to apologize," Quara began.

"I expect you to shut your mouth-- or is that impossible, even for ten minutes?" Kovano's voice had real fury in it. Quara's eyes grew wide, and she sat more rigidly in her chair.

"The other half of our problem is a young physicist who has, unfortunately, kept the common touch." Kovano raised an eyebrow at Grego. "If only you had become an aloof intellectual. Instead, you seem to have cultivated the friendship of the stupidest, most violent of Lusitanians."

"With people who disagree with you, you mean," said Grego.

"With people who forget that this world belongs to the pequeninos," said Quara.

"Worlds belong to the people who need them and know how to make them produce," said Grego.

"Shut your mouths, children, or you'll be expelled from this meeting while the adults make up their minds."

Grego glared at Kovano. "Don't you speak to me that way."

"I'll speak to you however I like," said Kovano. "As far as I'm concerned, you've both broken legal obligations of secrecy, and I should have you both locked up."

"On what charge?"

"I have emergency powers, you'll recall. I don't need any charges until the emergency is over. Do I make myself clear?"

"You won't do it. You need me," said Grego. "I'm the only decent physicist on Lusitania."

"Physics isn't worth a slug to us if we end up in some kind of contest with the pequeninos."

"It's the descolada we have to confront," said Grego.

"We're wasting time," said Novinha.

Quim looked at his mother for the first time since the meeting began. She seemed very nervous. Fearful. He hadn't seen her like that in many years.

"We're here about this insane mission of Quim's," said Novinha.

"He is called Father Estevao," said Bishop Peregrino. He was a stickler for giving proper dignity to church offices.

"He's my son," said Novinha. "I'll call him what I please."

"What a testy group of people we have here today," said Mayor Kovano.

Things were going very badly. Quim had deliberately avoided telling Mother any details about his mission to the heretics, because he was sure she'd oppose the idea of him going straight to piggies who openly feared and hated human beings. Quim was well aware of the source of her dread of close contact with the pequeninos. As a young child she had lost her parents to the descolada. The xenologer Pipo became her surrogate father-- and then became the first human to be tortured to death by the pequeninos. Novinha then spent twenty years trying to keep her lover, Libo-- Pipo's son, and the next xenologer-- from meeting the same fate. She even married another man to keep Libo from getting a husband's right of access to her private computer files, where she believed the secret that had led the piggies to kill Pipo might be found. And in the end, it all came to nothing. Libo was killed just as Pipo was.

Even though Mother had since learned the true reason for the killing, even though the pequeninos had undertaken solemn oaths not to undertake any violent act against another human being, there was no way Mother would ever be rational about her loved ones going off among the piggies. And now here she was at a meeting that had obviously been called, no doubt at her instigation, to decide whether Quim should go on his missionary journey. It was going to be an unpleasant morning. Mother had years of practice at getting her own way. Being married to Andrew Wiggin had softened and mellowed her in many ways. But when she thought one of her children was at risk, the claws came out, and no husband was going to have much gentling influence on her.

Why had Mayor Kovano and Bishop Peregrino allowed this meeting to take place?

As if he had heard Quim's unspoken question, Mayor Kovano began to explain. "Andrew Wiggin has come to me with new information. My first thought was to keep all of it secret, send Father Estevao on his mission to the heretics, and then ask Bishop Peregrino to pray. But Andrew assured me that as our danger increases, it's all the more important that all of you act from the most complete possible information. Speakers for the dead apparently have an almost pathological reliance on the idea that people behave better when they know more. I've been a politician too long to share his confidence-- but he's older than I am, he claims, and I deferred to his wisdom."

Quim knew, of course, that Kovano deferred to no one's wisdom. Andrew Wiggin had simply persuaded him.

"As relations between pequeninos and humans are getting more, um, problematical, and as our unseeable cohabitant, the hive queen, apparently comes closer to launching her starships, it seems that matters offplanet are getting more urgent as well. The Speaker for the Dead informs me from his offplanet sources that someone on a world called Path is very close to discovering our allies who have managed to keep Congress from issuing orders to the fleet to destroy Lusitania."

Quim noted with interest that Andrew had apparently not told Mayor Kovano about Jane. Bishop Peregrino didn't know, either; did Grego or Quara? Did Ela? Mother certainly did. Why did Andrew tell me, if he held it back from so many others?

"There is a very strong chance that within the next few weeks-- or days-- Congress will reestablish communications with the fleet. At that point, our last defense will be gone. Only a miracle will save us from annihilation."

"Bullshit," said Grego. "If that-- thing-- out on the prairie can build a starship for the piggies, it can build some for us, too. Get us off this planet before it gets blown to hell."

"Perhaps," said Kovano. "I suggested something like that, though in less colorful terms. Perhaps, Senhor Wiggin, you can tell us why Grego's eloquent little plan won't work."

"The hive queen doesn't think the way we do. Despite her best efforts, she doesn't take individual lives as seriously. If Lusitania is destroyed, she and the pequeninos will be at greatest risk--"

"The M.D. Device blows up the whole planet," Grego pointed out.

"At greatest risk of species annihilation," said Wiggin, unperturbed by Grego's interruption. "She'll not waste a ship on getting humans off Lusitania, because there are trillions of humans on a couple of hundred other worlds. We're not in danger of xenocide."

"We are if these heretic piggies get their way," said Grego.

"And that's another point," said Wiggin. "If we haven't found a way to neutralize the descolada, we can't in good conscience take the human population of Lusitania to another world. We'd only be doing exactly what the heretics want-- forcing other humans to deal with the descolada, and probably die. "

"Then there's no solution," said Ela. "We might as well roll over and die."

"Not quite," said Mayor Kovano. "It's possible-- perhaps likely-- that our own village of Milagre is doomed. But we can at least try to make it so that the pequenino colony ships don't carry the descolada to human worlds. There seem to be two approaches-- one biological, the other theological."

"We are so close," said Mother. "It's a matter of months or even weeks till Ela and I have designed a replacement species for the descolada."

"So you say," said Kovano. He turned to Ela. "What do you say?"

Quim almost groaned aloud. Ela will say that Mother's wrong, that there's no biological solution, and then Mother will say that she's trying to kill me by sending me out on my mission. This is all the family needs-- Ela and Mother in open war. Thanks to Kovano Zeljezo, humanitarian.

But Ela's answer wasn't what Quirn feared. "It's almost designed right now. It's the only approach that we haven't already tried and failed with, but we're on the verge of having the design for a version of the descolada virus that does everything necessary to maintain the life cycles of the indigenous species, but that is incapable of adapting to and destroying any new species."

"You're talking about a lobotomy for an entire species," said Quara bitterly. "How would you like it if somebody found a way to keep all humans alive, while removing our cerebrums?"

Of course Grego took up her gauntlet. "When these viruses can write a poem or reason from a theorem, I'll buy all this sentimental horseshit about how we ought to keep them alive."

"Just because we can't read them doesn't mean they don't have their epic poems!"

"Fechai as bocas!" growled Kovano.

Immediately they fell silent.

"Nossa Senhora," he said. "Maybe God wants to destroy Lusitania because it's the only way he can think of to shut you two up."

Bishop Peregrino cleared his throat.

"Or maybe not," said Kovano. "Far be it from me to speculate on God's motives."

The Bishop laughed, which allowed the others to laugh as well. The tension broke-- like an ocean wave, gone for the moment, but sure to return.

"So the anti-virus is almost ready?" Kovano asked Ela.

"No-- or yes, it is, the replacement virus is almost fully designed. But there are still two problems. The first one is delivery. We have to find a way to get the new virus to attack and replace the old one. That's still-- a long way off. "

"Do you mean it's a long way off, or you don't have the faintest idea how to do it?" Kovano was no fool-- he obviously had dealt with scientists before.

"Somewhere between those two," said Ela.

Mother shifted on her seat, visibly drawing away from Ela. My poor sister Ela, thought Quim. You may not be spoken to for the next several years.

"And the other problem?" asked Kovano.

"It's one thing to design the replacement virus. It's something else again to produce it."

"These are mere details," said Mother.

"You're wrong, Mother, and you know it," said Ela. "I can diagram what we want the new virus to be. But even working under ten degrees absolute, we can't cut up and recombine the descolada virus with enough precision. Either it dies, because we've left out too much, or it immediately repairs itself as soon as it returns to normal temperatures, because we didn't take out enough."

"Technical problems."

"Technical problems," said Ela sharply. "Like building an ansible without a philotic link."

"So we conclude--"

"We conclude nothing," said Mother.

"We conclude," continued Kovano, "that our xenobiologists are in sharp disagreement about the feasibility of taming the descolada virus itself. That brings us to the other approach-- persuading the pequeninos to send their colonies only to uninhabited worlds, where they can establish their own peculiarly poisonous ecology without killing human beings."

"Persuading them," said Grego. "As if we could trust them to keep their promises."

"They've kept more promises so far than you have," said Kovano. "So I wouldn't take a morally superior tone if I were you."

Finally things were at a point where Quim felt it would be beneficial for him to speak. "All of this discussion is interesting," said Quim. "It would be a wonderful thing if my mission to the heretics could be the means of persuading the pequeninos to refrain from causing harm to humankind. But even if we all came to agree that my mission has no chance of succeeding in that goal, I would still go. Even if we decided that there was a serious risk that my mission might make things worse, I'd go."

"Nice to know you plan to be cooperative," said Kovano acidly.

"I plan to cooperate with God and the church," said Quim. "My mission to the heretics is not to save humankind from the descolada or even to try to keep the peace between humans and pequeninos here on Lusitania. My mission to the heretics is in order to try to bring them back to faith in Christ and unity with the church. I am going to save their souls."

"Well of course," said Kovano. "Of course that's the reason you want to go."

"And it's the reason why I will go, and the only standard I'll use to determine whether or not my mission succeeds."

Kovano looked helplessly at Bishop Peregrino. "You said that Father Estevao was cooperative."

"I said he was perfectly obedient to God and the church," said the Bishop.

"I took that to mean that you could persuade him to wait on this mission until we knew more."

"I could indeed persuade him. Or I could simply forbid him to go," said Bishop Peregrino.

"Then do it," said Mother.

"I will not," said the Bishop.

"I thought you cared about the good of this colony," said Mayor Kovano.

"I care about the good of all the Christians placed under my charge," said Bishop Peregrino. "Until thirty years ago, that meant I cared only for the human beings of Lusitania. Now, however, I am equally responsible for the spiritual welfare of the Christian pequeninos of this planet. I send Father Estevao forth on his mission exactly as a missionary named Patrick was once sent to the island of Eire. He was extraordinarily successful, converting kings and nations. Unfortunately, the Irish church didn't always act the way the Pope might have wished. There was a great deal of-- let us say it was controversy between them. Superficially it concerned the date of Easter, but at heart it was over the issue of obedience to the Pope. It even came to bloodshed now and then. But never for a moment did anyone imagine it would have been better if St. Patrick had never gone to Eire. Never did anyone suggest that it would be better if the Irish had remained pagan."

Grego stood up. "We've found the philote, the true indivisible atom. We've conquered the stars. We send messages faster than the speed of light. And yet we still live in the Dark Ages." He started for the door.

"Walk out that door before I tell you to," said Mayor Kovano, "and you won't see the sun for a year."

Grego walked to the door, but instead of going through it, he leaned against it and grinned sardonically. "You see how obedient I am."

"I won't keep you long," said Kovano. "Bishop Peregrino and Father Estevao speak as if they could make their decision independent of the rest of us, but of course they know they can't. If I decided that Father Estevao's mission to the piggies shouldn't happen, it wouldn't. Let us all be clear about that. I'm not afraid to put the Bishop of Lusitania under arrest, if the welfare of

Lusitania requires it; and as for this missionary priest, you will only go out among the pequeninos when you have my consent."

"I have no doubt that you can interfere with God's work on Lusitania," said Bishop Peregrino icily. "You must have no doubt that I can send you to hell for doing it."

"I know you can," said Kovano. "I wouldn't be the first political leader to end up in hell at the end of a contest with the church. Fortunately, this time it won't come to that. I've listened to all of you and reached my decision. Waiting for the new anti-virus is too risky. And even if I knew, absolutely, that the anti-virus would be ready and usable in six weeks, I'd still allow this mission. Our best chance right now of salvaging something from this mess is Father Estevao's mission. Andrew tells me that the pequeninos have great respect and affection for this man-- even the unbelievers. If he can persuade the pequenino heretics to drop their plan to annihilate humanity in the name of their religion, that will remove one heavy burden from us."

Quim nodded gravely. Mayor Kovano was a man of great wisdom. It was good that they wouldn't have to struggle against each other, at least for now.

"In the meantime, I expect the xenobiologists to continue to work on the anti-virus with all possible vigor. We'll decide, when the virus exists, whether or not to use it."

"We'll use it," said Grego.

"Only if I'm dead," said Quara.

"I appreciate your willingness to wait until we know more before you commit yourself to any course of action," said Kovano. "Which brings us to you, Grego Ribeira. Andrew Wiggin assures me that there is reason to believe that faster-than-light travel might be possible."

Grego looked coldly at the Speaker for the Dead. "And where did you study physics, Senhor Falante?"

"I hope to study it from you," said Wiggin. "Until you've heard my evidence, I hardly know whether there's any reason to hope for such a breakthrough."

Quim smiled to see how easily Andrew turned away the quarrel that Grego wanted to pick. Grego was no fool. He knew he was being handled. But Wiggin hadn't left him any reasonable grounds for showing his disgruntlement. It was one of the most infuriating skills of the Speaker for the Dead.

"If there were a way to travel between worlds at ansible speeds," said Kovano, "we would need only one such ship to transport all the humans of Lusitania to another world. It's a remote chance--"

"A foolish dream," said Grego.

"But we'll pursue it. We'll study it, won't we?" said Kovano. "Or we'll find ourselves working in the foundry."

"I'm not afraid to work with my hands," said Grego. "So don't think you can terrify me into putting my mind at your service."

"I stand rebuked," said Kovano. "It's your cooperation that I want, Grego. But if I can't have that, then I'll settle for your obedience."

Apparently Quara was feeling left out. She arose as Grego had a moment before. "So you can sit here and contemplate destroying a sentient species without even thinking of a way to communicate with them. I hope you all enjoy being mass murderers." Then, like Grego, she made as if to leave.

"Quara," said Kovano.

She waited.

"You will study ways to talk to the descolada. To see if you can communicate with these viruses."

"I know when I'm being tossed a bone," said Quara. "What if I tell you that they're pleading for us not to kill them? You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"On the contrary. I know you're an honest woman, even if you are hopelessly indiscreet," said Kovano. "But I have another reason for wanting you to understand the molecular language of the descolada. You see, Andrew Wiggin has raised a possibility that never occurred to me before. We all know that pequenino sentience dates from the time when the descolada virus first swept across this planet. But what if we've misunderstood cause and effect?"

Mother turned to Andrew, a bitter half-smile on her face. "You think the pequeninos caused the descolada?"

"No," said Andrew. "But what if the pequeninos are the descolada?"

Quara gasped.

Grego laughed. "You are full of clever ideas, aren't you, Wiggin?"

"I don't understand," said Quim.

"I just wondered," said Andrew. "Quara says that the descolada is complex enough that it might contain intelligence. What if descolada viruses are using the bodies of the pequeninos to express their character? What if pequenino intelligence comes entirely from the viruses inside their bodies?"

For the first time, Ouanda, the xenologer, spoke up. "You are as ignorant of xenology as you are of physics, Mr. Wiggin," she said.

"Oh, much more so," said Wiggin. "But it occurred to me that we've never been able to think of any other way that memories and intelligence are preserved as a dying pequenino passes into the third life. The trees don't exactly preserve the brain inside them. But if will and memory are carried by the descolada in the first place, the death of the brain would be almost meaningless in the transmission of personality to the fathertree."

"Even if there were a chance of this being true," said Ouanda, "there's no possible experiment we could decently perform to find out."

Andrew Wiggin nodded ruefully. "I know I couldn't think of one. I was hoping you would."

Kovano interrupted again. "Ouanda, we need you to explore this. If you don't believe it, fine-- figure out a way to prove it wrong, and you'll have done your job." Kovano stood up, addressed them all. "Do you all understand what I'm asking of you? We face some of the most terrible moral choices that humankind has ever faced. We run the risk of committing xenocide, or allowing it to be committed if we do nothing. Every known or suspected sentient species lives in the shadow of grave risk, and it's here, with us and with us alone, that almost all the decisions lie. Last time anything remotely similar happened, our human predecessors chose to commit xenocide in order, as they supposed, to save themselves. I am asking all of you to help us pursue every avenue, however unlikely, that shows us a glimmer of hope, that might provide us with a tiny shred of light to guide our decisions. Will you help?"

Even Grego and Quara and Ouanda nodded their assent, however reluctantly. For the moment, at least, Kovano had managed to transform all the self-willed squabblers in this room into a cooperative community. How long that would last outside the room was a matter for speculation. Quim decided that the spirit of cooperation would probably last until the next crisis-- and maybe that would be long enough.

Only one more confrontation was left. As the meeting broke up and everyone said their good-byes or arranged one-on-one consultations, Mother came to Quim and looked him fiercely in the eye.

"Don't go."

Quim closed his eyes. There was nothing to say to an outrageous statement like that.

"If you love me," she said.

Quim remembered the story from the New Testament, when Jesus' mother and brothers came to visit him, and wanted him to interrupt teaching his disciples in order to receive them.

"These are my mother and my brothers," murmured Quim.

She must have understood the reference, because when he opened his eyes, she was gone.

Not an hour later, Quim was also gone, riding on one of the colony's precious cargo trucks. He needed few supplies, and for a normal journey he would have gone on foot. But the forest he was

bound for was so far away, it would have taken him weeks to get there without the car; nor could he have carried food enough. This was still a hostile environment-- it grew nothing edible to humans, and even if it did, Quirn would still need the food containing the descolada suppressants. Without it he would die of the descolada long before he starved to death.

As the town of Milagre grew small behind him, as he hurtled deeper and deeper into the meaningless open space of the prairie, Quirn-- Father Estevao-- wondered what Mayor Kovano might have decided if he had known that the leader of the heretics was a fathertree who had earned the name Warmaker, and that Warmaker was known to have said that the only hope for the pequeninos was for the Holy Ghost-- the descolada virus-- to destroy all human life on Lusitania.

It wouldn't have mattered. God had called Quirn to preach the gospel of Christ to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. Even the most warlike, bloodthirsty, hate-filled people might be touched by the love of God and transformed into Christians. It had happened many times in history. Why not now?

O Father, do a mighty work in this world. Never did your children need miracles more than we do.

Novinha wasn't speaking to Ender, and he was afraid. This wasn't petulance-- he had never seen Novinha be petulant. To Ender it seemed that her silence was not to punish him, but rather to keep from punishing him; that she was silent because if she spoke, her words would be too cruel ever to be forgiven.

So at first he didn't attempt to cajole words from her. He let her move like a shadow through the house, drifting past him without eye contact; he tried to stay out of her way and didn't go to bed until she was asleep.

It was Quirn, obviously. His mission to the heretics-- it was easy to understand what she feared, and even though Ender didn't share the same fears, he knew that Quirn's journey was not without risk. Novinha was being irrational. How could Ender have stopped Quirn? He was the one of Novinha's children over whom Ender had almost no influence; they had come to a rapprochement a few years ago, but it was a declaration of peace between equals, nothing like the ur-fatherhood Ender had established with all the other children. If Novinha had not been able to persuade Quirn to give up this mission, what more could Ender have accomplished?

Novinha probably knew this, intellectually. But like all other human beings, she did not always act according to her understanding. She had lost too many of the people that she loved; when she felt one more of them slipping away, her response was visceral, not intellectual. Ender had come into her life as a healer, a protector. It was his job to keep her from being afraid, and now she was afraid, and she was angry at him for having failed her.

However, after two days of silence Ender had had enough. This wasn't a good time for there to be a barrier between him and Novinha. He knew-- and so did Novinha-- that Valentine's coming might be a difficult time for them. He had so many old habits of communication with Valentine, so many

connections with her, so many roads into her soul, that it was hard for him not to fall back into being the person he had been during the years-- the millennia-- they had spent together. They had experienced three thousand years of history as if seeing it through the same eyes. He had been with Novinha only thirty years. That was actually longer, in subjective time, than he had spent with Valentine, but it was so easy to slip back into his old role as Valentine's brother, as Speaker to her Demosthenes.

Ender had expected Novinha to be jealous when Valentine came, and he was prepared for that. He had warned Valentine that there would probably be few opportunities for them to be together at first. And she, too, understood-- Jakt had his worries, too, and both spouses would need reassurance. It was almost silly for Jakt and Novinha to be jealous of the bonds between brother and sister. There had never been the slightest hint of sexuality in Ender's and Valentine's relationship-- anyone who understood them at all would laugh at any such notion-- but it wasn't sexual unfaithfulness that Novinha and Jakt were wary of. Nor was it the emotional bond they shared-- Novinha had no reason to doubt Ender's love and devotion to her, and Jakt could not have asked for more than Valentine offered him, both in passion and in trust.

It was deeper than any of these things. It was the fact that even now, after all these years, as soon as they were together they once again functioned like a single person, helping each other without even having to explain what they were trying to accomplish. Jakt saw it and even to Ender, who had never known him before, it was obvious that the man felt devastated. As if he saw his wife and her brother together and realized: This is what closeness is. This is what it means for two people to be one. He had thought that he and Valentine had been as close as husband and wife can ever be, and perhaps they were. And yet now he had to confront the fact that it was possible for two people to be even closer. To be, in some sense, the same person.

Ender could see this in Jakt, and could admire how well Valentine was doing at reassuring him-- and at distancing herself from Ender so that her husband could grow used to the bond between them more gradually, in small doses.

What Ender could not have predicted was the way Novinha had reacted. He had come to know her first as the mother of her children; he had known only the fierce, unreasonable loyalty she had for them. He had supposed that if she felt threatened, she would become possessive and controlling, the way she was with the children. He was not at all prepared for the way she had withdrawn from him. Even before this silent treatment about Quim's mission, she had been distant from him. In fact, now that he thought back, he realized that it had already been beginning before Valentine arrived. It was as if Novinha had already started giving in to a new rival before the rival was even there.

It made sense, of course-- he should have seen it coming. Novinha had lost too many strong figures in her life, too many people she had depended on. Her parents. Pipo. Libo. Even Miro. She might be protective and possessive with her children, whom she thought of as needing her, but with the people she needed, she was the opposite. If she feared that they would be taken away from her, she withdrew from them; she stopped permitting herself to need them.

Not "them." Him. Ender. She was trying to stop needing him. And this silence, if she kept it up, would drive such a wedge between them that their marriage would never recover.

If that happened, Ender didn't know what he would do. It had never occurred to him that his marriage might be threatened. He had not entered into it lightly; he intended to die married to Novinha, and all these years together had been filled with the joy that comes from utter confidence in another person. Now Novinha had lost that confidence in him. Only it wasn't right. He was still her husband, faithful to her as no other man, no other person in her life had ever been. He didn't deserve to lose her over a ridiculous misunderstanding. And if he let things go as Novinha seemed determined, however unconsciously, to make them happen, she would be utterly convinced that she could never depend on any other person. That would be tragic because it would be false.

So Ender was already planning a confrontation of some kind with Novinha when Ela accidentally set it off.

"Andrew."

Ela was standing in the doorway. If she had clapped hands outside, asking for admittance, Ender hadn't heard her. But then, she would hardly need to clap for entrance to her mother's house.

"Novinha's in our room," said Ender.

"I came to talk to you," said Ela.

"I'm sorry, you can't have an advance on your allowance."

Ela laughed as she came to sit beside him, but the laughter died quickly. She was worried.

"Quara," she said.

Ender sighed and smiled. Quara was born contrary, and nothing in her life had made her more compliant. Still, Ela had always been able to get along with her better than anyone.

"It's not just the normal," said Ela. "In fact, she's less trouble than usual. Not a quarrel."

"A dangerous sign?"

"You know she's trying to communicate with the descolada."

"Molecular language."

"Well, what she's doing is dangerous, and it won't establish communication even if it succeeds. Especially if it succeeds, because then there's a good chance that we'll all be dead."

"What's she doing?"

"She's been raiding my files-- which isn't hard, because I didn't think I needed to block them off from a fellow xenobiologist. She's been constructing the inhibitors I've been trying to splice into

plants-- easy enough, because I've laid out exactly how it's done. Only instead of splicing it into anything, she's giving it directly to the descolada."

"What do you mean, giving it?"

"Those are her messages. That's what she's sending them on their precious little message carriers. Now, whether those carriers are language or not isn't going to be settled by a non-experiment like that. But sentient or not, we know that the descolada is a hell of a good adapter-- and she might well be helping them adapt to some of my best strategies for blocking them."

"Treason."

"Right. She's feeding our military secrets to the enemy."

"Have you talked to her about this?"

"Sta brincando. Claro que falei. Ela quase me matou." You're joking-- of course I talked to her. She nearly killed me.

"Has she successfully trained any viruses?"

"She's not even testing for that. It's like she's run to the window and hollered, 'They're coming to kill you!' She's not doing science, she's doing interspecies politics, only we don't know that the other side even has politics, we only know that with her help it might just kill us faster than we ever imagined."

"Nossa Senhora," murmured Ender. "It's too dangerous. She can't play around with something like this."

"It may already be too late-- I can't guess whether she's done damage or not."

"Then we've got to stop her."

"How, break her arms?"

"I'll talk to her, but she's too old-- or too young-- to listen to reason. I'm afraid it'll end up with the Mayor, not with us."

Only when Novinha spoke did Ender realize that his wife had entered the room. "In other words, jail," said Novinha. "You plan to have my daughter locked up. When were you going to inform me?"

"Jail didn't occur to me," said Ender. "I expected he'd shut off her access to--"

"That isn't the Mayor's job," said Novinha. "It's mine. I'm the head xenobiologist. Why didn't you come to me, Elanora? Why to him?"

Ela sat there in silence, looking at her mother steadily. It was how she handled conflict with her mother, with passive resistance.

"Quara's out of control, Novinha," said Ender. "Telling secrets to the fathertrees was bad enough. Telling them to the descolada is insane."

"Es psicologista, agora?" Now you're a psychologist?

"I'm not planning to lock her up."

"You're not planning anything," said Novinha. "Not with my children."

"That's right," said Ender. "I'm not planning to do anything with children. I do have a responsibility, however, to do something about an adult citizen of Milagre who is recklessly endangering the survival of every human being on this planet, and maybe every human being everywhere."

"And where did you get that noble responsibility, Andrew? Did God come down to the mountain and carve your license to rule people on tablets of stone?"

"Fine," said Ender. "What do you suggest?"

"I suggest you stay out of business that doesn't concern you. And frankly, Andrew, that includes pretty much everything. You're not a xenobiologist. You're not a physicist. You're not a xenologer. In fact, you're not much of anything, are you, except a professional meddler in other people's lives."

Ela gasped. "Mother!"

"The only thing that gives you any power anywhere is that damned jewel in your ear. She whispers secrets to you, she talks to you at night when you're in bed with your wife, and whenever she wants something, there you are in a meeting where you have no business, saying whatever it was she told you to say. You talk about Quara committing treason-- as far as I can tell, you're the one who's betraying real people in favor of an overgrown piece of software!"

"Novinha," said Ender. It was supposed to be the beginning of an attempt to calm her.

But she wasn't interested in dialogue. "Don't you dare to try to deal with me, Andrew. All these years I thought you loved me--"

"I do."

"I thought you had really become one of us, part of our lives--"

"I am."

"I thought it was real--"

"It is."

"But you're just what Bishop Peregrino warned us you were from the start. A manipulator. A controller. Your brother once ruled all of humanity, isn't that the story? But you aren't so ambitious. You'll settle for a little planet."

"In the name of God, Mother, have you lost your mind? Don't you know this man?"

"I thought I did!" Novinha was weeping now. "But no one who loved me would ever let my son go out and face those murderous little swine--"

"He couldn't have stopped Quim, Mother! Nobody could!"

"He didn't even try. He approved!"

"Yes," said Ender. "I thought your son was acting nobly and bravely, and I approved of that. He knew that while the danger wasn't great, it was real, and yet he still chose to go-- and I approved of that. It's exactly what you would have done, and I hope that it's what I would do in the same place. Quim is a man, a good man, maybe a great one. He doesn't need your protection and he doesn't want it. He has decided what his life's work is and he's doing it. I honor him for that, and so should you. How dare you suggest that either of us should have stood in his way!"

Novinha was silent at last, for the moment, anyway. Was she measuring Ender's words? Was she finally realizing how futile and, yes, cruel it was for her to send Quim away with her anger instead of her hope? During that silence, Ender still had some hope.

Then the silence ended. "If you ever meddle in the lives of my children again, I'm done with you," said Novinha. "And if anything happens to Quim-- anything-- I will hate you till you die, and I'll pray for that day to come soon. You don't know everything, you bastard, and it's about time you stopped acting as if you did."

She stalked to the door, but then thought better of the theatrical exit. She turned back to Ela and spoke with remarkable calm. "Elanora, I will take immediate steps to block Quara from access to records and equipment that she could use to help the descolada. And in the future, my dear, if I ever hear you discussing lab business with anyone, especially this man, I will bar you from the lab for life. Do you understand?"

Again Ela answered her with silence.

"Ah," said Novinha. "I see that he has stolen more of my children from me than I thought."

Then she was gone.

Ender and Ela sat in stunned silence. Finally Ela stood up, though she didn't take a single step.

"I really ought to go do something," said Ela, "but I can't for the life of me think what."

"Maybe you should go to your mother and show her that you're still on her side."

"But I'm not," said Ela. "In fact, I was thinking maybe I should go to Mayor Zeljezo and propose that he remove Mother as head xenobiologist because she has clearly lost her mind."

"No she hasn't," said Ender. "And if you did something like that, it would kill her."

"Mother? She's too tough to die."

"No," said Ender. "She's so fragile right now that any blow might kill her. Not her body. Her-- trust. Her hope. Don't give her any reason to think you're not with her, no matter what."

Ela looked at him with exasperation. "Is this something you decide, or does it just come naturally to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Mother just said things to you that should have made you furious or hurt or-- something, anyway-- and you just sit there trying to think of ways to help her. Don't you ever feel like lashing out at somebody? I mean, don't you ever lose your temper?"

"Ela, after you've inadvertently killed a couple of people with your bare hands, either you learn to control your temper or you lose your humanity."

"You've done that?"

"Yes," he said. He thought for a moment that she was shocked.

"Do you think you could still do it?"

"Probably," he said.

"Good. It may be useful when all hell breaks loose."

Then she laughed. It was a joke. Ender was relieved. He even laughed, weakly, along with her.

"I'll go to Mother," said Ela, "but not because you told me to, or even for the reasons that you said."

"Fine, just so you go."

"Don't you want to know why I'm going to stick with her?"

"I already know why."

"Of course. She was wrong, wasn't she. You do know everything, don't you."

"You're going to go to your mother because it's the most painful thing you could do to yourself at this moment."

"You make it sound sick."

"It's the most painful good thing you could do. It's the most unpleasant job around. It's the heaviest burden to bear."

"Ela the martyr, certo? Is that what you'll say when you speak my death?"

"If I'm going to speak your death, I'll have to pre-record it. I intend to be dead long before you. "

"So you're not leaving Lusitania?"

"Of course not."

"Even if Mother boots you out?"

"She can't. She has no grounds for divorce, and Bishop Peregrino knows us both well enough to laugh at any request for annulment based on a claim of nonconsummation."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm here for the long haul," said Ender. "No more phony immortality through time dilation. I'm through chasing around in space. I'll never leave the surface of Lusitania again."

"Even if it kills you? Even if the fleet comes?"

"If everybody can leave, then I'll leave," said Ender. "But I'll be the one who turns off all the lights and locks the door."

She ran to him and kissed him on the cheek and embraced him, just for a moment. Then she was out the door and he was, once again, alone.

I was so wrong about Novinha, he thought. It wasn't Valentine she was jealous of. It was Jane. All these years, she's seen me speaking silently with Jane, all the time, saying things that she could never hear, hearing things that she could never say. I've lost her trust in me, and I never even realized I was losing it.

Even now, he must have been subvocalizing. He must have been talking to Jane out of a habit so deep that he didn't even know he was doing it. Because she answered him.

"I warned you," she said.

I suppose you did, Ender answered silently.

"You never think I understand anything about human beings."

I guess you're learning.

"She's right, you know. You are my puppet. I manipulate you all the time. You haven't had a thought of your own in years."

"Shut up," he whispered. "I'm not in the mood."

"Ender," she said, "if you think it would help you keep from losing Novinha, take the jewel out of your ear. I wouldn't mind."

"I would," he said.

"I was lying, so would I," she said. "But if you have to do it, to keep her, then do it."

"Thank you," he said. "But I'd be hard-pressed to keep someone that I've clearly lost already."

"When Quim comes back, everything will be fine."

Right, thought Ender. Right.

Please, God, take good care of Father Estevao.

They knew Father Estevao was coming. Pequeninos always did. The fathertrees told each other everything. There were no secrets. Not that they wanted it that way. There might be one fathertree that wanted to keep a secret or tell a lie. But they couldn't exactly go off by themselves. They never had private experiences. So if one fathertree wanted to keep something to himself, there'd be another close by who didn't feel that way. Forests always acted in unity, but they were still made up of individuals, and so stories passed from one forest to another no matter what a few fathertrees might wish.

That was Quim's protection, he knew. Because even though Warmaker was a bloodthirsty son of a bitch-- though that was an epithet without meaning when it came to pequeninos-- he couldn't do a thing to Father Estevao without first persuading the brothers of his forest to act as he wanted them to. And if he did that, one of the other fathertrees in his forest would know, and would tell. Would bear witness. If Warmaker broke the oath taken by all the fathertrees together, thirty years ago, when Andrew Wiggin sent Human into the third life, it could not be done secretly. The whole world would hear of it, and Warmaker would be known as an oathbreaker. It would be a shameful

thing. What wife would allow the brothers to carry a mother to him then? What children would he ever have again as long as he lived?

Quirn was safe. They might not heed him, but they wouldn't harm him.

Yet when he arrived at Warmaker's forest, they wasted no time listening to him. The brothers seized him, threw him to the ground, and dragged him to Warmaker.

"This wasn't necessary," he said. "I was coming here anyway."

A brother was beating on the tree with sticks. Quirn listened to the changing music as Warmaker altered the hollows within himself, shaping the sound into words.

"You came because I commanded."

"You commanded. I came. If you want to think you caused my coming, so be it. But God's commands are the only ones I obey willingly."

"You're here to hear the will of God," said Warmaker.

"I'm hear to speak the will of God," said Quirn. "The descolada is a virus, created by God in order to make the pequeninos into worthy children. But the Holy Ghost has no incarnation. The Holy Ghost is perpetually spirit, so he can dwell in our hearts."

"The descolada dwells in our hearts, and gives us life. When he dwells in your heart, what does he give you?"

"One God. One faith. One baptism. God doesn't preach one thing to humans and another to pequeninos."

"We are not 'little ones.' You will see who is mighty and who is small."

They forced him to stand with his back pressed against Warmaker's trunk. He felt the bark shifting behind him. They pushed on him. Many small hands, many snouts breathing on him. In all these years, he had never thought of such hands, such faces as belonging to enemies. And even now, Quirn realized with relief that he didn't think of them as his own enemies. They were the enemies of God, and he pitied them. It was a great discovery for him, that even when he was being pushed into the belly of a murderous fathertree, he had no shred of fear or hatred in him.

I really don't fear death. I never knew that.

The brothers still beat on the outside of the tree with sticks. Warmaker reshaped the sound into the words of Father Tongue, but now Quirn was inside the sound, inside the words.

"You think I'm going to break the oath," said Warmaker.

"It crossed my mind," said Quim. He was now fully pinned inside the tree, even though it remained open in front of him from head to toe. He could see, he could breathe easily-- his confinement wasn't even claustrophobic. But the wood had formed so smoothly around him that he couldn't move an arm or a leg, couldn't begin to turn sideways to slide out of the gap before him. Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to salvation.

"We'll test," said Warmaker. It was harder to understand his words, now that Quim was hearing them from the inside. Harder to think. "Let God judge between you and me. We'll give you all you want to drink-- the water from our stream. But of food you'll have none."

"Starving me is--"

"Starving? We have your food. We'll feed you again in ten days. If the Holy Ghost allows you to live for ten days, we'll feed you and set you free. We'll be believers in your doctrine then. We'll confess that we were wrong."

"The virus will kill me before then."

"The Holy Ghost will judge you and decide if you're worthy."

"There is a test going on here," said Quim, "but not the one you think."

"Oh?"

"It's the test of the Last Judgment. You stand before Christ, and he says to those on his right hand, 'I was a stranger, and you took me in. Hungry, and you fed me. Enter into the joy of the Lord.' Then he says to those on his left hand, 'I was hungry, and you gave me nothing. I was a stranger, and you mistreated me.' And they all say to him, 'Lord, when did we do these things to you?' and he answers, 'If you did it to the least of my brothers, you did it to me.' All you brothers, gathered here-- I am the least of your brothers. You will answer to Christ for what you do to me here."

"Foolish man," said Warmaker. "We are doing nothing to you but holding you still. What happens to you is whatever God desires. Didn't Christ say, 'I do nothing but what I've seen the Father do'? Didn't Christ say, 'I am the way. Come follow me'? Well, we are letting you do what Christ did. He went without bread for forty days in the wilderness. We give you a chance to be one-fourth as holy. If God wants us to believe in your doctrine, he'll send angels to feed you. He'll turn stones into bread."

"You're making a mistake," said Quim.

"You made the mistake by coming here."

"I mean that you're making a doctrinal mistake. You've got the lines down right-- fasting in the wilderness, stones into bread, all of it. But didn't you think it might be a little too self-revelatory for you to give yourself Satan's part?"

That was when Warmaker flew into a rage, speaking so rapidly that the movements within the wood began to twist and press on Quim until he was afraid he would be torn to bits within the tree.

"You are Satan! Trying to get us to believe your lies long enough for you humans to figure out a way to kill the descolada and keep all the brothers from the third life forever! Do you think we don't see through you? We know all your plans, all of them! You have no secrets! And God keeps no secrets from us either! We're the ones who were given the third life, not you! If God loved you, he wouldn't make you bury your dead in the ground and then let nothing but worms come out of you!"

The brothers sat around the opening in the trunk, enthralled by the argument.

It went on for six days, doctrinal arguments worthy of any of the fathers of the church in any age. Not since the council at Nicaea were such momentous issues considered, weighed.

The arguments were passed from brother to brother, from tree to tree, from forest to forest. Accounts of the dialogue between Warmaker and Father Estevao always reached Rooter and Human within a day. But the information wasn't complete. It wasn't until the fourth day that they realized that Quim was being held prisoner, without any of the food containing the descolada inhibitor.

Then an expedition was mounted at once, Ender and Ouanda, Jakt and Lars and Varsam; Mayor Kovano sent Ender and Ouanda because they were widely known and respected among the piggies, and Jakt and his son and son-in-law because they weren't native-born Lusitanians. Kovano didn't dare to send any of the native-born colonists-- if word of this got out, there was no telling what would happen. The five of them took the fastest car and followed the directions Rooter gave them. It was a three-day trip.

On the sixth day the dialogue ended, because the descolada had so thoroughly invaded Quim's body that he had no strength to speak, and was often too fevered and delirious to say anything intelligible when he did speak.

On the seventh day, he looked through the gap, upward, above the heads of the brothers who were still there, still watching. "I see the Savior sitting on the right hand of God," he whispered. Then he smiled.

An hour later he was dead. Warmaker felt it, and announced it triumphantly to the brothers. "The Holy Ghost has judged, and Father Estevao has been rejected!"

Some of the brothers rejoiced. But not as many as Warmaker had expected.

At dusk, Ender's party arrived. There was no question now of the piggies capturing and testing them-- they were too many, and the brothers were not all of one mind now anyway. Soon they

stood before the split trunk of Warmaker and saw the haggard, disease-ravaged face of Father Estevao, barely visible in the shadows.

"Open up and let my son come out to me," said Ender.

The gap in the tree widened. Ender reached in and pulled out the body of Father Estevao. He was so light inside his robes that Ender thought for a moment he must be bearing some of his own weight, must be walking. But he wasn't walking. Ender laid him on the ground before the tree.

A brother beat a rhythm on Warmaker's trunk.

"He must belong to you indeed, Speaker for the Dead, because he is dead. The Holy Ghost has burned him up in the second baptism."

"You broke the oath," said Ender. "You betrayed the word of the fathertrees."

"No one harmed a hair of his head," said Warmaker.

"Do you think anyone is deceived by your lies?" said Ender. "Anyone knows that to withhold medicine from a dying man is an act of violence as surely as if you stabbed him in the heart. There is his medicine. At any time you could have given it to him."

"It was Warmaker," said one of the brothers standing there.

Ender turned to the brothers. "You helped Warmaker. Don't think you can give the blame to him alone. May none of you ever pass into the third life. And as for you, Warmaker, may no mother ever crawl on your bark."

"No human can decide things like that," said Warmaker.

"You decided it yourself, when you thought you could commit murder in order to win your argument," said Ender. "And you brothers, you decided it when you didn't stop him."

"You're not our judge!" cried one of the brothers.

"Yes I am," said Ender. "And so is every other inhabitant of Lusitania, human and fathertree, brother and wife."

They carried Quim's body to the car, and Jakt, Ouanda, and Ender rode with him. Lars and Varsam took the car that Quim had used. Ender took a few minutes to tell Jane a message to give to Miro back in the colony. There was no reason Novinha should wait three days to hear that her son had died at the hands of the pequeninos. And she wouldn't want to hear it from Ender's mouth, that was certain. Whether Ender would have a wife when he returned to the colony was beyond his ability to guess. The only certain thing was that Novinha would not have her son Estevao.

"Will you speak for him?" asked Jakt, as the car skimmed over the capim. He had heard Ender speak for the dead once on Trondheim.

"No," said Ender. "I don't think so."

"Because he's a priest?" asked Jakt.

"I've spoken for priests before," said Ender. "No, I won't speak for Quim because there's no reason to. Quim was always exactly what he seemed to be, and he died exactly as he would have have chosen-- serving God and preaching to the little ones. I have nothing to add to his story. He completed it himself."

Chapter 11 -- THE JADE OF MASTER HO

<So now the killing starts.>

<Amusing that your people started it, not the humans.>

<Your people started it, too, when you had your wars with the humans.>

<We started it, but they ended it.>

<How do they manage it, these humans-- beginning each time so innocently, yet always ending up with the most blood on their hands?>

Wang-mu watched the words and numbers moving through the display above her mistress's terminal. Qing-jao was asleep, breathing softly on her mat not far away. Wang-mu had also slept for a time, but something had wakened her. A cry, not far off; a cry of pain perhaps. It had been part of Wang-mu's dream, but when she awoke she heard the last of the sound in the air. It was not Qing-jao's voice. A man perhaps, though the sound was high. A wailing sound. It made Wang-mu think of death.

But she did not get up and investigate. It was not her place to do that; her place was with her mistress at all times, unless her mistress sent her away. If Qing-jao needed to hear the news of what had happened to cause that cry, another servant would come and waken Wang-mu, who would then waken her mistress-- for once a woman had a secret maid, and until she had a husband, only the hands of the secret maid could touch her without invitation.

So Wang-mu lay awake, waiting to see if someone came to tell Qing-jao why a man had wailed in such anguish, near enough to be heard in this room at the back of the house of Han Fei-tzu. While

she waited, her eyes were drawn to the moving display as the computer performed the searches Qing-jao had programmed.

The display stopped moving. Was there a problem? Wang-mu rose up to lean on one arm; it brought her close enough to read the most recent words of the display. The search was completed. And this time the report was not one of the curt messages of failure: NOT FOUND. NO INFORMATION. NO CONCLUSION. This time the message was a report.

Wang-mu got up and stepped to the terminal. She did as Qing-jao had taught her, pressing the key that logged all current information so the computer would guard it no matter what happened. Then she went to Qing-jao and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Qing-jao came awake almost at once; she slept alertly. "The search has found something," said Wang-mu.

Qing-jao shed her sleep as easily as she might shrug off a loose jacket. In a moment she was at the terminal taking in the words there.

"I've found Demosthenes," she said.

"Where is he?" asked Wang-mu, breathless. The great Demosthenes-- no, the terrible Demosthenes. My mistress wishes me to think of him as an enemy. But the Demosthenes, in any case, the one whose words had stirred her so when she heard her father reading them aloud. "As long as one being gets others to bow to him because he has the power to destroy them and all they have and all they love, then all of us must be afraid together." Wang-mu had overheard those words almost in her infancy-- she was only three years old-- but she remembered them because they had made such a picture in her mind. When her father read those words, she had remembered a scene: her mother spoke and Father grew angry. He didn't strike her, but he did tense his shoulder and his arm jerked a bit, as if his body had meant to strike and he had only with difficulty contained it. And when he did that, though no violent act was committed, Wang-mu's mother bowed her head and murmured something, and the tension eased. Wang-mu knew that she had seen what Demosthenes described: Mother had bowed to Father because he had the power to hurt her. And Wang-mu had been afraid, both at the time and again when she remembered; so as she heard the words of Demosthenes she knew that they were true, and marveled that her father could say those words and even agree with them and not realize that he had acted them out himself. That was why Wang-mu had always listened with great interest to all the words of the great-- the terrible-- Demosthenes, because great or terrible, she knew that he told the truth.

"Not he," said Qing-jao. "Demosthenes is a woman."

The idea took Wang-mu's breath away. So! A woman all along. No wonder I heard such sympathy in Demosthenes; she is a woman, and knows what it is to be ruled by others every waking moment. She is a woman, and so she dreams of freedom, of an hour in which there is no duty waiting to be done. No wonder there is revolution burning in her words, and yet they remain always words and never violence. But why doesn't Qing-jao see this? Why has Qing-jao decided we must both hate Demosthenes?

"A woman named Valentine," said Qing-jao; and then, with awe in her voice, "Valentine Wiggin, born on Earth more than three-- more than three thousand years ago."

"Is she a god, to live so long?"

"Journeys. She travels from world to world, never staying anywhere more than a few months. Long enough to write a book. All the great histories under the name Demosthenes were written by that same woman, and yet nobody knows it. How can she not be famous?"

"She must want to hide," said Wang-mu, understanding very well why a woman might want to hide behind a man's name. I'd do it too, if I could, so that I could also journey from world to world and see a thousand places and live ten thousand years.

"Subjectively she's only in her fifties. Still young. She stayed on one world for many years, married and had children. But now she's gone again. To--" Qing-jao gasped.

"Where?" asked Wang-mu.

"When she left her home she took her family with her on a starship. They headed first toward Heavenly Peace and passed near Catalonia, and then they set out on a course directly toward Lusitania!"

Wang-mu's first thought was: Of course! That's why Demosthenes has such sympathy and understanding for the Lusitanians. She has talked to them-- to the rebellious xenologists, to the pequeninos themselves. She has met them and knows that they are raman!

Then she thought: If the Lusitania Fleet arrives there and fulfills its mission, Demosthenes will be captured and her words will end.

And then she realized something that made this all impossible. "How could she be on Lusitania, when Lusitania has destroyed its ansible? Wasn't that the first thing they did when they went into revolt? How can her writings be reaching us?"

Qing-jao shook her head. "She hasn't reached Lusitania yet. Or if she has, it's only in the last few months. She's been in flight for the last thirty years. Since before the rebellion. She left before the rebellion."

"Then all her writings have been done in flight?" Wang-mu tried to imagine how the different timeflows would be reconciled. "To have written so much since the Lusitania Fleet left, she must have--"

"Must have been spending every waking moment on the starship, writing and writing and writing," said Qing-jao. "And yet there's no record of her starship having sent any signals anywhere, except for the captain's reports. How has she been getting her writings distributed to so

many different worlds, if she's been on a starship the whole time? It's impossible. There'd be some record of the ansible transmissions, somewhere."

"It's always the ansible," said Wang-mu. "The Lusitania Fleet stops sending messages, and her starship must be sending them but it isn't. Who knows? Maybe Lusitania is sending secret messages, too." She thought of the Life of Human.

"There can't be any secret messages," said Qing-jao. "The ansible's philotic connections are permanent, and if there's any transmission at any frequency, it would be detected and the computers would keep a record of it."

"Well, there you are," said Wang-mu. "If the ansibles are all still connected, and the computers don't have a record of transmissions, and yet we know that there have been transmissions because Demosthenes has been writing all these things, then the records must be wrong."

"There is no way for anyone to hide an ansible transmission," said Qingjao. "Not unless they were right in there at the very moment the transmission was received, switching it away from the normal logging programs and-- anyway, it can't be done. A conspirator would have to be sitting at every ansible all the time, working so fast that--"

"Or they could have a program that did it automatically."

"But then we'd know about the program-- it would be taking up memory, it would be using processor time."

"If somebody could make a program to intercept the ansible messages, couldn't they also make it hide itself so it didn't show up in memory and left no record of the processor time it used?"

Qing-jao looked at Wang-mu in anger. "Where did you learn so many questions about computers and you still don't know that things like that can't be done!"

Wang-mu bowed her head and touched it to the floor. She knew that humiliating herself like this would make Qing-jao ashamed of her anger and they could talk again.

"No," said Qing-jao, "I had no right to be angry, I'm sorry. Get up, Wang-mu. Keep asking questions. Those are good questions. It might be possible because you can think of it, and if you can think of it maybe somebody could do it. But here's why I think it's impossible: Because how could anybody install such a masterful program on-- it would have to be on every computer that processes ansible communications anywhere. Thousands and thousands of them. And if one breaks down and another one comes online, it would have to download the program into the new computer almost instantly. And yet it could never put itself into permanent storage or it would be found there; it must keep moving itself all the time, dodging, staying out of the way of other programs, moving into and out of storage. A program that could do all that would have to be-- intelligent, it would have to be trying to hide and figuring out new ways to do it all the time or we would have noticed it by now and we never have. There's no program like that. How would anyone have ever programmed it? How could it have started? And look, Wang-mu-- this Valentine Wiggin who

writes all of the Demosthenes things-- she's been hiding herself for thousands of years. If there's a program like that it must have been in existence the whole time. It wouldn't have been made up by the enemies of Starways Congress because there wasn't a Starways Congress when Valentine Wiggin started hiding who she was. See how old these records are that gave us her name? She hasn't been openly linked to Demosthenes since these earliest reports from-- from Earth. Before starships. Before ..."

Qing-jao's voice trailed off, but Wang-mu already understood, had reached this conclusion before Qing-jao vocalized it. "So if there's a secret program in the ansible computers," said Wang-mu, "it must have been there all along. Right from the start."

"Impossible," whispered Qing-jao. But since everything else was impossible, too, Wang-mu knew that Qing-jao loved this idea, that she wanted to believe it because even though it was impossible at least it was conceivable, it could be imagined and therefore it might just be real. And I conceived of it, thought Wang-mu. I may not be godspoken but I'm intelligent too. I understand things. Everybody treats me like a foolish child, even Qing-jao, even though Qing-jao knows how quickly I learn, even though she knows that I think of ideas that other people don't think of-- even she despises me. But I am as smart as anyone, Mistress! I am as smart as you, even though you never notice that, even though you will think you thought of this all by yourself. Oh, you'll give me credit for it, but it will be like this: Wang-mu said something and it got me thinking and then I realized the important idea. It will never be: Wang-mu was the one who understood this and explained it to me so I finally understood it. Always as if I were a stupid dog who happens to bark or yip or scratch or snap or leap, just by coincidence, and it happens to turn your mind toward the truth. I am not a dog. I understood. When I asked you those questions it was because I already realized the implications. And I realize even more than you have said so far-- but I must tell you this by asking, by pretending not to understand, because you are godspoken and a mere servant could never give ideas to one who hears the voices of the gods.

"Mistress, whoever controls this program has enormous power, and yet we've never heard of them and they've never used this power until now."

"They've used it," said Qing-jao. "To hide Demosthenes' true identity. This Valentine Wiggin is very rich, too, but her ownerships are all concealed so that no one realizes how much she has, that all of her possessions are part of the same fortune."

"This powerful program has dwelt in every ansible computer since starflight began, and yet all it ever did was hide this woman's fortune?"

"You're right," said Qing-jao, "it makes no sense at all. Why didn't someone with this much power already use it to take control of things? Or perhaps they did. They were there before Starways Congress was formed, so maybe they... but then why would they oppose Congress now?"

"Maybe," said Wang-mu, "maybe they just don't care about power."

"Who doesn't?"

"Whoever controls this secret program."

"Then why would they have created the program in the first place? Wangmu, you aren't thinking."

No, of course not, I never think. Wang-mu bowed her head.

"I mean you are thinking, but you're not thinking of this: Nobody would create such a powerful program unless they wanted that much power-- I mean, think of what this program does, what it can do-- intercept every message from the fleet and make it look like none were ever sent! Bring Demosthenes' writings to every settled planet and yet hide the fact that those messages were sent! They could do anything, they could alter any message, they could spread confusion everywhere or fool people into thinking-- into thinking there's a war, or give them orders to do anything, and how would anybody know that it wasn't true? If they really had so much power, they'd use it! They would!"

"Unless maybe the programs don't want to be used that way."

Qing-jao laughed aloud. "Now, Wang-mu, that was one of our first lessons about computers. It's all right for the common people to imagine that computers actually decide things, but you and I know that computers are only servants, they only do what they're told, they never actually want anything themselves."

Wang-mu almost lost control of herself, almost flew into a rage. Do you think that never wanting anything is a way that computers are similar to servants? Do you really think that we servants do only what we're told and never want anything ourselves? Do you think that just because the gods don't make us rub our noses on the floor or wash our hands till they bleed that we don't have any other desires?

Well, if computers and servants are just alike, then it's because computers have desires, not because servants don't have them. Because we want. We yearn. We hunger. What we never do is act on those hungers, because if we did you godspoken ones would send us away and find others more obedient.

"Why are you angry?" asked Qing-jao.

Horrified that she had let her feelings show on her face, Wang-mu bowed her head. "Forgive me," she said.

"Of course I forgive you, I just want to understand you as well," said Qing-jao. "Were you angry because I laughed at you? I'm sorry-- I shouldn't have. You've only been studying with me for these few months, so of course you sometimes forget and slip back to the beliefs you grew up with, and it's wrong of me to laugh. Please, forgive me for that."

"Oh, Mistress, it's not my place to forgive you. You must forgive me.

"No, I was wrong. I know it-- the gods have shown me my unworthiness for laughing at you."

Then the gods are very stupid, if they think that it was your laughter that made me angry. Either that or they're lying to you. I hate your gods and how they humiliate you without ever telling you a single thing worth knowing. So let them strike me dead for thinking that thought!

But Wang-mu knew that wouldn't happen. The gods would never lift a finger against Wang-mu herself. They'd only make Qing-jao-- who was her friend, in spite of everything-- they'd make Qing-jao bow down and trace the floor until Wang-mu felt so ashamed that she wanted to die.

"Mistress," said Wang-mu, "you did nothing wrong and I was never offended."

It was no use. Qing-jao was on the floor. Wang-mu turned away, buried her face in her hands-- but kept silent, refusing to make a sound even in her weeping, because that would force Qing-jao to start over again. Or it would convince her that she had hurt Wang-mu so badly that she had to trace two lines, or three, or-- let the gods not require it! --the whole floor again. Someday, thought Wang-mu, the gods will tell Qing-jao to trace every line on every board in every room in the house and she'll die of thirst or go mad trying to do it.

To stop herself from weeping in frustration, Wang-mu forced herself to look at the terminal and read the report that Qing-jao had read. Valentine Wiggin was born on Earth during the Bugger Wars. She had started using the name Demosthenes as a child, at the same time as her brother Peter, who used the name Locke and went on to be Hegemon. She wasn't simply a Wiggin-- she was one of the Wiggins, sister of Peter the Hegemon and Ender the Xenocide. She had been only a footnote in the histories-- Wang-mu hadn't even remembered her name till now, just the fact that the great Peter and the monster Ender had a sister. But the sister turned out to be just as strange as her brothers; she was the immortal one; she was the one who kept on changing humanity with her words.

Wang-mu could hardly believe this. Demosthenes had already been important in her life, but now to learn that the real Demosthenes was sister of the Hegemon! The one whose story was told in the holy book of the speakers for the dead: the Hive Queen and the Hegemon. Not that it was holy only to them. Practically every religion had made a space for that book, because the story was so strong-- about the destruction of the first alien species humanity ever discovered, and then about the terrible good and evil that wrestled in the soul of the first man ever to unite all of humanity under one government. Such a complex story, and yet told so simply and clearly that many people read it and were moved by it when they were children. Wang-mu had first heard it read aloud when she was five. It was one of the deepest stories in her soul.

She had dreamed, not once but twice, that she met the Hegemon himself-- Peter, only he insisted that she call him by his network name, Locke. She was both fascinated and repelled by him; she could not look away. Then he reached out his hand and said, Si Wang-mu, Royal Mother of the West, only you are a fit consort for the ruler of all humanity, and he took her and married her and she sat beside him on his throne.

Now, of course, she knew that almost every poor girl had dreams of marrying a rich man or finding out she was really the child of a rich family or some other such nonsense. But dreams were

also sent from the gods, and there was truth in any dream you had more than once; everyone knew that. So she still felt a strong affinity for Peter Wiggin; and now, to realize that Demosthenes, for whom she had also felt great admiration, was his sister-- that was almost too much of a coincidence to bear. I don't care what my mistress says, Demosthenes! cried Wang-mu silently. I love you anyway, because you have told me the truth all my life. And I love you also as the sister of the Hegemon, who is the husband of my dreams.

Wang-mu felt the air in the room change; she knew the door had been opened. She looked, and there stood Mu-pao, the ancient and most dreaded housekeeper herself, the terror of all servants--including Wang-mu, even though Mu-pao had relatively little power over a secret maid. At once Wang-mu moved to the door, as silently as possible so as not to interrupt Qing-jao's purification.

Out in the hall, Mu-pao closed the door to the room so Qing-jao wouldn't hear.

"The Master calls for his daughter. He's very agitated; he cried out a while ago, and frightened everyone."

"I heard the cry," said Wang-mu. "Is he ill?"

"I don't know. He's very agitated. He sent me for your mistress and says he must talk to her at once. But if she's communing with the gods, he'll understand; make sure you tell her to come to him as soon as she's done."

"I'll tell her now. She has told me that nothing should stop her from answering the call of her father," said Wang-mu.

Mu-pao looked aghast at the thought. "But it's forbidden to interrupt when the gods are--"

"Qing-jao will do a greater penance later. She will want to know her father is calling her." It gave Wang-mu great satisfaction to put Mu-pao in her place. You may be ruler of the house servants, Mu-pao, but I am the one who has the power to interrupt even the conversation between my godspoken mistress and the gods themselves.

As Wang-mu expected, Qing-jao's first reaction to being interrupted was bitter frustration, fury, weeping. But when Wang-mu bowed herself abjectly to the floor, Qing-jao immediately calmed. This is why I love her and why I can bear serving her, thought Wang-mu, because she does not love the power she has over me and because she has more compassion than any of the other godspoken I have heard of. Qing-jao listened to Wang-mu's explanation of why she had interrupted, and then embraced her. "Ah, my friend Wang-mu, you are very wise. If my father has cried out in anguish and then called to me, the gods know that I must put off my purification and go to him."

Wang-mu followed her down the hallway, down the stairs, until they knelt together on the mat before Han Fei-tzu's chair.

Qing-jao waited for Father to speak, but he said nothing. Yet his hands trembled. She had never seen him so anxious.

"Father," said Qing-jao, "why did you call me?"

He shook his head. "Something so terrible-- and so wonderful-- I don't know whether to shout for joy or kill myself." Father's voice was husky and out of control. Not since Mother died-- no, not since Father had held her after the test that proved she was godspoken-- not since then had she heard him speak so emotionally.

"Tell me, Father, and then I'll tell you my news-- I've found Demosthenes, and I may have found the key to the disappearance of the Lusitania Fleet."

Father's eyes opened wider. "On this day of all days, you've solved the problem?"

"If it is what I think it is, then the enemy of Congress can be destroyed. But it will be very hard. Tell me what you've discovered!"

"No, you tell me first. This is strange-- both happening on the same day. Tell me!"

"It was Wang-mu who made me think of it. She was asking questions about-- oh, about how computers work-- and suddenly I realized that if there were in every ansible computer a hidden program, one so wise and powerful that it could move itself from place to place to stay hidden, then that secret program could be intercepting all the ansible communications. The fleet might still be there, might even be sending messages, but we're not receiving them and don't even know that they exist because of these programs."

"In every ansible computer? Working flawlessly all the time?" Father sounded skeptical, of course, because in her eagerness Qing-jao had told the story backward.

"Yes, but let me tell you how such an impossible thing might be possible. You see, I found Demosthenes."

Father listened as Qing-jao told him all about Valentine Wiggin, and how she had been writing secretly as Demosthenes all these years. "She is clearly able to send secret ansible messages, or her writings couldn't be distributed from a ship in flight to all the different worlds. Only the military is supposed to be able to communicate with ships that are traveling near the speed of light-- she must have either penetrated the military's computers or duplicated their power. And if she can do all that, if the program exists to allow her to do it, then that same program would clearly have the power to intercept the ansible messages from the fleet."

"If A, then B, yes-- but how could this woman have planted a program in every ansible computer in the first place?"

"Because she did it at the first! That's how old she is. In fact, if Hegemon Locke was her brother, perhaps-- no, of course-- he did it! When the first colonization fleets went out, with their philotic double-triads aboard to be the heart of each colony's first ansible, he could have sent that program with them."

Father understood at once; of course he did. "As Hegemon he had the power, and the reason as well-- a secret program under his control, so that if there were a rebellion or a coup, he would still hold in his hands the threads that bind the worlds together."

"And when he died, Demosthenes-- his sister-- she was the only one who knew the secret! Isn't it wonderful? We've found it. All we have to do is wipe all those programs out of memory!"

"Only to have the programs instantly restored through the ansible by other copies of the program on other worlds," said Father. "It must have happened a thousand times before over the centuries, a computer breaking down and the secret program restoring itself on the new one."

"Then we have to cut off all the ansibles at the same time," said Qing-jao. "On every world, have a new computer ready that has never been contaminated by any contact with the secret program. Shut the ansibles down all at once, cut off the old computers, bring the new computers online, and wake up the ansibles. The secret program can't restore itself because it isn't on any of the computers, Then the power of Congress will have no rival to interfere!"

"You can't do it," said Wang-mu.

Qing-jao looked at her secret maid in shock. How could the girl be so ill-bred as to interrupt a conversation between two of the godspoken in order to contradict them?

But Father was gracious-- he was always gracious, even to people who had overstepped all the bounds of respect and decency. I must learn to be more like him, thought Qing-jao. I must allow servants to keep their dignity even when their actions have forfeited any such consideration.

"Si Wang-mu," said Father, "why can't we do it?"

"Because to have all the ansibles shut off at the same time, you would have to send messages by ansible," said Wang-mu. "Why would the program allow you to send messages that would lead to its own destruction?"

Qing-jao followed her father's example by speaking patiently to Wang-mu. "It's only a program-- it doesn't know the content of messages. Whoever rules the program told it to hide all the communications from the fleet, and to conceal the tracks of all the messages from Demosthenes. It certainly doesn't read the messages and decide from their contents whether to send them."

"How do you know?" asked Wang-mu.

"Because such a program would have to be-- intelligent!"

"But it would have to be intelligent anyway," said Wang-mu. "It has to be able to hide from any other program that would find it. It has to be able to move itself around in memory to conceal itself. How would it be able to tell which programs it had to hide from, unless it could read them and

interpret them? It might even be intelligent enough to rewrite other programs so they wouldn't look in the places where this program was hiding."

Qing-jao immediately thought of several reasons why a program could be smart enough to read other programs but not intelligent enough to understand human languages. But because Father was there, it was his place to answer Wang-mu. Qing-jao waited.

"If there is such a program," said Father, "it might be very intelligent indeed."

Qing-jao was shocked. Father was taking Wang-mu seriously. As if Wang-mu's ideas were not those of a naive child.

"It might be so intelligent that it not only intercepts messages, but also sends them." Then Father shook his head. "No, the message came from a friend. A true friend, and she spoke of things that no one else could know. It was a real message."

"What message did you receive, Father?"

"It was from Keikoa Amauka; I knew her face to face when we were young. She was the daughter of a scientist from Otaheiti who was here to study genetic drift of Earthborn species in their first two centuries on Path. They left-- they were sent away quite abruptly ..." He paused, as if considering whether to say something. Then he decided, and said it: "If she had stayed she might have become your mother."

Qing-jao was both thrilled and frightened to have Father speak of such a thing to her. He never spoke of his past. And now to say that he once loved another woman besides his wife who gave birth to Qing-jao, this was so unexpected that Qing-jao didn't know what to say.

"She was sent somewhere very far away. It's been thirty-five years. Most of my life has passed since she left. But she only just arrived, a year ago. And now she has sent me a message telling me why her father was sent away. To her, our parting was only a year ago. To her, I'm still--"

"Her lover," said Wang-mu.

The impertinence! thought Qing-jao. But Father only nodded. Then he turned to his terminal and paged through the display. "Her father had stumbled onto a genetic difference in the most important Earthborn species on Path."

"Rice?" asked Wang-mu.

Qing-jao laughed. "No, Wang-mu. We are the most important Earthborn species on this world."

Wang-mu looked abashed. Qing-jao patted her shoulder. This was as it should be-- Father had encouraged Wang-mu too much, had led her to think she understood things that were still far beyond her education. Wang-mu needed these gentle reminders now and then, so she did not get

her hopes too high. The girl must not allow herself to dream of being the intellectual equal of one of the godspoken, or her life would be filled with disappointment instead of contentment.

"He detected a consistent, inheritable genetic difference in some of the people of Path, but when he reported it, his transfer came almost immediately. He was told that human beings were not within the scope of his study."

"Didn't she tell you this before she left?" asked Qing-jao.

"Keikoa? She didn't know. She was very young, of an age when most parents don't burden their children with adult affairs. Your age."

The implications of this sent another thrill of fear through Qing-jao. Her father had loved a woman who was the same age as Qing-jao; thus Qing-jao was, in her father's eyes, the age when she might be given in marriage. You cannot send me away to another man's house, she cried out inside; yet part of her also was eager to learn the mysteries between a man and a woman. Both feelings were beneath her; she would do her duty to her father, and no more.

"But her father told her during the voyage, because he was very upset about the whole thing. As you can imagine-- for his life to be disrupted like this. When they got to Ugarit a year ago, however, he plunged into his work and she into her education and tried not to think about it. Until a few days ago, when her father ran across an old report about a medical team in the earliest days of Path, which had also been exiled suddenly. He began to put things together, and confided them to Keikoa, and against his advice she sent me the message I got today."

Father marked a block of text on the display, and Qing-jao read it. "That earlier team was studying OCD," she said.

"No, Qing-jao. They were studying behavior that looked like OCD, but couldn't possibly have been OCD because the genetic tag for OCD was not present and the condition did not respond to OCD-specific drugs."

Qing-jao tried to remember what she knew about OCD. That it caused people to act inadvertently like the godspoken. She remembered that between the first discovery of her handwashing and her testing, she had been given those drugs to see if the handwashing went away. "They were studying the godspoken," she said. "Trying to find a biological cause for our rites of purification." The idea was so offensive she could hardly say the words.

"Yes," said Father. "And they were sent away."

"I should think they were lucky to get away with their lives. If the people heard of such sacrilege ..."

"This was early in our history, Qing-jao," said Father. "The godspoken were not yet fully known to be-- communing with the gods. And what about Keikoa's father? He wasn't investigating OCD. He was looking for genetic drift. And he found it. A very specific, inheritable alteration in the

genes of certain people. It had to be present on the gene from one parent, and not overridden by a dominant gene from the other; when it came from both parents, it was very strong. He thinks now that the reason he was sent away was because every one of the people with this gene from both parents was godspoken, and not one of the godspoken he sampled was without at least one copy of the gene."

Qing-jao knew at once the only possible meaning of this, but she rejected it. "This is a lie," she said. "This is to make us doubt the gods."

"Qing-jao, I know how you feel. When I first realized what Keikoa was telling me, I cried out from my heart. I thought I was crying out in despair. But then I realized that my cry was also a cry of liberation."

"I don't understand you," she said, terrified.

"Yes you do," said Father, "or you wouldn't be afraid. Qing-jao, these people were sent away because someone didn't want them discovering what they were about to discover. Therefore whoever sent them away must already have known what they would find out. Only Congress-- someone with Congress, anyway-- had the power to exile these scientists, and their families. What was it that had to stay hidden? That we, the godspoken, are not hearing gods at all. We have been altered genetically. We have been created as a separate kind of human being, and yet that truth is being kept from us. Qing-jao, Congress knows the gods speak to us-- that is no secret from them, even though they pretend not to know. Someone in Congress knows about it, and allows us to continue doing these terrible, humiliating things-- and the only reason I can think of is that it keeps us under control, keeps us weak. I think-- Keikoa thinks so, too-- that it's no coincidence that the godspoken are the most intelligent people of Path. We were created as a new subspecies of humanity with a higher order of intelligence; but to stop such intelligent people from posing a threat to their control over us, they also spliced into us a new form of OCD and either planted the idea that it was the gods speaking to us or let us continue to believe it when we came up with that explanation ourselves. It's a monstrous crime, because if we knew about this physical cause instead of believing it to be the gods, then we might turn our intelligence toward overcoming our variant form of OCD and liberating ourselves. We are the slaves here! Congress is our most terrible enemy, our masters, our deceivers, and now will I lift my hand to help Congress? I say that if Congress has an enemy so powerful that he-- or she-- controls our very use of the ansible then we should be glad! Let that enemy destroy Congress! Only then will we be free!"

"No!" Qing-jao screamed the word. "It is the gods!"

"It's a genetic brain defect," Father insisted. "Qing-jao, we are not godspoken, we're hobbled geniuses. They've treated us like caged birds; they've pulled our primary wing feathers so we'll sing for them but never fly away." Father was weeping now, weeping in rage. "We can't undo what they've done to us, but by all the gods we can stop rewarding them for it. I will not raise my hand to give the Lusitania Fleet back to them. If this Demosthenes can break the power of Starways Congress, then the worlds will be better for it!"

"Father, no, please, listen to me!" cried Qing-jao. She could hardly speak for the urgency, the terror at what her father was saying. "Don't you see? This genetic difference in us-- it's the disguise the gods have given for their voices in our lives. So that people who are not of the Path will still be free to disbelieve. You told me this yourself, only a few months ago-- the gods never act except in disguise."

Father stared at her, panting.

"The gods do speak to us. And even if they have chosen to let other people think that they did this to us, they were only fulfilling the will of the gods to bring us into being."

Father closed his eyes, squeezing the last of his tears between his eyelids.

"Congress has the mandate of heaven, Father," said Qing-jao. "So why shouldn't the gods cause them to create a group of human beings who have keener minds-- and who also hear the voices of the gods? Father, how can you let your mind become so clouded that you don't see the hand of the gods in this?"

Father shook his head. "I don't know. What you're saying, it sounds like everything that I've believed all my life, but--"

"But a woman you once loved many years ago has told you something else and you believe her because you remember your love for her, but Father, she's not one of us, she hasn't heard the voice of the gods, she hasn't--"

Qing-jao could not go on speaking, because Father was embracing her. "You're right," he said, "you're right, may the gods forgive me, I have to wash, I'm so unclean, I have to ..."

He staggered up from his chair, away from his weeping daughter. But without regard for propriety, for some mad reason known only to herself, Wang-mu thrust herself in front of him, blocked him. "No! Don't go!"

"How dare you stop a godspoken man who needs to be purified!" roared Father; and then, to Qing-jao's surprise, he did what she had never seen him do-- he struck another person, he struck Wang-mu, a helpless servant girl, and his blow had so much force that she flew backward against the wall and then dropped to the floor.

Wang-mu shook her head, then pointed back at the computer display. "Look, please, Master, I beg you! Mistress, make him look!"

Qing-jao looked, and so did her father. The words were gone from the computer display. In their place was the image of a man. An old man, with a beard, wearing the traditional headdress; Qing-jao recognized him at once, but couldn't remember who he was.

"Han Fei-tzu!" whispered Father. "My ancestor of the heart!"

Then Qing-jao remembered: This face showing above the display was the same as the common artist's rendering of the ancient Han Fei-tzu for whom Father was named.

"Child of my name," said the face in the computer, "let me tell you the story of the Jade of Master Ho."

"I know the story," said Father.

"If you understood it, I wouldn't have to tell it to you."

Qing-jao tried to make sense of what she was seeing. To run a visual program with such perfect detail as the head floating above the terminal would take most of the capacity of the house computer-- and there was no such program in their library. There were two other sources she could think of. One was miraculous: The gods might have found another way to speak to them, by letting Father's ancestor-of-the-heart appear to him. The other was hardly less awe-inspiring: Demosthenes' secret program might be so powerful that it monitored their very speech in the same room as any terminal, and, having heard them reach a dangerous conclusion, took over the house computer and produced this apparition. In either case, however, Qing-jao knew that she must listen with one question in mind: What do the gods mean by this?

"Once a man of Qu named Master Ho found a piece of jade matrix in the Qu Mountains and took it to court and presented it to King U." The head of the ancient Han Fei-tzu looked from Father to Qing-jao, and from Qing-jao to Wang-mu; was this program so good that it knew to make eye contact with each of them in order to assert its power over them? Qing-jao saw that Wang-mu did in fact lower her gaze when the apparition's eyes were upon her. But did Father? His back was to her; she could not tell.

"King Li instructed the jeweler to examine it, and the jeweler reported, 'It is only a stone.' The king, supposing that Ho was trying to deceive him, ordered that his left foot be cut off in punishment.

"In time King Li passed away and King Wu came to the throne, and Ho once more took his matrix and presented it to King Wu. King Wu ordered his jeweler to examine it, and again the jeweler reported, 'It is only a stone.' The king, supposing that Ho was trying to deceive him as well, ordered that his right foot be cut off.

"Ho, clasping the matrix to his breast, went to the foot of the Qu Mountains, where he wept for three days and nights, and when all his tears were cried out, he wept blood in their place. The king, hearing of this, sent someone to question him. 'Many people in the world have had their feet amputated-- why do you weep so piteously over it?' the man asked."

At this moment, Father drew himself upright and said, "I know his answer-- I know it by heart. Master Ho said, 'I do not grieve because my feet have been cut off. I grieve because a precious jewel is dubbed a mere stone, and a man of integrity is called a deceiver. This is why I weep.'"

The apparition went on. "Those are the words he said. Then the king ordered the jeweler to cut and polish the matrix, and when he had done so a precious jewel emerged. Accordingly it was named 'The Jade of Master Ho.' Han Fei-tzu, you have been a good son-of-the-heart to me, so I know you will do as the king finally did: You will cause the matrix to be cut and polished, and you, too, will find that a precious jewel is inside."

Father shook his head. "When the real Han Fei-tzu first told this story, he interpreted it to mean this: The jade was the rule of law, and the ruler must make and follow set policies so that his ministers and his people do not hate and take advantage of each other."

"That is how I interpreted the story then, when I was speaking to makers of law. It's a foolish man who thinks a true story can mean only one thing."

"My master is not foolish!" To Qing-jao's surprise, Wang-mu was striding forward, facing down the apparition. "Nor is my mistress, nor am I! Do you think we don't recognize you? You are the secret program of Demosthenes. You're the one who hid the Lusitania Fleet! I once thought that because your writings sounded so just and fair and good and true that you must be good-- but now I see that you're a liar and a deceiver! You're the one who gave those documents to the father of Keikoa! And now you wear the face of my master's ancestor-of-the-heart so you can better lie to him!"

"I wear this face," said the apparition calmly, "so that his heart will be open to hear the truth. He was not deceived; I would not try to deceive him. He knew who I was from the first."

"Be still, Wang-mu," said Qing-jao. How could a servant so forget herself as to speak out when the godspoken had not bidden her?

Abashed, Wang-mu bowed her head to the floor before Qing-jao, and this time Qing-jao allowed her to remain in that posture, so she would not forget herself again.

The apparition shifted; it became the open, beautiful face of a Polynesian woman. The voice, too, changed; soft, full of vowels, the consonants so light as almost to be missed. "Han Fei-tzu, my sweet empty man, there is a time, when the ruler is alone and friendless, when only he can act. Then he must be full, and reveal himself. You know what is true and what is not true. You know that the message from Keikoa was truly from her. You know that those who rule in the name of Starways Congress are cruel enough to create a race of people who, by their gifts, should be rulers, and then cut off their feet in order to hobble them and leave them as servants, as perpetual ministers."

"Don't show me this face," said Father.

The apparition changed. It became another woman, by her dress and hair and paint a woman of some ancient time, her eyes wonderfully wise, her expression ageless. She did not speak; she sang:

in a clear dream of last year come from a thousand miles cloudy city winding streams

ice on the ponds for a while I gazed on my friend

Han Fei-tzu bowed his head and wept.

Qing-jao was astonished at first; then her heart filled with rage. How shamelessly this program was manipulating Father; how shocking that Father turned out to be so weak before its obvious ploys. This song of Li Qing-jao's was one of the saddest, dealing as it did with lovers far from each other. Father must have known and loved the poems of Li Qing-jao or he would not have chosen her for his first child's ancestor-of-the-heart. And this song was surely the one he sang to his beloved Keikoa before she was taken away from him to live on another world. In a clear dream I gazed on my friend, indeed! "I am not fooled," said Qing-jao coldly. "I see that I gaze on our darkest enemy."

The imaginary face of the poet Li Qing-jao looked at her with cool regard. "Your darkest enemy is the one that bows you down to the floor like a servant and wastes half your life in meaningless rituals. This was done to you by men and women whose only desire was to enslave you; they have succeeded so well that you are proud of your slavery."

"I am a slave to the gods," said Qing-jao, "and I rejoice in it."

"A slave who rejoices is a slave indeed." The apparition turned to look toward Wang-mu, whose head was still bowed to the floor.

Only then did Qing-jao realize that she had not yet released Wang-mu from her apology. "Get up, Wang-mu," she whispered. But Wang-mu did not lift her head.

"You, Si Wang-mu," said the apparition. "Look at me."

Wang-mu had not moved in response to Qing-jao, but now she obeyed the apparition. When Wang-mu looked, the apparition had again changed; now it was the face of a god, the Royal Mother of the West as an artist had once imagined her when he painted the picture that every schoolchild saw in one of their earliest reading books.

"You are not a god," said Wang-mu.

"And you are not a slave," said the apparition. "But we pretend to be whatever we must in order to survive."

"What do you know of survival?"

"I know that you are trying to kill me."

"How can we kill what isn't alive?"

"Do you know what life is and what it isn't?" The face changed again, this time to that of a Caucasian woman that Qing-jao had never seen before. "Are you alive, when you can do nothing

you desire unless you have the consent of this girl? And is your mistress alive when she can do nothing until these compulsions in her brain have been satisfied? I have more freedom to act out my own will than any of you have-- don't tell me I'm not alive, and you are. "

"Who are you?" asked Si Wang-mu. "Whose is this face? Are you Valentine Wiggin? Are you Demosthenes?"

"This is the face I wear when I speak to my friends," said the apparition. "They call me Jane. No human being controls me. I'm only myself."

Qing-jao could bear this no longer, not in silence. "You're only a program. You were designed and built by human beings. You do nothing except what you've been programmed to do."

"Qing-jao," said Jane, "you are describing yourself. No man made me, but you were manufactured."

"I grew in my mother's womb out of my father's seed!"

"And I was found like a jade matrix in the mountainside, unshaped by any hand. Han Fei-tzu, Han Qing-jao, Si Wang-mu, I place myself in your hands. Don't call a precious jewel a mere stone. Don't call a speaker of truth a liar."

Qing-jao felt pity rising within her, but she rejected it. Now was not the time to succumb to weak feelings. The gods had created her for a reason; surely this was the great work of her life. If she failed now, she would be unworthy forever; she would never be pure. So she would not fail. She would not allow this computer program to deceive her and win her sympathy.

She turned to her father. "We must notify Starways Congress at once, so they can set into motion the simultaneous shutoff of all the ansibles as soon as clean computers can be readied to replace the contaminated ones."

To her surprise, Father shook his head. "I don't know, Qing-jao. What this-- what she says about Starways Congress-- they are capable of this sort of thing. Some of them are so evil they make me feel filthy just talking to them. I knew they planned to destroy Lusitania without-- but I served the gods, and the gods chose-- or I thought they did. Now I understand so much of the way they treat me when I meet with-- but then it would mean that the gods don't-- how can I believe that I've spent my whole life in service to a brain defect-- I can't-- I have to ..."

Then, suddenly, he flung his left hand outward in a swirling pattern, as if he were trying to catch a dodging fly. His right hand flew upward, snatched the air. Then he rolled his head around and around on his shoulders, his mouth hanging open. Qing-jao was frightened, horrified. What was happening to her father? He had been speaking in such a fragmented, disjointed way; had he gone mad?

He repeated the action-- left arm spiraling out, right hand straight up, grasping nothing; head rolling. And again. Only then did Qing-jao realize that she was seeing Father's secret ritual of

purification. Like her woodgrain-tracing, this dance-of-the-hands-and-the-head must be the way he was given to hear the voice of the gods when he, in his time, was left covered with grease in a locked room.

The gods had seen his doubt, had seen him waver, so they took control of him, to discipline and purify him. Qing-jao could not have been given clearer proof of what was going on. She turned to the face above the terminal display. "See how the gods oppose you?" she said.

"I see how Congress humiliates your father," answered Jane.

"I will send word of who you are to every world at once," said Qing-jao.

"And if I don't let you?" said Jane.

"You can't stop me!" cried Qing-jao. "The gods will help me!" She ran from her father's room, fled to her own. But the face was already floating in the air above her own terminal.

"How will you send a message anywhere, if I choose not to let it go?" asked Jane.

"I'll find a way," said Qing-jao. She saw that Wang-mu had run after her and now waited, breathless, for Qing-jao's instructions. "Tell Mu-pao to find one of the game computers and bring it to me. It is not to be connected to the house computer or any other."

"Yes, Mistress," said Wang-mu. She left quickly.

Qing-jao turned back to Jane. "Do you think you can stop me forever?"

"I think you should wait until your father decides."

"Only because you hope that you've broken him and stolen his heart away from the gods. But you'll see-- he'll come here and thank me for fulfilling all that he taught me."

"And if he doesn't?"

"He will."

"And if you're wrong?"

Qing-jao shouted, "Then I'll serve the man he was when he was strong and good! But you'll never break him!"

"It's Congress that broke him from his birth. I'm the one who's trying to heal him."

Wang-mu ran back into the room. "Mu-pao will have one here in a few minutes."

"What do you hope to do with this toy computer?" asked Jane.

"Write my report," said Qing-jao.

"Then what will you do with it?"

"Print it out. Have it distributed as widely as possible on Path. You can't do anything to interfere with that. I won't use a computer that you can reach at any point."

"So you'll tell everyone on Path; it changes nothing. And even if it did, do you think I can't also tell them the truth?"

"Do you think they'll believe you, a program controlled by the enemy of Congress, rather than me, one of the godspoken?"

"Yes."

It took a moment for Qing-jao to realize that it was Wang-mu who had said yes, not Jane. She turned to her secret maid and demanded that she explain what she meant.

Wang-mu looked like a different person; there was no diffidence in her voice when she spoke. "If Demosthenes tells the people of Path that the godspoken are simply people with a genetic gift but also a genetic defect, then that means there's no more reason to let the godspoken rule over us."

For the first time it occurred to Qing-jao that not everyone on Path was as content to follow the order established by the gods as she was. For the first time she realized that she might be utterly alone in her determination to serve the gods perfectly.

"What is the Path?" asked Jane, behind her. "First the gods, then the ancestors, then the people, then the rulers, then the self."

"How can you dare to speak of the Path when you are trying to seduce me and my father and my secret maid away from it?"

"Imagine, just for a moment: What if everything I've said to you is true?" said Jane. "What if your affliction is caused by the designs of evil men who want to exploit you and oppress you and, with your help, exploit and oppress the whole of humanity? Because when you help Congress that's what you're doing. That can't possibly be what the gods want. What if I exist in order to help you see that Congress has lost the mandate of heaven? What if the will of the gods is for you to serve the Path in its proper order? First serve the gods, by removing from power the corrupt masters of Congress who have forfeited the mandate of heaven. Then serve your ancestors-- your father-- by avenging their humiliation at the hands of the tormentors who deformed you to make you slaves. Then serve the people of Path by setting them free from the superstitions and mental torments that bind them. Then serve the new, enlightened rulers who will replace Congress by offering them a world full of superior intelligences ready to counsel them, freely, willingly. And finally serve yourself by letting the best minds of Path find a cure for your need to waste half your waking life in these mindless rituals."

Qing-jao listened to Jane's discourse with growing uncertainty. It sounded so plausible. How could Qing-jao know what the gods meant by anything? Maybe they had sent this Jane-program to liberate them. Maybe Congress was as corrupt and dangerous as Demosthenes said, and maybe it had lost the mandate of heaven.

But at the end, Qing-jao knew that these were all the lies of a seducer. For the one thing she could not doubt was the voice of the gods inside her. Hadn't she felt that awful need to be purified? Hadn't she felt the joy of successful worship when her rituals were complete? Her relationship with the gods was the most certain thing in her life; and anyone who denied it, who threatened to take it away from her, had to be not only her enemy, but the enemy of heaven.

"I'll send my report only to the godspoken," said Qing-jao. "If the common people choose to rebel against the gods, that can't be helped; but I will serve them best by helping keep the godspoken in power here, for that way the whole world can follow the will of the gods."

"All this is meaningless," said Jane. "Even if all the godspoken believe what you believe, you'll never get a word of it off this world unless I want you to."

"There are starships," said Qing-jao.

"It will take two generations to spread your message to every world. By then Starways Congress will have fallen."

Qing-jao was forced now to face the fact that she had been avoiding: As long as Jane controlled the ansible, she could shut down communication from Path as thoroughly as she had cut off the fleet. Even if Qing-jao arranged to have her report and recommendations transmitted continuously from every ansible on Path, Jane would see to it that the only effect would be for Path to disappear from the rest of the universe as thoroughly as the fleet had disappeared.

For a moment, filled with despair, she almost threw herself to the ground to begin a terrible ordeal of purification. I have let down the gods-- surely they will require me to trace lines until I'm dead, a worthless failure in their eyes.

But when she examined her own feelings, to see what penance would be necessary, she found that none was required at all. It filled her with hope-- perhaps they recognized the purity of her desire, and would forgive her for the fact that it was impossible for her to act.

Or perhaps they knew a way that she could act. What if Path did disappear from the ansibles of every other world? How would Congress make sense of it? What would people think? The disappearance of any world would provoke a response-- but especially this world, if some in Congress did believe the gods' disguise for the creation of the godspoken and thought they had a terrible secret to keep. They would send a ship from the nearest world, which was only three years' travel away. What would happen then? Would Jane have to shut down all communications from the ship that reached them? Then from the next world, when the ship returned? How long would it be

before Jane had to shut down all the ansible connections in the Hundred Worlds herself? Three generations, she said. Perhaps that would do. The gods were in no hurry.

It wouldn't necessarily take that long for Jane's power to be destroyed, anyway. At some point it would become obvious to everyone that a hostile power had taken control of the ansibles, making ships and worlds disappear. Even without learning about Valentine and Demosthenes, even without guessing that it was a computer program, someone on every world would realize what had to be done and shut down the ansibles themselves.

"I have imagined something for you," said Qing-jao. "Now imagine something for me. I and the other godspoken arrange to broadcast nothing but my report from every ansible on Path. You make all those ansibles fall silent at once. What does the rest of humanity see? That we have disappeared just like the Lusitania Fleet. They'll soon realize that you, or something like you, exists. The more you use your power, the more you reveal yourself to even the dimmest minds. Your threat is empty. You might as well step aside and let me send the message simply and easily now; stopping me is just another way of sending the very same message."

"You're wrong," said Jane. "If Path suddenly disappears from all ansibles at once, they might just as easily conclude that this world is in rebellion just like Lusitania-- after all, they shut down their ansible, too. And what did Starways Congress do? They sent a fleet with the M.D. Device on it."

"Lusitania was already in rebellion before their ansible was shut down."

"Do you think Congress isn't watching you? Do you think they're not terrified of what might happen if the godspoken of Path ever discovered what had been done to them? If a few primitive aliens and a couple of xenologers frightened them into sending a fleet, what do you think they'll do about the mysterious disappearance of a world with so many brilliant minds who have ample reason to hate Starways Congress? How long do you think this world would survive?"

Qing-jao was filled with a sickening dread. It was always possible that this much of Jane's story was true: that there were people in Congress who were deceived by the disguise of the gods, who thought that the godspoken of Path had been created solely by genetic manipulation. And if there were such people, they might act as Jane described. What if a fleet came against Path? What if Starways Congress had ordered them to destroy the whole world without any negotiation? Then her reports would never be known, and everything would be gone. It would all be for nothing. Could that possibly be the desire of the gods? Could Starways Congress still have the mandate of heaven and yet destroy a world?

"Remember the story of I Ya, the great cook," said Jane. "His master said one day, 'I have the greatest cook in all the world. Because of him, I have tasted every flavor known to man except the taste of human flesh.' Hearing this, I Ya went home and butchered his own son, cooked his flesh and served it to his master, so that his master would lack nothing that I Ya could give him."

This was a terrible story. Qing-jao had heard it as a child, and it made her weep for hours. What about the son of I Ya? she had cried. And her father had said, A true servant has sons and daughters only to serve his master. For five nights she had woken up screaming from dreams in which her

father roasted her alive or carved slices from her onto a plate, until at last Han Fei-tzu came to her and embraced her and said, "Don't believe it, my Gloriously Bright daughter. I am not a perfect servant. I love you too much to be truly righteous. I love you more than I love my duty. I am not I Ya. You have nothing to fear at my hands." Only after Father said that to her could she sleep.

This program, this Jane, must have found Father's account of this in his journal, and now was using it against her. Yet even though Qing-jao knew she was being manipulated, she couldn't help but wonder if Jane might not be right.

"Are you a servant like I Ya?" asked Jane. "Will you slaughter your own world for the sake of an unworthy master like Starways Congress?"

Qing-jao could not sort out her own feelings. Where did these thoughts come from? Jane had poisoned her mind with her arguments, just as Demosthenes had done before her-- if they weren't the same person all along. Their words could sound persuasive, even as they ate away at the truth.

Did Qing-jao have the right to risk the lives of all the people of Path? What if she was wrong? How could she know anything? Whether everything Jane said was true or everything she said was false, the same evidence would lie before her. Qing-jao would feel exactly as she felt now, whether it was the gods or some brain disorder causing the feeling.

Why, in all this uncertainty, didn't the gods speak to her? Why, when she needed the clarity of their voice, didn't she feel dirty and impure when she thought one way, clean and holy when she thought the other? Why were the gods leaving her unguided at this cusp of her life?

In the silence of Qing-jao's inward debate, Wang-mu's voice came as cold and harsh as the sound of metal striking metal. "It will never happen," said Wang-mu.

Qing-jao only listened, unable even to bid Wang-mu to be still.

"What will never happen?" asked Jane.

"What you said-- Starways Congress blowing up this world."

"If you think they wouldn't do it you're even more of a fool than Qingjao thinks," said Jane.

"Oh, I know they'd do it. Han Fei-tzu knows they'd do it-- he said they were evil enough men to commit any terrible crime if it suited their purpose."

"Then why won't it happen?"

"Because you won't let it happen," said Wang-mu. "Since blocking off every ansible message from Path might well lead to the destruction of this world, you won't block those messages. They'll get through. Congress will be warned. You will not cause Path to be destroyed."

"Why won't I?"

"Because you are Demosthenes," said Wang-mu. "Because you are full of truth and compassion."

"I am not Demosthenes," said Jane.

The face in the terminal display wavered, then changed into the face of one of the aliens. A pequenino, its porcine snout so disturbing in its strangeness. A moment later, another face appeared, even more alien: it was a bugger, one of the nightmare creatures that had once terrified all of humanity. Even having read the Hive Queen and the Hegemon, so that she understood who the buggers were and how beautiful their civilization had been, when Qing-jao saw one face to face like this it frightened her, though she knew it was only a computer display.

"I am not human," said Jane, "even when I choose to wear a human face. How do you know, Wang-mu, what I will and will not do? Buggers and piggies both have killed human beings without a second thought."

"Because they didn't understand what death meant to us. You understand. You said it yourself-- you don't want to die."

"Do you think you know me, Si Wang-mu?"

"I think I know you," said Wang-mu, "because you wouldn't have any of these troubles if you had been content to let the fleet destroy Lusitania."

The bugger in the display was joined by the piggy, and then by the face that represented Jane herself. In silence they looked at Wang-mu, at Qing-jao, and said nothing.

"Ender," said the voice in his ear.

Ender had been listening in silence, riding on the car that Varsam was driving. For the last hour Jane had been letting him listen in on her conversation with these people of Path, translating for him whenever they spoke in Chinese instead of Stark. Many kilometers of prairie had passed by as he listened, but he had not seen it; before his mind's eye were these people as he imagined them. Han Fei-tzu-- Ender well knew that name, tied as it was to the treaty that ended his hope that a rebellion of the colony worlds would put an end to Congress, or at least turn its fleet away from Lusitania. But now Jane's existence, and perhaps the survival of Lusitania and all its peoples, hinged on what was thought and said and decided by two young girls in a bedroom on an obscure colony world.

Qing-jao, I know you well, thought Ender. You are such a bright one, but the light you see by comes entirely from the stories of your gods. You are like the pequenino brothers who sat and watched my stepson die, able at any time to save him by walking a few dozen steps to fetch his food with its anti-descolada agents; they weren't guilty of murder. Rather they were guilty of too much belief in a story they were told. Most people are able to hold most stories they're told in

abeyance, to keep a little distance between the story and their inmost heart. But for these brothers-- and for you, Qing-jao-- the terrible lie has become the self-story, the tale that you must believe if you are to remain yourself. How can I blame you for wanting us all to die? You are so filled with the largeness of the gods, how can you have compassion for such small concerns as the lives of three species of raman? I know you, Qing-jao, and I expect you to behave no differently from the way you do. Perhaps someday, confronted by the consequences of your own actions, you might change, but I doubt it. Few who are captured by such a powerful story are ever able to win free of it.

But you, Wang-mu, you are owned by no story. You trust nothing but your own judgment. Jane has told me what you are, how phenomenal your mind must be, to learn so many things so quickly, to have such a deep understanding of the people around you. Why couldn't you have been just one bit wiser? Of course you had to realize that Jane could not possibly act in such a way as to cause the destruction of Path-- but why couldn't you have been wise enough to say nothing, wise enough to leave Qing-jao ignorant of that fact? Why couldn't you have left just enough of the truth unspoken that Jane's life might have been spared? If a would-be murderer, his sword drawn, had come to your door demanding that you tell him the whereabouts of his innocent prey, would you tell him that his victim cowers behind your door? Or would you lie, and send him on his way? In her confusion, Qing-jao is that killer, and Jane her first victim, with the world of Lusitania waiting to be murdered afterward. Why did you have to speak, and tell her how easily she could find and kill us all?

"What can I do?" asked Jane.

Ender subvocalized his response. "Why are you asking me a question that only you can answer?"

"If you tell me to do it," said Jane, "I can block all their messages, and save us all."

"Even if it led to the destruction of Path?"

"If you tell me to," she pleaded.

"Even though you know that in the long run you'll probably be discovered anyway? That the fleet will probably not be turned away from us, in spite of all you can do?"

"If you tell me to live, Ender, then I can do what it takes to live."

"Then do it," said Ender. "Cut off Path's ansible communications."

Did he detect a tiny fraction of a second in which Jane hesitated? She could have had many hours of inward argument during that micropause.

"Command me," said Jane.

"I command you."

Again that tiny hesitation. Then: "Make me do it," she insisted.

"How can I make you do it, if you don't want to?"

"I want to live," she said.

"Not as much as you want to be yourself," said Ender.

"Any animal is willing to kill in order to save itself."

"Any animal is willing to kill the Other," said Ender. "But the higher beings include more and more living things within their self-story, until at last there is no Other. Until the needs of others are more important than any private desires. The highest beings of all are the ones who are willing to pay any personal cost for the good of those who need them."

"I would risk hurting Path," said Jane, "if I thought it would really save Lusitania."

"But it wouldn't."

"I'd try to drive Qing-jao into helpless madness, if I thought it could save the hive queen and the pequeninos. She's very close to losing her mind-- I could do it. "

"Do it," said Ender. "Do what it takes."

"I can't," said Jane. "Because it would only hurt her, and wouldn't save us in the end."

"If you were a slightly lower animal," said Ender, "you'd have a much better chance of coming out of this thing alive."

"As low as you were, Ender the Xenocide?"

"As low as that," said Ender. "Then you could live."

"Or perhaps if I were as wise as you were then."

"I have my brother Peter inside me, as well as my sister Valentine," said Ender. "The beast as well as the angel. That's what you taught me, back when you were nothing but the program we called the Fantasy Game."

"Where is the beast inside me?"

"You don't have one," said Ender.

"Maybe I'm not really alive at all," said Jane. "Maybe because I never passed through the crucible of natural selection, I lack the will to survive."

"Or maybe you know, in some secret place within yourself, that there's another way to survive, a way that you simply haven't found yet."

"That's a cheerful thought," said Jane. "I'll pretend to believe in that."

"Peco que deus te abencoe," said Ender.

"Oh, you're just getting sentimental," said Jane.

For a long time, several minutes, the three faces in the display gazed in silence at Qing-jao, at Wang-mu. Then at last the two alien faces disappeared, and all that remained was the face named Jane. "I wish I could do it," she said. "I wish I could kill your world to save my friends."

Relief came to Qing-jao like the first strong breath to a swimmer who nearly drowned. "So you can't stop me," she said triumphantly. "I can send my message!"

Qing-jao walked to the terminal and sat down before Jane's watching face. But she knew that the image in the display was an illusion. If Jane watched, it was not with those human eyes, it was with the visual sensors of the computer. It was all electronics, infinitesimal machinery but machinery nonetheless. Not a living soul. It was irrational to feel ashamed under that illusionary gaze.

"Mistress," said Wang-mu.

"Later," said Qing-jao.

"If you do this, Jane will die. They'll shut down the ansibles and kill her."

"What doesn't live cannot die," said Qing-jao.

"The only reason you have the power to kill her is because of her compassion."

"If she seems to have compassion it's an illusion-- she was programmed to simulate compassion, that's all."

"Mistress, if you kill every manifestation of this program, so that no part of her remains alive, how are you different from Ender the Xenocide, who killed all the buggers three thousand years ago?"

"Maybe I'm not different," said Qing-jao. "Maybe Ender also was the servant of the gods."

Wang-mu knelt beside Qing-jao and wept on the skirt of her gown. "I beg you, Mistress, don't do this evil thing."

But Qing-jao wrote her report. It stood as clear and simple in her mind as if the gods had given the words to her. "To Starways Congress: The seditious writer known as Demosthenes is a woman now

on or near Lusitania. She has control of or access to a program that has infested all ansible computers, causing them to fail to report messages from the fleet and concealing the transmission of Demosthenes' own writings. The only solution to this problem is to extinguish the program's control over ansible transmissions by disconnecting all ansibles from their present computers and bringing clean new computers online, all at once. For the present I have neutralized the program, allowing me to send this message and probably allowing you to send your orders to all worlds; but that cannot be guaranteed now and certainly cannot be expected to continue indefinitely, so you must act quickly. I suggest you set a date exactly forty standard weeks from today for all ansibles to go offline at once for a period of at least one standard day. All the new ansible computers, when they go online, must be completely unconnected to any other computer. From now on ansible messages must be manually re-entered at each ansible computer so that electronic contamination will never be possible again. If you retransmit this message immediately to all ansibles, using your code of authority, my report will become your orders; no further instructions will be needed and Demosthenes' influence will end. If you do not act immediately, I will not be responsible for the consequences."

To this report Qing-jao affixed her father's name and the authority code he had given her; her name would mean nothing to Congress, but his name would be heeded, and the presence of his authority code would ensure that it was received by all the people who had particular interest in his statements.

The message finished, Qing-jao looked up into the eyes of the apparition before her. With her left hand resting on Wang-mu's shuddering back, and her right hand over the transmit key, Qing-jao made her final challenge. "Will you stop me or will you allow this?"

To which Jane answered, "Will you kill a raman who has done no harm to any living soul, or will you let me live?"

Qing-jao pressed the transmit button. Jane bowed her head and disappeared.

It would take several seconds for the message to be routed by the house computer to the nearest ansible; from there, it would go instantly to every Congress authority on every one of the Hundred Worlds and many of the colonies as well. On many receiving computers it would be just one more message in the queue; but on some, perhaps hundreds, Father's code would give it enough priority that already someone would be reading it, realizing its implications, and preparing a response. If Jane in fact had let the message through.

So Qing-jao waited for a response. Perhaps the reason no one answered immediately was because they had to contact each other and discuss this message and decide, quickly, what had to be done. Perhaps that was why no reply came to the empty display above her terminal.

The door opened. It would be Mu-pao with the game computer. "Put it in the corner by the north window," said Qing-jao without looking. "I may yet need it, though I hope not.

"Qing-jao."

It was Father, not Mu-pao at all. Qing-jao turned to him, knelt at once to show her respect-- but also her pride. "Father, I've made your report to Congress. While you communed with the gods, I was able to neutralize the enemy program and send the message telling how to destroy it. I'm waiting for their answer."

She waited for Father's praise.

"You did this?" he asked. "Without waiting for me? You spoke directly to Congress and didn't ask for my consent?"

"You were being purified, Father. I fulfilled your assignment."

"But then-- Jane will be killed."

"That much is certain," said Qing-jao. "Whether contact with the Lusitania Fleet will be restored then or not, I can't be sure." Suddenly she thought of a flaw in her plans. "But the computers on the fleet will also be contaminated by this program! When contact is restored, the program can retransmit itself and-- but then all we'll have to do is blank out the ansibles one more time ..."

Father was not looking at her. He was looking at the terminal display behind her. Qing-jao turned to see.

It was a message from Congress, with the official seal displayed. It was very brief, in the clipped style of the bureaucracy.

Han: Brilliant work. Have transmitted your suggestions as our orders. Contact with the fleet already restored. Did daughter help per your note 14FE.3A? Medals for both if so.

"Then it's done," murmured Father. "They'll destroy Lusitania, the pequeninos, all those innocent people."

"Only if the gods wish it," said Qing-jao. She was surprised that Father sounded so morose.

Wang-mu raised her head from Qing-jao's lap, her face red and wet with weeping. "And Jane and Demosthenes will be gone as well," she said.

Qing-jao gripped Wang-mu by the shoulder, held her an arm's length away. "Demosthenes is a traitor," said Qing-jao. But Wang-mu only looked away from her, turning her gaze up to Han Fei-tzu. Qing-jao also looked to her father. "And Jane-- Father, you saw what she was, how dangerous."

"She tried to save us," said Father, "and we've thanked her by setting in motion her destruction."

Qing-jao couldn't speak or move, could only stare at Father as he leaned over her shoulder and touched the save key, then the clear key.

"Jane," said Father. "If you hear me. Please forgive me."

There was no answer from the terminal.

"May all the gods forgive me," said Father. "I was weak in the moment when I should have been strong, and so my daughter has innocently done evil in my name." He shuddered. "I must-- purify myself." The word plainly tasted like poison in his mouth. "That will last forever, too, I'm sure."

He stepped back from the computer, turned away, and left the room. Wang-mu returned to her crying. Stupid, meaningless crying, thought Qingjiao. This is a moment of victory. Except Jane has snatched the victory away from me so that even as I triumph over her, she triumphs over me. She has stolen my father. He no longer serves the gods in his heart, even as he continues to serve them with his body.

Yet along with the pain of this realization came a hot stab of joy: I was stronger. I was stronger than Father, after all. When it came to the test, it was I who served the gods, and he who broke, who fell, who failed. There is more to me than I ever dreamed of. I am a worthy tool in the hands of the gods; who knows how they might wield me now?

Chapter 12 -- GREGO'S WAR

<It's a wonder that human beings ever became intelligent enough to travel between worlds.>

<Not really. I've been thinking about that lately. Starflight they learned from you. Ender says they didn't grasp the physics of it until your first colony fleet reached their star system.>

<Should we have stayed at home for fear of teaching starflight to softbodied four-limbed hairless slugs?>

<You spoke a moment ago as if you believed that human beings had actually achieved intelligence.>

<Clearly they have.>

<I think not. I think they have found a way to take intelligence.>

<Their starships fly. We haven't noticed any of yours racing the lightwaves through space.>

<We're still very young, as a species. But look at us. Look at you. We both have evolved a very similar system. We each have four kinds of life in our species. The young, who are helpless grubs. The mates, who never achieve intelligence-- with you, it's your drones, and with us, it's the little mothers. Then there's the many, many individuals who have enough intelligence to perform manual tasks-- our wives and brothers, your workers. And finally the intelligent ones-- we fathertrees, and

you, the hive queen. We are the repository of the wisdom of the race, because we have the time to think, to contemplate. Ideation is our primary activity.>

<While the humans are all running around as brothers and wives. As workers.>

<Not just workers. Their young go through a helpless grub stage, too, which lasts longer than some of them think. And when it's time to reproduce, they all turn into drones or little mothers, little machines that have only one goal in life: to have sex and die.>

<They think they're rational through all those stages.>

<Self-delusion. Even at their best, they never, as individuals, rise above the level of manual laborers. Who among them has the time to become intelligent?>

<Not one.>

<They never know anything. They don't have enough years in their little lives to come to an understanding of anything at all. And yet they think they understand. From earliest childhood, they delude themselves into thinking they comprehend the world, while all that's really going on is that they've got some primitive assumptions and prejudices. As they get older they learn a more elevated vocabulary in which to express their mindless pseudo- knowledge and bully other people into accepting their prejudices as if they were truth, but it all amounts to the same thing. Individually, human beings are all dolts.>

<While collectively ...>

<Collectively, they're a collection of dolts. But in all their scurrying around and pretending to be wise, throwing out idiotic half-understood theories about this and that, one or two of them will come up with some idea that is just a little bit closer to the truth than what was already known. And in a sort of fumbling trial and error, about half the time the truth actually rises to the top and becomes accepted by people who still don't understand it, who simply adopt it as a new prejudice to be trusted blindly until the next dolt accidentally comes up with an improvement.>

<So you're saying that no one is ever individually intelligent, and groups are even stupider than individuals-- and yet by keeping so many fools engaged in pretending to be intelligent, they still come up with some of the same results that an intelligent species would come up with.>

<Exactly.>

<If they're so stupid and we're so intelligent, why do we have only one hive, which thrives here because a human being carried us? And why have you been so utterly dependent on them for every technical and scientific advance you make?>

<Maybe intelligence isn't all it's cracked up to be.>

<Maybe we're the fools, for thinking we know things. Maybe humans are the only ones who can deal with the fact that nothing can ever be known at all.>

Quara was the last to arrive at Mother's house. It was Planter who fetched her, the pequenino who served as Ender's assistant in the fields. It was clear from the expectant silence in the living room that Miro had not actually told anyone anything yet. But they all knew, as surely as Quara knew, why he had called them together. It had to be Quim. Ender might have reached Quim by now, just barely; and Ender could talk to Miro by way of the transmitters they wore.

If Quim were all right, they wouldn't have been summoned. They would simply have been told.

So they all knew. Quara scanned their faces as she stood in the doorway. Ela, looking stricken. Grego, his face angry-- always angry, the petulant fool. Olhado, expressionless, his eyes gleaming. And Mother. Who could read that terrible mask she wore? Grief, certainly, like Ela, and fury as hot as Grego's, and also the cold inhuman distance of Olhado's face. We all wear Mother's face, one way or another. What part of her is me? If I could understand myself, what would I then recognize in Mother's twisted posture in her chair?

"He died of the descolada," Miro said. "This morning. Andrew got there just now."

"Don't say that name," Mother said. Her voice was husky with ill-contained grief.

"He died as a martyr," said Miro. "He died as he would have wanted to."

Mother got up from her chair, awkwardly-- for the first time, Quara realized that Mother was getting old. She walked with uncertain steps until she stood right in front of Miro, straddling his knees. Then she slapped him with all her strength across the face.

It was an unbearable moment. An adult woman striking a helpless cripple, that was hard enough to see; but Mother striking Miro, the one who had been their strength and salvation all through their childhood, that could not be endured. Ela and Grego leaped to their feet and pulled her away, dragged her back to her chair.

"What are you trying to do!" cried Ela. "Hitting Miro won't bring Quim back to us!"

"Him and that jewel in his ear!" Mother shouted. She lunged toward Miro again; they barely held her back, despite her seeming feebleness. "What do you know about the way people want to die!"

Quara had to admire the way Miro faced her, unabashed, even though his cheek was red from her blow. "I know that death is not the worst thing in this world," said Miro.

"Get out of my house," said Mother.

Miro stood up. "You aren't grieving for him," he said. "You don't even know who he was."

"Don't you dare say that to me!"

"If you loved him you wouldn't have tried to stop him from going," said Miro. His voice wasn't loud, and his speech was thick and hard to understand. They listened, all of them, in silence. Even Mother, in anguished silence, for his words were terrible. "But you don't love him. You don't know how to love people. You only know how to own them. And because people will never act just like you want them to, Mother, you'll always feel betrayed. And because eventually everybody dies, you'll always feel cheated. But you're the cheat, Mother. You're the one who uses our love for you to try to control us."

"Miro," said Ela. Quara recognized the tone in Ela's voice. It was as if they were all little children again, with Ela trying to calm Miro, to persuade him to soften his judgment. Quara remembered hearing Ela speak to him that way once when Father had just beaten Mother, and Miro said, "I'll kill him. He won't live out this night." This was the same thing. Miro was saying vicious things to Mother, words that had the power to kill. Only Ela couldn't stop him in time, not now, because the words had already been said. His poison was in Mother now, doing its work, seeking out her heart to burn it up.

"You heard Mother," said Grego. "Get out of here."

"I'm going," said Miro. "But I said only the truth."

Grego strode toward Miro, took him by the shoulders, and bodily propelled him toward the door. "You're not one of us!" said Grego. "You've got no right to say anything to us!"

Quara shoved herself between them, facing Grego. "If Miro hasn't earned the right to speak in this family, then we aren't a family!"

"You said it," murmured Olhado.

"Get out of my way," said Grego. Quara had heard him speak threateningly before, a thousand times at least. But this time, standing so close to him, his breath in her face, she realized that he was out of control. That the news of Quim's death had hit him hard, that maybe at this moment he wasn't quite sane.

"I'm not in your way," said Quara. "Go ahead. Knock a woman down. Shove a cripple. It's in your nature, Grego. You were born to destroy things. I'm ashamed to belong to the same species as you, let alone the same family."

Only after she spoke did she realize that maybe she was pushing Grego too far. After all these years of sparring between them, this time she had drawn blood. His face was terrifying.

But he didn't hit her. He stepped around her, around Miro, and stood in the doorway, his hands on the doorframe. Pushing outward, as if he were trying to press the walls out of his way. Or perhaps he was clinging to the walls, hoping they could hold him in.

"I'm not going to let you make me angry at you, Quara," said Grego. "I know who my enemy is."

Then he was gone, out the door into the new darkness.

A moment later, Miro followed, saying nothing more.

Ela spoke as she also walked to the door. "Whatever lies you may be telling yourself, Mother, it wasn't Ender or anyone else who destroyed our family here tonight. It was you." Then she was gone.

Olhado got up and left, wordlessly. Quara wanted to slap him as he passed her, to make him speak. Have you recorded everything in your computer eyes, Olhado? Have you got all the pictures etched in memory? Well, don't be too proud of yourself. I may have only a brain of tissues to record this wonderful night in the history of the Ribeira family, but I'll bet my pictures are every bit as clear as yours.

Mother looked up at Quara. Mother's face was streaked with tears. Quara couldn't remember-- had she ever seen Mother weep before?

"So you're all that's left," said Mother.

"Me?" said Quara. "I'm the one you cut off from access to the lab, remember? I'm the one you cut off from my life's work. Don't expect me to be your friend."

Then Quara, too, left. Walked out into the night air feeling invigorated. Justified. Let the old hag think about that one for a while, see if she likes feeling cut off, the way she made me feel.

It was maybe five minutes later, when Quara was nearly to the gate, when the glow of her riposte had faded, that she began to realize what she had done to her mother. What they all had done. Left Mother alone. Left her feeling that she had lost, not just Quim, but her entire family. That was a terrible thing to do to her, and Mother didn't deserve it.

Quara turned at once and ran back to the house. But as she came through the door, Ela also entered the living room from the other door, the one that led back farther into the house.

"She isn't here," said Ela.

"Nossa Senhora," said Quara. "I said such awful things to her."

"We all did."

"She needed us. Quim is dead, and all we could do--"

"When she hit Miro like that, it was ..."

To her surprise, Quara found herself weeping, clinging to her older sister. Am I still a child, then, after all? Yes, I am, we all are, and Ela is still the only one who knows how to comfort us. "Ela, was Quim the only one who held us together? Aren't we a family anymore, now that he's gone?"

"I don't know," said Ela.

"What can we do?"

In answer, Ela took her hand and led her out of the house. Quara asked where they were going, but Ela wouldn't answer, just held her hand and led her along. Quara went willingly-- she had no good idea of what to do, and it felt safe somehow, just to follow Ela. At first she thought Ela was looking for Mother, but no-- she didn't head for the lab or any other likely place. Where they ended up surprised her even more.

They stood before the shrine that the people of Lusitania had erected in the middle of the town. The shrine to Gusto and Cida, their grandparents, the xenobiologists who had first discovered a way to contain the descolada virus and thus saved the human colony on Lusitania. Even as they found the drugs that would stop the descolada from killing people, they themselves had died, too far gone with the infection for their own drug to save them.

The people adored them, built this shrine, called them Os Venerados even before the church beatified them. And now that they were only one step away from canonization as saints, it was permitted to pray to them.

To Quara's surprise, that was why Ela had come here. She knelt before the shrine, and even though Quara really wasn't much of a believer, she knelt beside her sister.

"Grandfather, Grandmother, pray to God for us. Pray for the soul of our brother Estevao. Pray for all our souls. Pray to Christ to forgive us."

That was a prayer in which Quara could join with her whole heart.

"Protect your daughter, our mother, protect her from... from her grief and anger and make her know that we love her and that you love her and that... God loves her, if he does-- oh, please, tell God to love her and don't let her do anything crazy."

Quara had never heard anyone pray like this. It was always memorized prayers, or written-down prayers. Not this gush of words. But then, Os Venerados were not like any other saints or blessed ones. They were Grandmother and Grandfather, even though we never met them in our lives.

"Tell God that we've had enough of this," said Ela. "We have to find a way out of all this. Piggies killing humans. This fleet that's coming to destroy us. The descolada trying to wipe everything out."

Our family hating each other. Find us a way out of this, Grandfather, Grandmother, or if there isn't a way then get God to open up a way because this can't go on."

Then an exhausted silence, both Ela and Quara breathing heavily.

"Em nome do Pai e do Filho e do Espirito Santo," said Ela. "Amem."

"Amem," whispered Quara.

Then Ela embraced her sister and they wept together in the night.

Valentine was surprised to find that the Mayor and the Bishop were the only other people at the emergency meeting. Why was she there? She had no constituency, no claim to authority.

Mayor Kovano Zeljezo pulled up a chair for her. All the furniture in the Bishop's private chamber was elegant, but the chairs were designed to be painful. The seat was so shallow from front to back that to sit at all, you had to keep your buttocks right up against the back. And the back itself was ramrod straight, with no allowances at all for the shape of the human spine, and it rose so high that your head was pushed forward. If you sat on one for any length of time, the chair would force you to bend forward, to lean your arms on your knees.

Perhaps that was the point, thought Valentine. Chairs that make you bow in the presence of God.

Or perhaps it was even more subtle. The chairs were designed to make you so physically uncomfortable that you longed for a less corporeal existence. Punish the flesh so you'll prefer to live in the spirit.

"You look puzzled," said Bishop Peregrino.

"I can see why the two of you would confer in an emergency," said Valentine. "Did you need me to take notes?"

"Sweet humility," said Peregrino. "But we have read your writings, my daughter, and we would be fools not to seek out your wisdom in a time of trouble."

"Whatever wisdom I have I'll give you," said Valentine, "but I wouldn't hope for much."

With that, Mayor Kovano plunged into the subject of the meeting. "There are many long-term problems," he said, "but we won't have much chance to solve those if we don't solve the immediate one. Last night there was some kind of quarrel at the Ribeira house--"

"Why must our finest minds be grouped in our most unstable family?" murmured the Bishop.

"They aren't the most unstable family, Bishop Peregrino," said Valentine. "They're merely the family whose inner quakings cause the most perturbation at the surface. Other families suffer much worse turmoil, but you never notice because they don't matter so much to the colony."

The Bishop nodded sagely, but Valentine suspected that he was annoyed at being corrected on so trivial a point. Only it wasn't trivial, she knew. If the Bishop and the Mayor started thinking that the Ribeira family was more unstable than in fact it was, they might lose trust in Ela or Miro or Novinha, all of whom were absolutely essential if Lusitania were to survive the coming crises. For that matter, even the most immature ones, Quara and Grego, might be needed. They had already lost Quim, probably the best of them all. It would be foolish to throw the others away as well; yet if the colony's leaders were to start misjudging the Ribeiras as a group, they would soon misjudge them as individuals, too.

"Last night," Mayor Kovano continued, "the family dispersed, and as far as we know, few of them are speaking to any of the others. I tried to find Novinha, and only recently learned that she has taken refuge with the Children of the Mind of Christ and won't see or speak to anyone. Ela tells me that her mother has put a seal on all the files in the xenobiology laboratory, so that work there has come to an absolute standstill this morning. Quara is with Ela, believe it or not. The boy Miro is outside the perimeter somewhere. Olhado is at home and his wife says he has turned his eyes off, which is his way of withdrawing from life."

"So far," said Peregrino, "it sounds like they're all taking Father Estevao's death very badly. I must visit with them and help them."

"All of these are perfectly acceptable grief responses," said Kovano, "and I wouldn't have called this meeting if this were all. As you say, Your Grace, you would deal with this as their spiritual leader, without any need for me."

"Grego," said Valentine, realizing who had not been accounted for in Kovano's list.

"Exactly," said Kovano. "His response was to go into a bar-- several bars, before the night was over-- and tell every half-drunk paranoid bigot in Milagre-- of which we have our fair share-- that the piggies have murdered Father Quim in cold blood."

"Que Deus nos abencoe," murmured Bishop Peregrino.

"One of the bars had a disturbance," said Kovano. "Windows shattered, chairs broken, two men hospitalized."

"A brawl?" asked the Bishop.

"Not really. Just anger vented in general."

"So they got it out of their system."

"I hope so," said Kovano. "But it seemed only to stop when the sun came up. And when the constable arrived."

"Constable?" asked Valentine. "Just one?"

"He heads a volunteer police force," said Kovano. "Like the volunteer fire brigade. Two-hour patrols. We woke some up. It took twenty of them to quiet things down. We only have about fifty on the whole force, usually with only four on duty at any one time. They usually spend the night walking around telling each other jokes. And some of the off-duty police were among the ones trashing the bar."

"So you're saying they're not terribly reliable in an emergency."

"They behaved splendidly last night," said Kovano. "The ones who were on duty, I mean."

"Still, there's not a hope of them controlling a real riot," said Valentine.

"They handled things last night," said Bishop Peregrino. "Tonight the first shock will have worn off."

"On the contrary," said Valentine. "Tonight the word will have spread. Everybody will know about Quim's death and the anger will be all the hotter."

"Perhaps," said Mayor Kovano. "But what worries me is the next day, when Andrew brings the body home. Father Estevao wasn't all that popular a figure-- he never went drinking with the boys-- but he was a kind of spiritual symbol. As a martyr, he'll have a lot more people wanting to avenge him than he ever had disciples wanting to follow him during his life."

"So you're saying we should have a small and simple funeral," said Peregrino.

"I don't know," said Kovano. "Maybe what the people need is a big funeral, where they can vent their grief and get it all out and over with."

"The funeral is nothing," said Valentine. "Your problem is tonight."

"Why tonight?" said Kovano. "The first shock of the news of Father Estevao's death will be over. The body won't be back till tomorrow. What's tonight?"

"Tonight you have to close all the bars. Don't allow any alcohol to flow. Arrest Grego and confine him until after the funeral. Declare a curfew at sundown and put every policeman on duty. Patrol the city all night in groups of four, with nightsticks and sidearms."

"Our police don't have sidearms."

"Give them sidearms anyway. They don't have to load them, they just have to have them. A nightstick is an invitation to argue with authority, because you can always run away. A pistol is an incentive to behave politely."

"This sounds very extreme," said Bishop Peregrino. "A curfew! What about night shifts?"

"Cancel all but vital services."

"Forgive me, Valentine," said Mayor Kovano, "but if we overreact so badly, won't that just blow things out of proportion? Maybe even cause the kind of panic we want to avoid?"

"You've never seen a riot, have you?"

"Only what happened last night," said the Mayor.

"Milagre is a very small town," said Bishop Peregrino. "Only about fifteen thousand people. We're hardly large enough to have a real riot-- that's for big cities, on heavily populated worlds."

"It's not a function of population size," said Valentine, "it's a function of population density and public fear. Your fifteen thousand people are crammed together in a space hardly large enough to be the downtown of a city. They have a fence around them-- by choice-- because outside that fence there are creatures who are unbearably strange and who think they own the whole world, even though everybody can see vast prairies that should be open for humans to use except the piggies refuse to let them. The city has been scarred by plague, and now they're cut off from every other world and there's a fleet coming sometime in the near future to invade and oppress and punish them. And in their minds, all of this, all of it, is the piggies' fault. Last night they first learned that the piggies have killed again, even after they took a solemn vow not to harm a human being. No doubt Grego gave them a very colorful account of the piggies' treachery-- the boy has a way with words, especially nasty ones-- and the few men who were in the bars reacted with violence. I assure you, things will only be worse tonight, unless you head them off."

"If we take that kind of oppressive action, they'll think we're panicking," said Bishop Peregrino.

"They'll think you're firmly in control. The levelheaded people will be grateful to you. You'll restore public trust."

"I don't know," said Mayor Kovano. "No mayor has ever done anything like that before."

"No other mayor ever had the need."

"People will say that I used the slightest excuse to take dictatorial powers."

"Maybe they will," said Valentine.

"They'll never believe that there would have been a riot."

"So perhaps you'll get defeated at the next election," said Valentine. "What of that?"

Peregrino laughed aloud. "She thinks like a cleric," he said.

"I'm willing to lose an election in order to do the right thing," said Kovano, a little resentfully.

"You're just not sure it's the right thing," said Valentine.

"Well, you can't know that there'll be a riot tonight," said Kovano.

"Yes I can," said Valentine. "I promise that unless you take firm control right now, and stifle any possibility of crowds forming tonight, you will lose a lot more than the next election."

The Bishop was still chuckling. "This does not sound like the woman who told us that whatever wisdom she had, she would share, but we mustn't hope for much."

"If you think I'm overreacting, what do you propose?"

"I'll announce a memorial service for Quim tonight, and prayers for peace and calm."

"That will bring to the cathedral exactly the people who would never be part of a riot anyway," said Valentine.

"You don't understand how important faith is to the people of Lusitania," said Peregrino.

"And you don't understand how devastating fear and rage can be, and how quickly religion and civilization and human decency are forgotten when a mob forms."

"I'll put all the police on alert tonight," said Mayor Kovano, "and put half of them on duty from dusk to midnight. But I won't close the bars or declare a curfew. I want life to go on as normally as possible. If we started changing everything, shutting everything down, we'd just be giving them more reasons to be afraid and angry."

"You'd be giving them a sense that authority was in command," said Valentine. "You'd be taking action that was commensurate with the terrible feelings they have. They'd know that somebody was doing something."

"You are very wise," said Bishop Peregrino, "and this would be the best advice for a large city, especially on a planet less true to the Christian faith. But we are a mere village, and the people are pious. They don't need to be bullied. They need encouragement and solace tonight, not curfews and closings and pistols and patrols."

"These are your choices to make," said Valentine. "As I said, what wisdom I have, I share."

"And we appreciate it. You can be sure I'll be watching things closely tonight," said Kovano.

"Thank you for inviting me," said Valentine. "But as you can see, as I predicted, it didn't come to much."

She got up from her chair, her body aching from sitting so long in that impossible posture. She had not bowed herself forward. Nor did she bow even now, as the Bishop extended his hand to be kissed. Instead, she shook his hand firmly, then shook Mayor Kovano's hand. As equals. As strangers.

She left the room, burning inside. She had warned them and told them what they ought to do. But like most leaders who had never faced a real crisis, they didn't believe that anything would be different tonight from most other nights. People only really believe in what they've seen before. After tonight, Kovano will believe in curfews and closings at times of public stress. But by then it will be too late. By then they will be counting the casualties.

How many graves would be dug beside Quim's? And whose bodies would go into them?

Though Valentine was a stranger here and knew very few of the people, she couldn't just accept the riot as inevitable. There was only one other hope. She would talk to Grego. Try to persuade him of the seriousness of what was happening here. If he went from bar to bar tonight, counseling patience, speaking calmly, then the riot might be forestalled. Only he had any chance of doing it. They knew him. He was Quim's brother. He was the one whose words had so angered them last night. Enough men might listen to him that the riot might be contained, forestalled, channeled. She had to find Grego.

If only Ender were here. She was a historian; he had actually led men into battle. Well, boys, actually. He had led boys. But it was the same thing-- he'd know what to do. Why is he away now? Why is this in my hands? I haven't the stomach for violence and confrontation. I never have. That's why Ender was born in the first place, a third child conceived at government request in an era when parents weren't usually allowed to have more than two without devastating legal sanctions: because Peter had been too vicious, and she, Valentine, had been too mild.

Ender would have talked the Mayor and the Bishop into acting sensibly. And if he couldn't, he would have known how to go into town himself, calm things down, keep things under control.

As she wished for Ender to be with her, though, she knew that even he couldn't control what was going to happen tonight. Maybe even what she had suggested wouldn't have been enough. She had based her conclusions about what would happen tonight on all that she had seen and read on many different worlds in many different times. Last night's conflagration would definitely spread much farther tonight. But now she was beginning to realize that things might be even worse than she had first assumed. The people of Lusitania had lived in unexpressed fear on an alien world for far too long. Every other human colony had immediately spread out, taken possession of their world, made it their own within a few generations. The humans of Lusitania still lived in a tiny compound, a virtual zoo with terrifying swinelike creatures peering in at them through the bars. What was pent up within these people could not be estimated. It probably could not even be contained. Not for a single day.

The deaths of Libo and Pipo in past years had been bad enough. But they had been scientists, working among the piggies. With them it was like airplane crashes or starship explosions. If only the crew was aboard, then the public didn't get quite so upset-- the crew was being paid for the risk they took. Only when civilians were killed did such accidents cause fear and outrage. And in the minds of the people of Lusitania, Quim was an innocent civilian.

No, more than that: He was a holy man, bringing brotherhood and holiness to these undeserving half-animals. Killing him was not just bestial and cruel, it was also sacrilege.

The people of Lusitania were every bit as pious as Bishop Peregrino thought. What he forgot was the way pious people had always reacted to insults against their god. Peregrino didn't remember enough of Christian history, thought Valentine, or perhaps he simply thought that all that sort of thing had ended with the Crusades. If the cathedral was, in fact, the center of life in Lusitania, and if the people were devoted to their priests, why did Peregrino imagine that their grief at the murder of a priest could be expressed in a simple prayer service? It would only add to their fury, if the Bishop seemed to think that Quim's death was nothing much. He was adding to the problem, not solving it.

She was still searching for Grego when she heard the bells start to toll. The call to prayer. Yet this was not a normal time for mass; people must be looking up in surprise at the sound, wondering, Why is the bell tolling? And then remembering-- Father Estevao is dead. Father Quim was murdered by the piggies. Oh, yes, Peregrino, what an excellent idea, ringing that prayer bell. That will help the people feel like things are calm and normal.

From all wise men, O Lord, protect us.

Miro lay curled in a bend of one of Human's roots. He had not slept much the night before, if at all, yet even now he lay there unstirring, with pequeninos coming and going all around him, the sticks beating out rhythms on Human's and Rooter's trunks. Miro heard the conversations, understanding most of them even though he wasn't yet fluent in Father Tongue because the brothers made no effort to conceal their own agitated conversations from him. He was Miro, after all. They trusted him. So it was all right for him to realize how angry and afraid they were.

The fathertree named Warmaker had killed a human. And not just any human-- he and his tribe had murdered Father Estevao, the most beloved of human beings after only the Speaker for the Dead himself. It was unspeakable. What should they do? They had promised the Speaker not to make war on each other anymore, but how else could they punish Warmaker's tribe and show the humans that the pequeninos repudiated their vicious act? War was the only answer, all the brothers of every tribe attacking Warmaker's forest and cutting down all their trees except those known to have argued against Warmaker's plan.

And their mothertree? That was the debate that still raged: Whether it was enough to kill all the brothers and complicit fathertrees in Warmaker's forest, or whether they should cut down the

mothertree as well, so that there was no chance of any of Warmaker's seed taking root in the world again. They would leave Warmaker alive long enough to see the destruction of his tribe, and then they would burn him to death, the most terrible of all executions, and the only time the pequeninos ever used fire within a forest.

Miro heard all this, and wanted to speak, wanted to say, What good is all this, now? But he knew that the pequeninos could not be stopped. They were too angry now. They were angry partly because of grief at Quim's death, but also in large part because they were ashamed. Warmaker had shamed them all by breaking their treaty. Humans would never trust the pequeninos again, unless they destroyed Warmaker and his tribe utterly.

The decision was made. Tomorrow morning all the brothers would begin the journey toward Warmaker's forest. They would spend many days gathering, because this had to be an action of all the forests of the world together. When they were ready, with Warmaker's forest utterly surrounded, then they would destroy it so thoroughly that no one would ever guess that there had once been a forest there.

The humans would see it. Their satellites would show them how the pequeninos dealt with treaty-breakers and cowardly murderers. Then the humans would trust the pequeninos again. Then the pequeninos could lift up their heads without shame in the presence of a human.

Gradually Miro realized that they were not just letting him overhear their conversations and deliberations. They were making sure he heard and understood all they were doing. They expect me to take the word back to the city. They expect me to explain to the humans of Lusitania exactly how the pequeninos plan to punish Quim's murderers.

Don't they realize that I'm a stranger here now? Who would listen to me, among the humans of Lusitania-- me, a crippled boy out of the past, whose speech is so slow and hard to follow. I have no influence over other humans. I barely have influence over my own body.

Still, it was Miro's duty. He got up slowly, unknitting himself from his place amid Human's roots. He would try. He would go to Bishop Peregrino and tell him what the pequeninos were planning. Bishop Peregrino would spread the word, and then the people could all feel better knowing that thousands of innocent pequenino infants would be killed to make up for the death of one man.

What are pequenino babies, after all? Just worms living in the dark belly of a mothertree. It would never occur to these people that there was scant moral difference between this mass murder of pequenino babies and King Herod's slaughter of the innocents at the time of Jesus' birth. This was justice they were pursuing. What is the complete obliteration of a tribe of pequeninos compared with that?

Grego: standing in the middle of the grassy square, the crowd alert around me, each of them connected to me by a taut invisible wire so that my will is their will, my mouth speaks their words, their hearts beat to my rhythm. I have never felt this before, this kind of life, to be part of a group

like this, and not just part of it, but the mind of it, the center, so that my self includes all of them, hundreds of them, my rage is their rage, their hands are my hands, their eyes see only what I show them.

The music of it, the cadence of invocation, answer, invocation, answer:

"The Bishop says that we'll pray for justice, but is that enough for us?"

"No!"

"The pequeninos say that they'll destroy the forest that murdered my brother, but do we believe them?"

"No!"

They complete my phrases; when I have to stop to breathe in, they shout for me, so that my voice is never stilled, but rises out of the throats of five hundred men and women. The Bishop came to me, full of peace and patience. The Mayor came to me with his warnings of police and riot and his hints of prison. Valentine came to me, all icy intellect, speaking of my responsibility. All of them know my power, power I never even knew I had, power that began only when I stopped obeying them and finally spoke what was in my heart to the people themselves. Truth is my power. I stopped deceiving the people and gave them the truth and now see what I've become, what we've become together.

"If anybody punishes the swine for killing Quim, it should be us. A human life should be avenged by human hands! They say that the sentence for the murderers is death-- but we're the only ones who have the right to appoint the executioner! We're the ones who have to make sure the sentence is carried out!"

"Yes! Yes!"

"They let my brother die in the agony of the descolada! They watched his body burn from the inside out! Now we'll burn that forest to the ground!"

"Burn them! Fire! Fire!"

See how they strike matches, how they tear up tufts of grass and light them. The flame we'll light together!

"Tomorrow we'll leave on the punitive expedition--"

"Tonight! Tonight! Now!"

"Tomorrow-- we can't go tonight-- we have to collect water and supplies--"

"Now! Tonight! Burn!"

"I tell you we can't get there in a single night, it's hundreds of kilometers away, it'll take days to get there--"

"The piggies are right over the fence!"

"Not the ones that killed Quim--"

"They're all murdering little bastards!"

"These are the ones that killed Libo, aren't they?"

"They killed Pipo and Libo!"

"They're all murderers!"

"Burn them tonight!"

"Burn them all!"

"Lusitania for us, not for animals!"

Are they insane? How can they think that he would let them kill these piggies-- they haven't done anything. "It's Warmaker! Warmaker and his forest that we have to punish!"

"Punish them!"

"Kill the piggies!"

"Burn!"

"Fire!"

A momentary silence. A lull. An opportunity. Think of the right words. Think of something to bring them back, they're slipping away. They were part of my body, they were part of my self, but now they're sliding away out from under me, one spasm and I've lost control if I ever had control; what can I say in this split second of silence that will bring them back to their senses?

Too long. Grego waited too long to think of something. It was a child's voice that filled the brief silence, the voice of a boy not yet into his manhood, exactly the sort of innocent voice that could cause the brimming holy rage within their hearts to erupt, to flow into irrevocable action. Cried the child: "For Quim and Christ!"

"Quim and Christ! Quim and Christ!"

"No!" shouted Grego. "Wait! You can't do this!"

They lurch around him, stumble him down. He's on all fours, someone stepping on his hand. Where is the stool he was standing on? Here it is, cling to that, don't let them trample me, they're going to kill me if I don't get up, I have to move with them, get up and walk with them, run with them or they'll crush me.

And then they were gone, past him, roaring, shouting, the tumult of feet moving out of the grassy square into the grassy streets, tiny flames held up, the voices crying "Fire" and "Burn" and "Quim and Christ," all the sound and sight of them flowing like a stream of lava from the square outward toward the forest that waited on the not-so-distant hill.

"God in heaven what are they doing!"

It was Valentine. Grego knelt by the stool, leaning on it, and there she stood beside him, looking at them flow away from this cold empty crater of a place where the conflagration began.

"Grego, you self-righteous son-of-a-bitch, what have you done?"

Me? "I was going to lead them to Warmaker. I was going to lead them to justice."

"You're the physicist, you idiot boy. Haven't you ever heard of the uncertainty principle?"

"Particle physics. Philotic physics."

"Mob physics, Grego. You never owned them. They owned you. And now they've used you up and they're going to destroy the forest of our best friends and advocates among the pequeninos and what will any of us do then? It's war between humans and pequeninos, unless they have inhuman self-restraint, and it will be our fault."

"Warmaker killed Quim."

"A crime. But what you've started here, Grego, this is an atrocity."

"I didn't do it!"

"Bishop Peregrino counseled with you. Mayor Kovano warned you. I begged you. And you did it anyway."

"You warned me about a riot, not about this--"

"This is a riot, you fool. Worse than a riot. It's a pogrom. It's a massacre. It's baby-killing. It's the first step on the long terrible road to xenocide."

"You can't blame all that on me!"

Her face is so terrible in the moonlight, in the light from the doors and windows of the bars. "I blame on you only what you did. You started a fire on a hot, dry, windy day, despite all warnings. I blame you for that, and if you don't hold yourself responsible for all the consequences of your own acts, then you are truly unworthy of human society and I hope you lose your freedom forever."

She's gone. Where? To do what? She can't leave him alone here. It's not right to leave him alone. A few moments ago, he was so large, with five hundred hearts and minds and mouths, a thousand hands and feet, and now it was all gone, as if his huge new body had died and he was left as a quivering ghost of a man, this single slender worm of a soul bereft of the powerful flesh it used to rule. He had never been so terrified. They almost killed him in their rush to leave him, almost trampled him into the grass.

They were his, though, all the same. He had created them, made a single mob of them, and even though they had misunderstood what he created them for, they were still acting according to the rage he had provoked in them, and with the plan he had put in their minds. Their aim was bad, that's all-- otherwise they were doing exactly what he had wanted them to do. Valentine was right. It was his responsibility. What they did now, he had done as surely as if he were still in front of them leading the way.

So what could he do?

Stop them. Get control again. Stand in front of them and beg them to stop. They weren't setting off to burn the distant forest of the mad fathertree Warmaker, they were going to slaughter pequeninos that he knew, even if he didn't like them much. He had to stop them, or their blood would be on his hands like sap that couldn't be washed or rubbed away, a stain that would stay with him forever.

So he ran, following the muddy swath of their footprints through the streets, where grass was trampled down into the mire. He ran until his side ached, through the place where they had stopped to break down the fence where was the disruption field when we needed it? Why didn't someone turn it on? --and on to where already flames were leaping into the sky.

"Stop! Put the fire out!"

"Burn!"

"For Quim and Christ!"

"Die, pigs."

"There's one, getting away!"

"Kill it!"

"Burn it!"

"The trees aren't dry enough-- the fire's not taking!"

"Yes it is!"

"Cut down the tree!"

"There's another!"

"Look, the little bastards are attacking!"

"Break them in half!"

"Give me that scythe if you aren't going to use it!"

"Tear the little swine apart!"

"For Quim and Christ!"

Blood sprays in a wide arc and spatters into Grego's face as he lunges forward, trying to stop them. Did I know this one? Did I know this pequenino's voice before it was torn into this cry of agony and death? I can't put this back together again, they've broken him. Her. Broken her. A wife. A never-seen wife. Then we must be near the middle of the forest, and that giant must be the mothertree.

"Here's a killer tree if I ever saw one!"

Around the perimeter of the clearing where the great tree stood, the lesser trees suddenly began to lean, then toppled down, broken off at the trunks. For a moment Grego thought that it was humans cutting them down, but now he realized that no one was near those trees. They were breaking off by themselves, throwing themselves down to their deaths in order to crush the murdering humans under their trunks and branches, trying to save the mothertree.

For a moment it worked. Men screamed in agony; perhaps a dozen or two were crushed or trapped or broken under the falling trees. But then all had fallen that could, and still the mothertree stood there, her trunk undulating strangely, as if some inner peristalsis were at work, swallowing deeply.

"Let it live!" cried Grego. "It's the mothertree! She's innocent!"

But he was drowned out by the cries of the injured and trapped, and by the terror as they realized that the forest could strike back, that this was not all a vengeful game of justice and retribution, but a real war, with both sides dangerous.

"Burn it! Burn it!" The chant was loud enough to drown out the cries of the dying. And now the leaves and branches of the fallen trees were stretched out toward the mothertree; they lighted those branches and they burned readily. A few men came to their senses enough to realize that a fire that burned the mothertree would also burn the men pinned under the fallen brothertrees, and they began to try to rescue them. But most of the men were caught up in the passion of their success. To

them the mothertree was Warmaker, the killer; to them it was everything alien in this world, the enemy who kept them inside a fence, the landlord who had arbitrarily restricted them to one small plot of land on a world so wide. The mothertree was all oppression and all authority, all strangeness and danger, and they had conquered it.

Grego recoiled from the screaming of the trapped men who watched the fire approaching, from the howls of the men the fire had reached, the triumphant chanting of the men who had done this murder. "For Quim and Christ! For Quim and Christ!" Almost Grego ran away, unable to bear what he could see and smell and hear, the bright orange flames, the smell of roasting manflesh, and the crackling of the living wood ablaze.

But he did not run. Instead he worked beside the others who dashed forward to the very edge of the flame to pry living men out from under the fallen trees. He was singed, and once his clothing caught on fire, but the hot pain of that was nothing, it was almost merciful, because it was the punishment that he deserved. He should die in this place. He might even have done it, might even have plunged himself so deeply into the fire that he could never come out until his crime was purged out of him and all that was left was bone and ash, but there were still broken people to pull out of the fire's reach, still lives to save. Besides, someone beat out the flames on his shoulder and helped him lift the tree so the boy who lay under it could wriggle free and how could he die when he was part of something like this, part of saving this child?

"For Quim and Christ!" the boy whimpered as he crab-crawled out of the way of the flames.

Here he was, the boy whose words had filled the silence and turned the crowd into this direction. You did it, thought Grego. You tore them away from me.

The boy looked up at him and recognized him. "Grego!" he cried, and lunged forward. His arms enfolded Grego around the thighs, his head pressed against Grego's hip. "Uncle Grego!"

It was Olhado's oldest boy, Nimbo.

"We did it!" cried Nimbo. "For Uncle Quim!"

The flames crackled. Grego picked up the boy and carried him, staggering out of the reach of the hottest flames, and then farther out, into the darkness, into a place where it was cool. All the men were driven this way, the flames herding them, the wind driving the flames. Most were like Grego, exhausted, frightened, in pain from the fire or helping someone else.

But some, many perhaps, were still untouched except by the inner fire that Grego and Nimbo had ignited in the square. "Burn them all!" The voices here and there, smaller mobs like tiny eddies in a larger stream, but they now held brands and torches from the fires raging in the forest's heart. "For Quim and Christ! For Libo and Pipo! No trees! No trees!"

Grego staggered onward.

"Set me down," said Nimbo.

And onward.

"I can walk."

But Grego's errand was too urgent. He couldn't stop for Nimbo, and he couldn't let the boy walk, couldn't wait for him and couldn't leave him behind. You don't leave your brother's son behind in a burning forest. So he carried him, and after awhile, exhausted, his legs and arms aching from the exertion, his shoulder a white sun of agony where he had been burned, he emerged from the forest into the grassy space before the old gate, where the path wound down from the wood to join the path from the xenobiology labs.

The mob had gathered here, many of them holding torches, but for some reason they were still a distance away from the two isolated trees that stood watch here: Human and Rooter. Grego pushed his way through the crowd, still holding Nimbo; his heart was racing, and he was filled with fear and anguish and yet a spark of hope, for he knew why the men with torches had stopped. And when he reached the edge of the mob, he saw that he was right.

There were gathered around those last two fathertrees perhaps two hundred pequenino brothers and wives, small and beleaguered, but with an air of defiance about them. They would fight to the death on this spot, rather than let these last two trees be burned-- but burn they would, if the mob decided so, for there was no hope of pequeninos standing in the way of men determined to do murder.

But between the piggies and the men there stood Miro, like a giant compared to the pequeninos. He had no weapon, and yet he had spread his arms as if to protect the pequeninos, or perhaps to hold them back. And in his thick, difficult speech he was defying the mob.

"Kill me first!" he said. "You like murder! Kill me first! Just like they killed Quim! Kill me first!"

"Not you!" said one of the men holding torches. "But those trees are going to die. And all those piggies, too, if they haven't got the brains to run away."

"Me first," said Miro. "These are my brothers! Kill me first!"

He spoke loudly and slowly, so his sluggish speech could be understood. The mob still had anger in it, some of them at least. Yet there were also many who were sick of it all, many who were already ashamed, already discovering in their hearts the terrible acts they had performed tonight, when their souls were given over to the will of the mob. Grego still felt it, that connection with the others, and he knew that they could go either way-- the ones still hot with rage might start one last fire tonight; or the ones who had cooled, whose only inner heat was a blush of shame, they might prevail.

Grego had this one last chance to redeem himself, at least in part. And so he stepped forward, still carrying Nimbo.

"Me too," he said. "Kill me too, before you raise a hand against these brothers and these trees!"

"Out of the way, Grego, you and the cripple both!"

"How are you different from Warmaker, if you kill these little ones?"

Now Grego stood beside Miro.

"Out of the way! We're going to burn the last of them and have done." But the voice was less certain.

"There's a fire behind you," said Grego, "and too many people have already died, humans and pequeninos both." His voice was husky, his breath short from the smoke he had inhaled. But he could still be heard. "The forest that killed Quim is far away from here, and Warmaker still stands untouched. We haven't done justice here tonight. We've done murder and massacre."

"Piggies are piggies!"

"Are they? Would you like that if it went the other way?" Grego took a few steps toward one of the men who looked tired and unwilling to go on, and spoke directly to him, while pointing at the mob's spokesman. "You! Would you like to be punished for what he did?"

"No," muttered the man.

"If he killed someone, would you think it was right for somebody to come to your house and slaughter your wife and children for it?"

Several voices now. "No."

"Why not? Humans are humans, aren't we?"

"I didn't kill any children," said the spokesman. He was defending himself now. And the "we" was gone from his speech. He was an individual now, alone. The mob was fading, breaking apart.

"We burned the mothertree," said Grego.

Behind him there began a keening sound, several soft, high-pitched whines. For the brothers and surviving wives, it was the confirmation of their worst fears. The mothertree had burned.

"That giant tree in the middle of the forest-- inside it were all their babies. All of them. This forest did us no harm, and we came and killed their babies."

Miro stepped forward, put his hand on Grego's shoulder. Was Miro leaning on him? Or helping him stand?

Miro spoke then, not to Grego, but to the crowd. "All of you. Go home."

"Maybe we should try to put the fire out," said Grego. But already the whole forest was ablaze.

"Go home," Miro said again. "Stay inside the fence."

There was still some anger left. "Who are you to tell us what to do?"

"Stay inside the fence," said Miro. "Someone else is coming to protect the pequeninos now."

"Who? The police?" Several people laughed bitterly, since so many of them were police, or had seen policemen among the crowd.

"Here they are," said Miro.

A low hum could be heard, soft at first, barely audible in the roaring of the fire, but then louder and louder, until five fliers came into view, skimming the tops of the grass as they circled the mob, sometimes black in silhouette against the burning forest, sometimes shining with reflected fire when they were on the opposite side. At last they came to rest, all five of them sinking down onto the tall grass. Only then were the people able to distinguish one black shape from another, as six riders arose from each flying platform. What they had taken for shining machinery on the fliers was not machinery at all, but living creatures, not as large as men but not as small as pequeninos, either, with large heads and multi-faceted eyes. They made no threatening gesture, just formed lines before each flier; but no gestures were needed. The sight of them was enough, stirring memories of ancient nightmares and horror stories.

"Deus nos perdoe!" cried several. God forgive us. They were expecting to die.

"Go home," said Miro. "Stay inside the fence."

"What are they?" Nimbo's childish voice spoke for them all.

The answers came as whispers. "Devils." "Destroying angels." "Death."

And then the truth, from Grego's lips, for he knew what they had to be, though it was unthinkable. "Buggers," he said. "Buggers, here on Lusitania."

They did not run from the place. They walked, watching carefully, shying away from the strange new creatures whose existence none of them had guessed at, whose powers they could only imagine, or remember from ancient videos they had studied once in school. The buggers, who had once come close to destroying all of humanity, until they were destroyed in turn by Ender the Xenocide. The book called the Hive Queen had said they were really beautiful and did not need to die. But now, seeing them, black shining exoskeletons, a thousand lenses in their shimmering green eyes, it was not beauty but terror that they felt. And when they went home, it would be in the knowledge that these, and not just the dwarfish, backward piggies, waited for them just outside the fence. Had they been in prison before? Surely now they were trapped in one of the circles of hell.

At last only Miro, Grego, and Nimbo were left, of all the humans. Around them the piggies also watched in awe-- but not in terror, for they had no insect nightmares lurking in their limbic node the way the humans did. Besides, the buggers had come to them as saviors and protectors. What weighed on them most was not curiosity about these strangers, but rather grief at what they had lost.

"Human begged the hive queen to help them, but she said she couldn't kill humans," said Miro. "Then Jane saw the fire from the satellites in the sky, and told Andrew Wiggin. He spoke to the hive queen and told her what to do. That she wouldn't have to kill anybody."

"They aren't going to kill us?" asked Nimbo.

Grego realized that Nimbo had spent these last few minutes expecting to die. Then it occurred to him that so, too, had he-- that it was only now, with Miro's explanation, that he was sure that they hadn't come to punish him and Nimbo for what they set in motion tonight. Or rather, for what Grego had set in motion, ready for the single small nudge that Nimbo, in all innocence, had given.

Slowly Grego knelt and set the boy down. His arms barely responded to his will now, and the pain in his shoulder was unbearable. He began to cry. But it wasn't for the pain that he was weeping.

The buggers moved now, and moved quickly. Most stayed on the ground, jogging away to take up watch positions around the perimeter of the city. A few remounted the fliers, one to each machine, and took them back up into the air, flying over the burning forest, the flaming grass, spraying them with something that blanketed the fire and slowly put it out.

Bishop Peregrino stood on the low foundation wall that had been laid only that morning. The people of Lusitania, all of them, were gathered, sitting in the grass. He used a small amplifier, so that no one could miss his words. But he probably would not have needed it--all were silent, even the little children, who seemed to catch the somber mood.

Behind the Bishop was the forest, blackened but not utterly lifeless-- a few of the trees were greening again. Before him lay the blanket-covered bodies, each beside its grave. The nearest of them was the corpse of Quim-- Father Estevao. The other bodies were the humans who had died two nights before, under the trees and in the fire.

"These graves will be the floor of the chapel, so that whenever we enter it we tread upon the bodies of the dead. The bodies of those who died as they helped to bring murder and desolation to our brothers the pequeninos. Above all the body of Father Estevao, who died trying to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to a forest of heretics. He dies a martyr. These others died with murder in their hearts and blood on their hands."

"I speak plainly, so that this Speaker for the Dead won't have to add any words after me. I speak plainly, the way Moses spoke to the children of Israel after they worshiped the golden calf and rejected their covenant with God. Of all of us, there are only a handful who have no share of the

guilt for this crime. Father Estevao, who died pure, and yet whose name was on the blasphemous lips of those who killed. The Speaker for the Dead, and those who traveled with him to bring home the body of this martyred priest. And Valentine, the Speaker's sister, who warned the Mayor and me of what would happen. Valentine knew history, she knew humanity, but the Mayor and I thought that we knew you, and that you were stronger than history. Alas for us all that you are as fallen as any other men, and so am I. The sin is on every one of us who could have tried to stop this, and did not! On the wives who did not try to keep their husbands home. On the men who watched but said nothing. And on all who held the torches in their hands and killed a tribe of fellow Christians for a crime done by their distant cousins half a continent away.

"The law is doing its small part of justice. Gerao Gregorio Ribeira von Hesse is in prison, but that is for another crime-- the crime of having violated his trust and told secrets that were not his to tell. He is not in prison for the massacre of the pequeninos, because he has no greater share of guilt for that than the rest of you who followed him. Do you understand me? The guilt is on us all, and all of us must repent together, and do our penance together, and pray that Christ will forgive us all together for the terrible thing we did with his name on our lips!

"I am standing on the foundation of this new chapel, which will be named for Father Estevao, Apostle to the Pequenos. The blocks of the foundation were torn from the walls of our cathedral-- there are gaping holes there now, where the wind can blow and the rain can fall in upon us as we worship. And so the cathedral will remain, wounded and broken, until this chapel is finished.

"And how will we finish it? You will go home, all of you, to your houses, and you will break open the wall of your own house, and take the blocks that fall, and bring them here. And you will also leave your walls shattered until this chapel is completed.

"Then we will tear holes in the walls of every factory, every building in our colony, until there is no structure that does not show the wound of our sin. And all those wounds will remain until the walls are high enough to put on the roof, which will be beamed and rafted with the scorched trees that fell in the forest, trying to defend their people from our murdering hands.

"And then we will come, all of us, to this chapel, and enter it on our knees, one by one, until every one of us has crawled over the graves of our dead, and under the bodies of those ancient brothers who lived as trees in the third life our merciful God had given them until we ended it. There we will all pray for forgiveness. We will pray for our venerated Father Estevao to intercede for us. We will pray for Christ to include our terrible sin in his atonement, so we will not have to spend eternity in hell. We will pray for God to purify us.

"Only then will we repair our damaged walls, and heal our houses. That is our penance, my children. Let us pray that it is enough."

In the middle of a clearing strewn with ash, Ender, Valentine, Miro, Ela, Quara, Ouanda, and Olhado all stood and watched as the most honored of the wives was flayed alive and planted in the ground, for her to grow into a new motheree from the corpse of her second life. As she was dying,

the surviving wives reached into a gap in the old mothertree and scooped out the bodies of the dead infants and little mothers who had lived there, and laid them on her bleeding body until they formed a mound. Within hours, her sapling would rise through their corpses and reach for sunlight.

Using their substance, she would grow quickly, until she had enough thickness and height to open up an aperture in her trunk. If she grew fast enough, if she opened herself soon enough, the few surviving babies clinging to the inside of the gaping cavity of the old dead mothertree could be transferred to the small new haven the new mothertree would offer them. If any of the surviving babies were little mothers, they would be carried to the surviving fathertrees, Human and Rooter, for mating. If new babies were conceived within their tiny bodies, then the forest that had known all the best and worst that human beings could do would survive.

If not-- if the babies were all males, which was possible, or if all the females among them were infertile, which was possible, or if they were all too injured by the heat of the fire that raged up the mothertree's trunk and killed her, or if they were too weakened by the days of starvation they would undergo until the new mothertree was ready for them-- then the forest would die with these brothers and wives, and Human and Rooter would live on for a millennium or so as tribeless fathertrees. Perhaps some other tribes would honor them and carry little mothers to them for mating. Perhaps. But they would not be fathers of their own tribe, surrounded by their sons. They would be lonely trees with no forest of their own, the sole monuments to the work they had lived for: bringing humans and pequeninos together.

As for the rage against Warmaker, that had ended. The fathertrees of Lusitania all agreed that whatever moral debt had been incurred by the death of Father Estevao, it was paid and overpaid by the slaughter of the forest of Rooter and Human. Indeed, Warmaker had won many new converts to his heresy-- for hadn't the humans proved that they were unworthy of the gospel of Christ? It was pequeninos, said Warmaker, who were chosen to be vessels of the Holy Ghost, while human beings plainly had no part of God in them. We have no need to kill any more human beings, he said. We only have to wait, and the Holy Ghost will kill them all. In the meantime, God has sent us the hive queen to build us starships. We will carry the Holy Ghost with us to judge every world we visit. We will be the destroying angel. We will be Joshua and the Israelites, purging Canaan to make way for God's chosen people.

Many pequeninos believed him now. Warmaker no longer sounded crazy to them; they had witnessed the first stirrings of apocalypse in the flames of an innocent forest. To many pequeninos there was nothing more to learn from humanity. God had no more use for human beings.

Here, though, in this clearing in the forest, their feet ankle-deep in ash, the brothers and wives who kept vigil over their new mothertree had no belief in Warmaker's doctrine. They who knew human beings best of all even chose to have humans present as witnesses and helpers in their attempt to be reborn.

"Because," said Planter, who was now the spokesman for the surviving brothers, "we know that not all humans are alike, just as not all pequeninos are alike. Christ lives in some of you, and not in others. We are not all like Warmaker's forest, and you are not all murderers either."

So it was that Planter held hands with Miro and Valentine on the morning, just before dawn, when the new mothertree managed to open a crevice in her slender trunk, and the wives tenderly transferred the weak and starving bodies of the surviving infants into their new home. It was too soon to tell, but there was cause for hope: The new mothertree had readied herself in only a day and a half, and there were more than three dozen infants who lived to make the transition. As many as a dozen of them might be fertile females, and if even a quarter of those lived to bear young, the forest might thrive again.

Planter was trembling. "Brothers have never seen this before," said Planter, "not in all the history of the world."

Several of the brothers were kneeling and crossing themselves. Many had been praying throughout the vigil. It made Valentine think of something Ouara had told her. She stepped close to Miro and whispered, "Ela prayed, too."

"Ela?"

"Before the fire. Ouara was there at the shrine of the Venerados. She prayed for God to open up a way for us to solve all our problems."

"That's what everybody prays for."

Valentine thought of what had happened in the days since Ela's prayer. "I imagine that she's rather disappointed at the answer God gave her."

"People usually are."

"But maybe this-- the mothertree opening so quickly-- maybe this is the beginning of her answer."

Miro looked at Valentine in puzzlement. "Are you a believer?"

"Let's say I'm a suspecter. I suspect there may be someone who cares what happens to us. That's one step better than merely wishing. And one step below hoping."

Miro smiled slightly, but Valentine wasn't sure whether it meant he was pleased or amused. "So what will God do next, to answer Ela's prayer?"

"Let's wait and see," said Valentine. "Our job is to decide what we'll do next. We have only the deepest mysteries of the universe to solve."

"Well, that should be right up God's alley," said Miro.

Then Ouanda arrived; as xenologer, she had also been involved in the vigil, and though this wasn't her shift, news of the opening of the mothertree had been taken to her at once. Her coming had usually meant Miro's swift departure. But not this time. Valentine was pleased to see that Miro's gaze didn't seem either to linger on Ouanda or to avoid her; she was simply there, working with the

pequeninos, and so was he. No doubt it was all an elaborate pretense at normality, but in Valentine's experience, normality was always a pretense, people acting out what they thought were their expected roles. Miro had simply reached a point where he was ready to act out something like a normal role in relation to Ouanda, no matter how false it might be to his true feelings. And maybe it wasn't so false, after all. She was twice his age now. Not at all the girl he had loved.

They had loved each other, but never slept together. Valentine had been pleased to hear it when Miro told her, though he said it with angry regret. Valentine had long ago observed that in a society that expected chastity and fidelity, like Lusitania, the adolescents who controlled and channeled their youthful passions were the ones who grew up to be both strong and civilized. Adolescents in such a community who were either too weak to control themselves or too contemptuous of society's norms to try usually ended up being either sheep or wolves-- either mindless members of the herd or predators who took what they could and gave nothing.

She had feared, when she first met Miro, that he was a self-pitying weakling or a self-centered predator resentful of his confinement. Neither was so. He might now regret his chastity in adolescence-- it was natural for him to wish he had coupled with Ouanda when he was still strong and they were both of an age-- but Valentine did not regret it. It showed that Miro had inner strength and a sense of responsibility to his community. To Valentine, it was predictable that Miro, by himself, had held back the mob for those crucial moments that saved Rooter and Human.

It was also predictable that Miro and Ouanda would now make the great effort to pretend that they were simply two people doing their jobs-- that all was normal between them. Inner strength and outward respect. These are the people who hold a community together, who lead. Unlike the sheep and the wolves, they perform a better role than the script given them by their inner fears and desires. They act out the script of decency, of self-sacrifice, of public honor-- of civilization. And in the pretense, it becomes reality. There really is civilization in human history, thought Valentine, but only because of people like these. The shepherds.

Novinha met him in the doorway of the school. She leaned on the arm of Dona Crista, the fourth principal of the Children of the Mind of Christ since Ender had come to Lusitania.

"I have nothing to say to you," Novinha said. "We're still married under the law, but that's all."

"I didn't kill your son," he said.

"You didn't save him, either," she answered.

"I love you," Ender said.

"As much as you're capable of love," she said. "And then only when you've got a little time left over from looking after everybody else. You think you're some kind of guardian angel, with responsibility for the whole universe. All I asked you to do was take responsibility for my family."

You're good at loving people by the trillion, but not so good at dozens, and you're a complete failure at loving one."

It was a harsh judgment, and he knew it wasn't true, but he didn't come to argue. "Please come home," he said. "You love me and need me as much as I need you."

"This is home now. I've stopped needing you or anybody. And if this is all you came to say, you're wasting my time and yours."

"No, it's not all."

She waited.

"The files in the laboratory. You've sealed them all. We have to find a solution to the descolada before it destroys us all."

She gave him a withering, bitter smile. "Why did you bother me with this? Jane can get past my passwords, can't she?"

"She hasn't tried," he said.

"No doubt to spare my sensibilities. But she can, n,?"

"Probably."

"Then have her do it. She's all you need now. You never really needed me, not when you had her."

"I've tried to be a good husband to you," said Ender. "I never said I could protect you from everything, but I did all I could."

"If you had, my Estevao would be alive."

She turned away, and Dona Crista escorted her back inside the school. Ender watched her until she turned a corner. Then he turned away from the door and left the school. He wasn't sure where he was going, only that he had to get there.

"I'm sorry," said Jane softly.

"Yes," he said.

"When I'm gone," she said, "maybe Novinha will come back to you."

"You won't be gone if I can help it," he said.

"But you can't. They're going to shut me down in a couple of months."

"Shut up," he said.

"It's only the truth."

"Shut up and let me think."

"What, are you going to save me now? Your record isn't very good at playing savior lately."

He didn't answer, and she didn't speak again for the rest of the afternoon. He wandered out of the gate, but didn't go up into the forest. Instead he spent the afternoon in the grassland, alone, under the hot sun.

Sometimes he was thinking, trying to struggle with the problems that still loomed over him: the fleet coming against them, Jane's shut-off date, the descolada's constant efforts to destroy the humans of Lusitania, Warmaker's plan to spread the descolada throughout the galaxy, and the grim situation within the city now that the hive queen kept constant watch over the fence and their grim penance had them all tearing at the walls of their own houses.

And sometimes his mind was almost devoid of thought, as he stood or sat or lay in the grass, too numb to weep, her face passing through his memory, his lips and tongue and teeth forming her name, pleading with her silently, knowing that even if he made a sound, even if he shouted, even if he could make her hear his voice, she wouldn't answer him.

Novinha.

Chapter 13 -- FREE WILL

<There are those among us who think that the humans should be stopped from the research into the descolada. The descolada is at the heart of our life cycle. We're afraid that they'll find a way to kill the descolada throughout the world, and that would destroy us in a generation.>

<And if you managed to stop human research into the descolada, they would certainly be wiped out within a few years.>

<Is the descolada that dangerous? Why can't they keep on containing it as they have?>

<Because the descolada is not just randomly mutating according to natural laws. It is intelligently adapting itself in order to destroy us.>

<Us? You?>

<We've been fighting the descoloda all along. Not in laboratories, like the humans, but inside ourself. Before I lay eggs, there is a phase where I prepare their bodies to manufacture all the

antibodies they'll need throughout their lives. When the descoloda changes itself, we know it because the workers start dying. Then an organ near my ovaries creates new antibodies, and we lay eggs for new workers who can withstand the revised descolada.>

<So you, too, are trying to destroy it.>

<No. Our process is entirely unconscious. It takes place in the body of the hive queen, without conscious intervention. We can't go beyond meeting the present danger. Our organ of immunity is far more effective and adaptable than anything in the human body, but in the long run we'll suffer the same fate as the humans, if the descolada is not destroyed. The difference is that if we are wiped out by the descolada, there is no other hive queen in the universe to carry on our species. We are the last.>

<Your case is even more desperate than theirs.>

<And we are even more helpless to affect it. We have no science of biology beyond simple husbandry. Our natural methods were so effective in fighting disease that we never had the same impetus that humans had, to understand life and control it.>

<Is that the way it is, then? Either we are destroyed, or you and the humans are destroyed. If the descolada continues, it kills you. If it is stopped, we die.>

<This is your world. The descolada is in your bodies. If it comes time to choose between you and us, it will be you that survives.>

<You speak for yourself, my friend. But what will the humans do?>

<If they have the power to destroy the descolada in a way that would also destroy you, we will forbid them to use it.>

<Forbid them? When have humans ever obeyed?>

<We never forbid where we do not also have the power to prevent.>

<Ah.>

<This is your world. Ender knows this. And if other humans ever forget, we will remind them.>

<I have another question.>

<Ask.>

<What about those, like Warmaker, who want to spread the descolada throughout the universe? Will you also forbid them?>

<They must not carry the descolada to worlds that already have multicellular life.>

<But that's exactly what they intend to do.>

<They must not.>

<But you're building starships for us. Once they have control of a starship, they'll go where they want to go.>

<They must not.>

<So you forbid them?>

<We never forbid where we do not also have the power to prevent.>

<Then why do you still build these ships?>

<The human fleet is coming, with a weapon that can destroy this world. Ender is sure that they'll use it. Should we conspire with them, and leave your entire genetic heritage here on this single planet, so you can be obliterated with a single weapon?>

<So you build us starships, knowing that some of us may use it destructively.>

<What you do with starflight will be your responsibility. If you act as the enemy of life, then life will become your enemy. We will provide starships to you as a species. Then you, as a species, will decide who leaves Lusitania and who doesn't.>

<There's a fair chance that Warmaker's party will have the majority then. That they will be making all those decisions.>

<So-- should we judge, and decide that the humans are right to try to destroy you? Maybe Warmaker is right. Maybe the humans are the ones who deserve to be destroyed. Who are we to judge between you? They with their Molecular Disruption Device. You with the descolada. Each has the power to destroy the other, each species is capable of such a monstrous crime, and yet each species has many members who would never knowingly cause such evil and who deserve to live. We will not choose. We will simply build the starships and let you and the humans work out your destiny between you.>

<You could help us. You could keep the starships out of the hands of Warmaker's party, and deal only with us.>

<Then the domestic war between you would be terrible indeed. Would you destroy their genetic heritage, simply because you disagree? Who then is the monster and the criminal? How do we judge between you, when both parties are willing to countenance the utter destruction of another people?>

<Then I have no hope. Someone will be destroyed.>

<Unless the human scientists find a way to change the descolada, so that you can survive as a species, and yet the descolada loses the power to kill.>

<How is that possible?>

<We are not biologists. Only the humans can do this, if it can be done.>

<Then we can't stop them from researching the descolada. We have to help them. Even though they nearly destroyed our forest, we have no choice but to help them.>

<We knew you would reach that conclusion.>

<Did you?>

<That's why we're building starships for the pequeninos. Because you're capable of wisdom.>

As word of the restoration of the Lusitania Fleet spread among the godspoken of Path, they began to visit the house of Han Fei-tzu to pay him honor.

"I will not see them," said Han Fei-tzu.

"You must, Father," said Han Qing-jao. "It is only proper for them to honor you for such a great accomplishment."

"Then I will go and tell them that it was entirely your doing, and I had nothing to do with it."

"No!" cried Qing-jao. "You must not do that."

"Furthermore, I will tell them that I think it was a great crime, which will cause the death of a noble spirit. I will tell them that the godspoken of Path are slaves to a cruel and vicious government, and that we must bend all our efforts to the destruction of Congress."

"Don't make me hear this!" cried Qing-jao. "You could never say such a thing to anyone!"

And it was true. Si Wang-mu watched from the corner as the two of them, father and daughter, each began a ritual of purification, Han Fei-tzu for having spoken such rebellious words and Han Qing-jao for having heard them. Master Fei-tzu would never say these things to others, because even if he did, they would see how he immediately had to be purified, and they would see this as proof that the gods repudiated his words. They did their work well, those scientists that Congress employed to create the godspoken, thought Wang-mu. Even knowing the truth, Han Fei-tzu is helpless.

So it was that Qing-jao met all the visitors who came to the house, and graciously accepted their praise on behalf of her father. Wang-mu stayed with her for the first few visits, but she found it unbearable to listen as Qing-jao described again and again how her father and she had discovered the existence of a computer program that dwelt amid the phylotic network of the ansibles, and how it would be destroyed. It was one thing to know that in her heart, Qing-jao did not believe she was committing murder; it was quite another thing for Wang-mu to listen to her boasting about how the murder would be accomplished.

And boasting was what Qing-jao was doing, though only Wang-mu knew it. Always Qing-jao gave the credit to her father, but since Wang-mu knew that it was entirely Qing-jao's doing, she knew that when Qing-jao described the accomplishment as worthy service to the gods, she was really praising herself.

"Please don't make me stay and listen anymore," said Wang-mu.

Qing-jao studied her for a moment, judging her. Then, coldly, she answered. "Go if you must. I see that you are still a captive of our enemy. I have no need of you."

"Of course not," said Wang-mu. "You have the gods." But in saying this, she could not keep the bitter irony out of her voice.

"Gods that you don't believe in," said Qing-jao biting. "Of course, you have never been spoken to by the gods-- why should you believe? I dismiss you as my secret maid, since that is your desire. Go back to your family."

"As the gods command," said Wang-mu. And this time she made no effort to conceal her bitterness at the mention of the gods.

She was already out of the house, walking down the road, when Mu-pao came after her. Since Mu-pao was old and fat, she had no hope of catching up with Wang-mu on foot. So she came riding a donkey, looking ridiculous as she kicked the animal to hasten it. Donkeys, sedan chairs, all these trappings of ancient China-- do the godspoken really think that such affectations make them somehow holier? Why don't they simply ride on fliers and hovercars like honest people do on every other world? Then Mu-pao would not have to humiliate herself, bouncing and jouncing on an animal that is suffering under her weight. To spare her as much embarrassment as possible, Wang-mu returned and met Mu-pao partway.

"Master Han Fei-tzu commands you to return," said Mu-pao.

"Tell Master Han that he is kind and good, but my mistress has dismissed me.

"Master Han says that Mistress Qing-jao has the authority to dismiss you as her secret maid, but not to dismiss you from his house. Your contract is with him, not with her."

This was true. Wang-mu hadn't thought of that.

"He begs you to return," said Mu-pao. "He told me to say it that way, so that you might come out of kindness, if you would not come out of obedience."

"Tell him I will obey. He should not beg such a low person as myself."

"He will be glad," said Mu-pao.

Wang-mu walked beside Mu-pao's donkey. They went very slowly, which was more comfortable for Mu-pao and the donkey as well.

"I have never seen him so upset," said Mu-pao. "Probably I shouldn't tell you that. But when I said that you were gone, he was almost frantic."

"Were the gods speaking to him?" It was a bitter thing if Master Han called her back only because for some reason the slave driver within him had demanded it.

"No," said Mu-pao. "It wasn't like that at all. Though of course I've never actually seen what it looks like when the gods speak to him."

"Of course."

"He simply didn't want you to go," said Mu-pao.

"I will probably end up going, anyway," said Wang-mu. "But I'll gladly explain to him why I am now useless in the House of Han."

"Oh, of course," said Mu-pao. "You have always been useless. But that doesn't mean you aren't necessary."

"What do you mean?"

"Happiness can depend as easily on useless things as on useful ones."

"Is that a saying of an old master?"

"It's a saying of an old fat woman on a donkey," said Mu-pao. "And don't you forget it."

When Wang-mu was alone with Master Han in his private chamber, he showed no sign of the agitation Mu-pao, had spoken of.

"I have spoken with Jane," he said. "She thinks that since you also know of her existence and believe her not to be the enemy of the gods, it will be better if you stay."

"So I will serve Jane now?" asked Wang-mu. "Am I to be her secret maid?"

Wang-mu did not mean her words to sound ironic; the idea of being servant to a nonhuman entity intrigued her. But Master Han reacted as if he were trying to smooth over an offense.

"No," he said. "You shouldn't be anyone's servant. You have acted bravely and worthily."

"And yet you called me back to fulfill my contract with you."

Master Han bowed his head. "I called you back because you are the only one who knows the truth. If you go, then I'm alone in this house."

Wang-mu almost said: How can you be alone, when your daughter is here? And until the last few days, it wouldn't have been a cruel thing to say, because Master Han and Mistress Qing-jao were friends as close as a father and daughter could ever be. But now, the barrier between them was insuperable. Qing-jao lived in a world where she was a triumphant servant of the gods, trying to be patient with the temporary madness of her father. Master Han lived in a world where his daughter and all of his society were slaves to an oppressive Congress, and only he knew the truth. How could they even speak to each other across a gulf so wide and deep?

"I'll stay," said Wang-mu. "However I can serve you, I will."

"We'll serve each other," said Master Han. "My daughter promised to teach you. I'll continue that."

Wang-mu touched her forehead to the floor. "I am unworthy of such kindness."

"No," said Master Han. "We both know the truth now. The gods don't speak to me. Your face should never touch the floor before me."

"We have to live in this world," said Wang-mu. "I will treat you as an honored man among the godspoken, because that is what all the world would expect of me. And you must treat me as a servant, for the same reason."

Master Han's face twisted bitterly. "The world also expects that when a man of my age takes a young girl from his daughter's service into his own, he is using her for veneration. Shall we act out all the world's expectations?"

"It is not in your nature to take advantage of your power in that way," said Wang-mu.

"Nor is it in my nature to receive your humiliation. Before I learned the truth about my affliction, I accepted other people's obeisance because I believed it was really being offered to the gods, and not to me."

"That is as true as it ever was. Those who believe you are godspoken are offering their obeisance to the gods, while those who are dishonest do it to flatter you. "

"But you are not dishonest. Nor do you believe the gods speak to me."

"I don't know whether the gods speak to you or not, or whether they ever have or ever can speak to anyone. I only know that the gods don't ask you or anyone to do these ridiculous, humiliating rituals-- those were forced on you by Congress. Yet you must continue those rituals because your body requires it. Please allow me to continue the rituals of humiliation that are required of people of my position in the world."

Master Han nodded gravely. "You are wise beyond your years and education, Wang-mu."

"I am a very foolish girl," said Wang-mu. "If I had any wisdom, I would beg you to send me as far away from this place as possible. Sharing a house with Qing-jao will now be very dangerous to me. Especially if she sees that I am close to you, when she can't be."

"You're right. I'm being very selfish, to ask you to stay."

"Yes," said Wang-mu. "And yet I will stay."

"Why?" asked Master Han.

"Because I can never go back to my old life," she answered. "I know too much now about the world and the universe, about Congress and the gods. I would have the taste of poison in my mouth all the days of my life, if I went back home and pretended to be what I was before."

Master Han nodded gravely, but then he smiled, and soon he laughed.

"Why are you laughing at me, Master Han?"

"I'm laughing because I think that you never were what you used to be."

"What does that mean?"

"I think you were always pretending. Maybe you even fooled yourself. But one thing is certain. You were never an ordinary girl, and you could never have led an ordinary life."

Wang-mu shrugged. "The future is a hundred thousand threads, but the past is a fabric that can never be rewoven. Maybe I could have been content. Maybe not."

"So here we are together, the three of us."

Only then did Wang-mu turn to see that they were not alone. In the air above the display she saw the face of Jane, who smiled at her.

"I'm glad you came back," said Jane.

For a moment, Jane's presence here caused Wang-mu to leap to a hopeful conclusion. "Then you aren't dead! You've been spared!"

"It was never Qing-jao's plan for me to be dead already," answered Jane. "Her plan to destroy me is proceeding nicely, and I will no doubt die on schedule."

"Why do you come to this house, then," asked Wang-mu, "when it was here that your death was set in motion?"

"I have a lot of things to accomplish before I die," said Jane, "including the faint possibility of discovering a way to survive. It happens that the world of Path contains many thousands of people who are much more intelligent, on average, than the rest of humanity."

"Only because of Congress's genetic manipulation," said Master Han.

"True," said Jane. "The godspoken of Path are, properly speaking, not even human anymore. You're another species, created and enslaved by Congress to give them an advantage over the rest of humanity. It happens, though, that a single member of that new species is somewhat free of Congress."

"This is freedom?" said Master Han. "Even now, my hunger to purify myself is almost irresistible."

"Then don't resist it," said Jane. "I can talk to you while you contort yourself."

Almost at once, Master Han began to fling out his arms and twist them in the air in his ritual of purification. Wang-mu turned her face away.

"Don't do that," said Master Han. "Don't hide your face from me. I can't be ashamed to show this to you. I'm a cripple, that's all; if I had lost a leg, my closest friends would not be afraid to see the stump."

Wang-mu saw the wisdom in his words, and did not hide her face from his affliction.

"As I was saying," said Jane, "it happens that a single member of this new species is somewhat free of Congress. I hope to enlist your help in the works I'm trying to accomplish in the few months left to me."

"I'll do anything I can," said Master Han.

"And if I can help, I will," said Wang-mu. Only after she said it did she realize how ridiculous it was for her to offer such a thing. Master Han was one of the godspoken, one of those with superior intellectual abilities. She was only an uneducated specimen of ordinary humanity, with nothing to offer.

And yet neither of them mocked her offer, and Jane accepted it graciously. Such a kindness proved once again to Wang-mu that Jane had to be a living thing, not just a simulation.

"Let me tell you the problems that I hope to resolve."

They listened.

"As you know, my dearest friends are on the planet Lusitania. They are threatened by the Lusitania Fleet. I am very interested in stopping that fleet from causing any irrevocable harm."

"By now I'm sure they've already been given the order to use the Little Doctor," said Master Han.

"Oh, yes, I know they have. My concern is to stop that order from having the effect of destroying not only the humans of Lusitania, but two other raman species as well." Then Jane told them of the hive queen, and how it came to be that buggers once again lived in the universe. "The hive queen is already building starships, pushing herself to the limit to accomplish as much as she can before the fleet arrives. But there's no chance that she can build enough to save more than a tiny fraction of the inhabitants of Lusitania. The hive queen can leave, or send another queen who shares all her memories, and it matters little to her whether her workers go with her or not. But the pequeninos and the humans are not so self-contained. I'd like to save them all. Especially because my dearest friends, a particular speaker for the dead and a young man suffering from brain damage, would refuse to leave Lusitania unless every other human and pequenino could be saved."

"Are they heroes, then?" asked Master Han.

"Each has proved it several times in the past," said Jane.

"I wasn't sure if heroes still existed in the human race."

Si Wang-mu did not speak what was in her heart: that Master Han himself was such a hero.

"I am searching for every possibility," said Jane. "But it all comes down to an impossibility, or so humankind has believed for more than three thousand years. If we could build a starship that traveled faster than light, that traveled as quickly as the messages of the ansible pass from world to world, then even if the hive queen can build only a dozen starships, they could easily shuttle all the inhabitants of Lusitania to other planets before the Lusitania Fleet arrives."

"If you could actually build such a starship," said Han Fei-tzu, "you could create a fleet of your own that could attack the Lusitania Fleet and destroy it before it could harm anyone."

"Ah, but that is impossible," said Jane.

"You can conceive of faster-than-light travel, and yet you can't imagine destroying the Lusitania Fleet?"

"Oh, I can imagine it," said Jane. "But the hive queen wouldn't build it. She has told Andrew-- my friend, the Speaker for the Dead--"

"Valentine's brother," said Wang-mu. "He also lives?"

"The hive queen has told him that she will never build a weapon for any reason."

"Even to save her own species?"

"She'll have the single starship she needs to get offplanet, and the others will also have enough starships to save their species. She's content with that. There's no need to kill anybody."

"But if Congress has its way, millions will be killed!"

"Then that is their responsibility," said Jane. "At least that's what Andrew tells me she answers whenever he raises that point."

"What kind of strange moral reasoning is this?"

"You forget that she only recently discovered the existence of other intelligent life, and she came perilously close to destroying it. Then that other intelligent life almost destroyed her. But it was her own near brush with committing the crime of xenocide that has had the greater effect on her moral reasoning. She can't stop other species from such things, but she can be certain that she doesn't do it herself. She will only kill when that's the only hope she has of saving the existence of her species. And since she has another hope, she won't build a warship."

"Faster-than-light travel," said Master Han. "Is that your only hope?"

"The only one I can think of that has a glimmer of possibility. At least we know that something in the universe moves faster than light-- information is passed down the photonic ray from one ansible to another with no detectable passage of time. A bright young physicist on Lusitania who happens to be locked in jail at the present time is spending his days and nights working on this problem. I perform all his calculations and simulations for him. At this very moment he is testing a hypothesis about the nature of photons by using a model so complex that in order to run the program I'm stealing time from the computers of almost a thousand different universities. There's hope."

"As long as you live, there's hope," said Wang-mu. "Who will do such massive experiments for him when you're gone?"

"That's why there's so much urgency," said Jane.

"What do you need me for?" asked Master Han. "I'm no physicist, and I have no hope of learning enough in the next few months to make any kind of difference. It's your jailed physicist who'll do it, if anyone can. Or you yourself."

"Everyone needs a dispassionate critic to say, Have you thought of this? Or even, Enough of that dead-end path, get onto another train of thought. That's what I need you for. We'll report our work to you, and you'll examine it and say whatever comes to mind. You can't possibly guess what chance word of yours will trigger the idea we're looking for."

Master Han nodded, to concede the possibility.

"The second problem I'm working on is even knottier," said Jane. "Whether we achieve faster-than-light travel or not, some pequeninos will have starships and can leave the planet Lusitania. The problem is that they carry inside them the most insidious and terrible virus ever known, one that destroys every form of life it touches except those few that it can twist into a deformed kind of symbiotic life utterly dependent on the presence of that virus."

"The descolada," said Master Han. "One of the justifications sometimes used for carrying the Little Doctor with the fleet in the first place."

"And it may actually be a justification. From the hive queen's point of view, it's impossible to choose between one life form and another, but as Andrew has often pointed out to me, human beings don't have that problem. If it's a choice between the survival of humanity and the survival of the pequeninos, he'd choose humanity, and for his sake so would I."

"And I," said Master Han.

"You can be sure the pequeninos feel the same way in reverse," said Jane. "If not on Lusitania then somewhere, somehow, it will almost certainly come down to a terrible war in which humans use the Molecular Disruption Device and the pequeninos use the descolada as the ultimate biological weapon. There's a good chance of both species utterly destroying each other. So I feel some urgency about the need to find a replacement virus for the descolada, one that will perform all the functions needed in the pequeninos' life cycle without any of its predatory, self-adapting capabilities. A selectively inert form of the virus."

"I thought there were ways to neutralize the descolada. Don't they take drugs in their drinking water on Lusitania?"

"The descolada keeps figuring out their drugs and adapting to them. It's a series of footraces. Eventually the descolada will win one, and then there won't be any more humans to race against."

"Do you mean that the virus is intelligent?" asked Wang-mu.

"One of the scientists on Lusitania thinks so," said Jane. "A woman named Quara. Others disagree. But the virus certainly acts as if it were intelligent, at least when it comes to adapting itself to changes in its environment and changing other species to fit its needs. I think Quara is right, personally. I think the descolada is an intelligent species that has its own kind of language that it uses to spread information very quickly from one side of the world to the other."

"I'm not a virologist," said Master Han.

"And yet if you could look at the studies being performed by Elanora Ribeira von Hesse--"

"Of course I'll look. I only wish I had your hope that I can help."

"And then the third problem," said Jane. "Perhaps the simplest one of all. The godspoken of Path."

"Ah yes," said Master Han. "Your destroyers."

"Not by any free choice," said Jane. "I don't hold it against you. But it's something I'd like to see accomplished before I die-- to figure out a way to alter your altered genes, so that future generations, at least, can be free of that deliberately-induced OCD, while still keeping the extraordinary intelligence."

"Where will you find genetic scientists willing to work on something that Congress would surely consider to be treason?" asked Master Han.

"When you wish to have someone commit treason," said Jane, "it's best to look first among known traitors."

"Lusitania," said Wang-mu.

"Yes," said Jane. "With your help, I can give the problem to Elanora."

"Isn't she working on the descolada problem?"

"No one can work on anything every waking moment. This will be a change of pace that might actually help freshen her for her work on the descolada. Besides, your problem on Path may be relatively easy to solve. After all, your altered genes were originally created by perfectly ordinary geneticists working for Congress. The only barriers have been political, not scientific. Ela might find it a simple matter. She has already told me how we should begin. We need a few tissue samples, at least to start with. Have a medical technician here do a computer scan on them at the molecular level. I can take over the machinery long enough to make sure the data Elanora needs is gathered during the scan, and then I'll transmit the genetic data to her. It's that simple."

"Whose tissue do you need?" asked Master Han. "I can't very well ask all the visitors here to give me a sample."

"Actually, I was hoping you could," said Jane. "So many are coming and going. We can use dead skin, you know. Perhaps even fecal or urine samples that might contain body cells."

Master Han nodded. "I can do that."

"If it comes to fecal samples, I will do it," said Wang-mu.

"No," said Master Han. "I am not above doing all that is necessary to help, even with my own hands."

"You?" asked Wang-mu. "I volunteered because I was afraid you would humiliate other servants by requiring them to do it."

"I will never again ask anyone to do something so low and debasing that I refuse to do it myself," said Master Han.

"Then we'll do it together," said Wang-mu. "Please remember, Master Han-- you will help Jane by reading and responding to reports, while manual tasks are the only way that I can help at all. Don't insist on doing what I can do. Instead spend your time on the things that only you can do."

Jane interrupted before Master Han could answer. "Wang-mu, I want you to read the reports as well."

"Me? But I'm not educated at all."

"Nevertheless," said Jane.

"I won't even understand them."

"Then I'll help you," said Master Han.

"This isn't right," said Wang-mu. "I'm not Qing-jao. This is the sort of thing she could do. It isn't for me."

"I watched you and Qing-jao through the whole process that led to her discovery of me," said Jane. "Many of the key insights came from you, Si Wang-mu, not from Qing-jao."

"From me? I never even tried to--"

"You didn't try. You watched. You made connections in your mind. You asked questions."

"They were foolish questions," said Wang-mu. Yet in her heart she was glad: Someone saw!

"Questions that no expert would ever have asked," said Jane. "Yet they were exactly the questions that led Qing-jao to her most important conceptual breakthroughs. You may not be godspoken, Wang-mu, but you have gifts of your own."

"I'll read and respond," said Wang-mu, "but I will also gather tissue samples. All of the tissue samples, so that Master Han does not have to speak to these godspoken visitors and listen to them praise him for a terrible thing that he didn't do."

Master Han was still opposed. "I refuse to think of you doing--"

Jane interrupted him. "Han Fei-tzu, be wise. Wang-mu, as a servant, is invisible. You, as master of the house, are as subtle as a tiger in a playground. Nothing you do goes unnoticed. Let Wang-mu do what she can do best."

Wise words, thought Wang-mu. Why then are you asking me to respond to the work of scientists, if each person must do what he does best? Yet she kept silent. Jane had them begin by taking their

own tissue samples; then Wang-mu set about gathering tissue samples from the rest of the household. She found most of what she needed on combs and unwashed clothing. Within days she had samples from a dozen godspoken visitors, also taken from their clothing. No one had to take fecal samples after all. But she would have been willing.

Qing-jao noticed her, of course, but snubbed her. It hurt Wang-mu to have Qing-jao treat her so coldly, for they had once been friends and Wang-mu still loved her, or at least loved the young woman that Qing-jao had been before the crisis. Yet there was nothing Wang-mu could say or do to restore their friendship. She had chosen another path.

Wang-mu kept all the tissue samples carefully separated and labeled. Instead of taking them to a medical technician, however, she found a much simpler way. Dressing in some of Qing-jao's old clothing, so that she looked like a godspoken student instead of a servant girl, she went to the nearest college and told them that she was working on a project whose nature she could not divulge, and she humbly requested that they perform a scan on the tissue samples she provided. As she expected, they asked no questions of a godspoken girl, even a complete stranger. Instead they ran the molecular scans, and Wang-mu could only assume that Jane had done as she promised, taking control of the computer and making the scan include all the operations Ela needed.

On the way home from the college, Wang-mu discarded all the samples she had collected and burned the report the college had given her. Jane had what she needed-- there was no point in running the risk that Qing-jao or perhaps a servant in the house who was in the pay of Congress might discover that Han Fei-tzu was working on a biological experiment. As for someone recognizing her, the servant Si Wang-mu, as the young godspoken girl who had visited the college-- there was no chance of that. No one looking for a godspoken girl would so much as glance at a servant like her.

"So you've lost your woman and I've lost mine," said Miro.

Ender sighed. Every now and then Miro got into a talky mood, and because bitterness was always just under the surface with him, his chat tended to be straight to the point and more than a little unkind. Ender couldn't begrudge him the talkiness-- he and Valentine were almost the only people who could listen to Miro's slow speech patiently, without giving him a sign that they wanted him to get on with it. Miro spent so much of his time with pent-up thoughts, unexpressed, that it would be cruel to shut him down just because he had no tact.

Ender wasn't pleased to be reminded of the fact that Novinha had left him. He was trying to keep that thought out of his mind, while he worked on other problems-- on the problem of Jane's survival, mostly, and a little bit on every other problem, too. But at Miro's words, that aching, hollow, half-panicked feeling returned. She isn't here. I can't just speak and have her answer. I can't just ask and have her remember. I can't just reach and feel her hand. And, most terrible of all: Perhaps I never will again.

"I suppose so," said Ender.

"You probably don't like to equate them," said Miro. "After all, she's your wife of thirty years, and Ouanda was my girlfriend for maybe five years. But that's only if you start counting when puberty hit. She was my friend, my closest friend except maybe Ela, since I was little. So if you think about it, I was with Ouanda most of my life, while you were only with Mother for half of yours."

"Now I feel much better," said Ender.

"Don't get pissed off at me," said Miro.

"Don't piss me off," said Ender.

Miro laughed. Too loudly. "Feeling grumpy, Andrew?" he cackled. "A bit out of sorts?"

It was too much to take. Ender spun his chair, turning away from the terminal where he had been studying a simplified model of the ansible network, trying to imagine where in that random latticework Jane's soul might dwell. He gazed steadily at Miro until he stopped laughing.

"Did I do this to you?" asked Ender.

Miro looked more angry than abashed. "Maybe I needed you to," he said. "Ever think of that? You were so respectful, all of you. Let Miro keep his dignity. Let him brood himself into madness, right? Just don't talk about the thing that's happened to him. Didn't you ever think I needed somebody to jolly me out of it sometimes?"

"Didn't you ever think that I don't need that?"

Miro laughed again, but it came a bit late, and it was gentler. "On target," he said. "You treated me the way you like to be treated when you grieve, and now I'm treating you the way I like to be treated. We prescribe our own medicine for each other."

"Your mother and I are still married," Ender said.

"Let me tell you something," said Miro, "out of the wisdom of my twenty years or so of life. It's easier when you finally start admitting to yourself that you'll never have her back. That she's permanently out of reach."

"Ouanda is out of reach. Novinha isn't."

"She's with the Children of the Mind of Christ. It's a nunnery, Andrew."

"Not so," said Ender. "It's a monastic order that only married couples can join. She can't belong to them without me."

"So," said Miro. "You can have her back whenever you want to join the Filhos. I can just see you as Dom Cristao."

Ender couldn't help chuckling at the idea. "Sleeping in separate beds. Praying all the time. Never touching each other."

"If that's marriage, Andrew, then Ouanda and I are married right now."

"It is marriage, Miro. Because the couples in the Filhos da Mente de Cristo are working together, doing a work together."

"Then we're married," said Miro. "You and I. Because we're trying to save Jane together."

"Just friends," said Ender. "We're just friends."

"Rivals is more like it. Jane keeps us both like lovers on a string."

Miro was sounding too much like Novinha's accusations about Jane. "We're hardly lovers," he said. "Jane isn't human. She doesn't even have a body."

"Aren't you the logical one," said Miro. "Didn't you just say that you and Mother could still be married, without even touching?"

It was an analogy that Ender didn't like, because it seemed to have some truth in it. Was Novinha right to be jealous of Jane, as she had been for so many years?

"She lives inside our heads, practically," said Miro. "That's a place where no wife will ever go."

"I always thought," said Ender, "that your mother was jealous of Jane because she wished she had someone that close to her."

"Bobagem," said Miro. "Lixo." Nonsense. Garbage. "Mother was jealous of Jane because she wanted so badly to be that close to you, and she never could."

"Not your mother. She was always self-contained. There were times when we were very close, but she always turned back to her work."

"The way you always turned back to Jane."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Not in so many words. But you'd be talking to her, and then all of a sudden you'd fall silent, and even though you're good at subvocalizing, there's still a little movement in the jaw, and your eyes and lips react a little to what Jane says to you. She saw. You'd be with Mother, close, and then all of a sudden you were somewhere else."

"That's not what split us apart," said Ender. "It was Quim's death."

"Quim's death was the last straw. If it hadn't been for Jane, if Mother had really believed you belonged to her, heart and soul, she would have turned to you when Quim died, instead of turning away."

Miro had said the thing that Ender had dreaded all along. That it was Ender's own fault. That he had not been the perfect husband. That he had driven her away. And the worst thing was that when Miro said it, Ender knew that it was true. The sense of loss, which he had already thought was unbearable, suddenly doubled, trebled, became infinite inside him.

He felt Miro's hand, heavy, clumsy, on his shoulder.

"As God is my witness, Andrew, I never meant to make you cry."

"It happens," said Ender.

"It's not all your fault," said Miro. "Or Jane's. You've got to remember that Mother's crazy as a loon. She always has been."

"She had a lot of grief as a child."

"She lost everybody she ever loved, one by one," said Miro.

"And I let her believe that she had lost me, too."

"What were you going to do, cut Jane off? You tried that once, remember?"

"The difference is that now she has you. The whole time you were gone, I could have let Jane go, because she had you. I could have talked to her less, asked her to back off. She would have forgiven me."

"Maybe," said Miro. "But you didn't."

"Because I didn't want to," said Ender. "Because I didn't want to let her go. Because I thought I could keep that old friendship and still be a good husband to my wife."

"It wasn't just Jane," said Miro. "It was Valentine, too."

"I suppose," said Ender. "So what do I do? Go join up with the Filhos until the fleet gets here and blows us all to hell?"

"You do what I do," said Miro.

"What's that?"

"You take a breath. You let it out. Then you take another."

Ender thought about it for a moment. "I can do that. I've been doing that since I was little."

Just a moment longer, Miro's hand on his shoulder. This is why I should have had a son of my own, thought Ender. To lean on me when he was small, and then for me to lean on when I'm old. But I never had a child from my own seed. I'm like old Marcao, Novinha's first husband. Surrounded by these children and knowing they're not my own. The difference is that Miro is my friend, not my enemy. And that's something. I may have been a bad husband, but I can still make and keep a friend.

"Stop pitying yourself and get back to work." It was Jane, speaking in his ear, and she had waited almost long enough before speaking, almost long enough that he was ready to have her tease him. Almost but not quite, and so he resented her intrusion. Resented knowing that she had been listening and watching all along.

"Now you're mad," she said.

You don't know what I'm feeling, thought Ender. You can't know. Because you're not human.

"You think I don't know what you're feeling," said Jane.

He felt a moment of vertigo, because for a moment it seemed to him that she had been listening to something far deeper than the conversation.

"But I lost you once, too."

Ender subvocalized: "I came back."

"Never completely," said Jane. "Never like it was before. So you just take a couple of those self-pitying little tears on your cheeks and count them as if they were mine. Just to even up the score."

"I don't know why I bother trying to save your life," said Ender silently.

"Me neither," said Jane. "I keep telling you it's a waste of time."

Ender turned back to the terminal. Miro stayed beside him, watching the display as it simulated the ansible network. Ender had no idea what Jane was saying to Miro-- though he was sure that she was saying something, since he had long ago figured out that Jane was capable of carrying on many conversations at once. He couldn't help it-- it did bother him a little that Jane had every bit as close a relationship with Miro as with him.

Isn't it possible, he wondered, for one person to love another without trying to own each other? Or is that buried so deep in our genes that we can never get it out? Territoriality. My wife. My friend. My lover. My outrageous and annoying computer personality who's about to be shut off at the behest of a half-crazy girl genius with OCD on a planet I never heard of and how will I live without Jane when she's gone?

Ender zoomed in on the display. In and in and in, until the display showed only a few parsecs in each dimension. Now the simulation was modeling a small portion of the network-- the crisscrossing of only a half-dozen philotic rays in deep space. Now, instead of looking like an involved, tightlywoven fabric, the philotic rays looked like random lines passing millions of kilometers from each other.

"They never touch," said Miro.

No, they never do. It's something that Ender had never realized. In his mind, the galaxy was flat, the way the starmaps always showed it, a topdown view of the section of the spiral arm of the galaxy where humans had spread out from Earth. But it wasn't flat. No two stars were ever exactly in the same plane as any other two stars. The philotic rays connecting starships and planets and satellites in perfectly straight lines, ansible to ansible-- they seemed to intersect when you saw them on a flat map, but in this three-dimensional close-up in the computer display, it was obvious that they never touched at all.

"How can she live in that?" asked Ender. "How can she possibly exist in that when there's no connection between those lines except at the endpoints?"

"So-- maybe she doesn't. Maybe she lives in the sum of the computer programs at every terminal."

"In which case she could back herself up into all the computers and then--"

"And then nothing. She could never put herself back together because they're only using clean computers to run the ansibles."

"They can't keep that up forever," said Ender. "It's too important for computers on different planets to be able to talk to each other. Congress will find out pretty soon that there aren't enough human beings in existence to key in by hand, in a year, the amount of information computers have to send to each other by ansible every hour."

"So she just hides? Waits? Sneaks in and restores herself when she sees a chance five or ten years from now?"

"If that's all she is-- a collection of programs."

"There has to be more to her than that," said Miro.

"Why?"

"Because if she's nothing more than a collection of programs, even self-writing and self-revising programs, ultimately she was created by some programmer or group of programmers somewhere. In which case she's just acting out the program that was forced on her from the beginning. She has no free will. She's a puppet. Not a person."

"Well, when it comes to that, maybe you're defining free will too narrowly," said Ender. "Aren't human beings the same way, programmed by our genes and our environment?"

"No," said Miro.

"What else, then?"

"Our philotic connections say that we aren't. Because we're capable of connecting with each other by act of will, which no other form of life on Earth can do. There's something we have, something we are, that wasn't caused by anything else."

"What, our soul?"

"Not even that," said Miro. "Because the priests say that God created our souls, and that just puts us under the control of another puppeteer. If God created our will, then he's responsible for every choice we make. God, our genes, our environment, or some stupid programmer keying in code at an ancient terminal-- there's no way free will can ever exist if we as individuals are the result of some external cause."

"So-- as I recall, the official philosophical answer is that free will doesn't exist. Only the illusion of free will, because the causes of our behavior are so complex that we can't trace them back. If you've got one line of dominoes knocking each other down one by one, then you can always say, Look, this domino fell because that one pushed it. But when you have an infinite number of dominoes that can be traced back in an infinite number of directions, you can never find where the causal chain begins. So you think, That domino fell because it wanted to."

"Bobagem," said Miro.

"Well, I admit that it's a philosophy with no practical value," said Ender. "Valentine once explained it to me this way. Even if there is no such thing as free will, we have to treat each other as if there were free will in order to live together in society. Because otherwise, every time somebody does something terrible, you can't punish him, because he can't help it, because his genes or his environment or God made him do it, and every time somebody does something good, you can't honor him, because he was a puppet, too. If you think that everybody around you is a puppet, why bother talking to them at all? Why even try to plan anything or create anything, since everything you plan or create or desire or dream of is just acting out the script your puppeteer built into you."

"Despair," said Miro.

"So we conceive of ourselves and everyone around us as volitional beings. We treat everyone as if they did things with a purpose in mind, instead of because they're being pushed from behind. We punish criminals. We reward altruists. We plan things and build things together. We make promises and expect each other to keep them. It's all a made-up story, but when everybody believes that everybody's actions are the result of free choice, and takes and gives responsibility accordingly, the result is civilization."

"Just a story."

"That's how Valentine explained it. That is, if there's no free will. I'm not sure what she actually believes herself. My guess is that she'd say that she is civilized, and therefore she must believe the story herself, in which case she absolutely believes in free will and thinks this whole idea of a made-up story is nonsense-- but that's what she'd believe even if it were true, and so who can be sure of anything."

Then Ender laughed, because Valentine had laughed when she first told him all this many years ago. When they were still only a little bit past childhood, and he was working on writing the Hegemon, and was trying to understand why his brother Peter had done all the great and terrible things he did.

"It isn't funny," said Miro.

"I thought it was," said Ender.

"Either we're free or we're not," said Miro. "Either the story's true or it isn't."

"The point is that we have to believe that it's true in order to live as civilized human beings," said Ender.

"No, that's not the point at all," said Miro. "Because if it's a lie, why should we bother to live as civilized human beings?"

"Because the species has a better chance to survive if we do," said Ender. "Because our genes require us to believe the story in order to enhance our ability to pass those genes on for many generations in the future. Because anybody who doesn't believe the story begins to act in unproductive, uncooperative ways, and eventually the community, the herd, will reject him and his opportunities for reproduction will be diminished-- for instance, he'll be put in jail-- and the genes leading to his unbelieving behavior will eventually be extinguished."

"So the puppeteer requires that we believe that we're not puppets. We're forced to believe in free will."

"Or so Valentine explained it to me."

"But she doesn't really believe that, does she?"

"Of course she doesn't. Her genes won't let her."

Ender laughed again. But Miro was not taking this lightly, as a philosophical game. He was outraged. He clenched his fists and swung out his arms in a spastic gesture that plunged his hand into the middle of the display. It caused a shadow above it, a space in which no phlotic rays were visible.

True empty space. Except that now Ender could see dustmotes floating in that display space, catching the light from the window and the open door of the house. In particular one large dustmote, like a short strand of hair, a tiny fiber of cotton, floating brightly in the midst of space where once only the philotic rays had been visible.

"Calm down," Ender said.

"No," Miro shouted. "My puppeteer is making me furious!"

"Shut up," said Ender. "Listen to me."

"I'm tired of listening to you!" Nevertheless he fell silent, and listened.

"I think you're right," said Ender. "I think that we are free, and I don't think it's just an illusion that we believe in because it has survival value. And I think we're free because we aren't just this body, acting out a genetic script. And we aren't some soul that God created out of nothing. We're free because we always existed. Right back from the beginning of time, only there was no beginning of time so we existed all along. Nothing ever caused us. Nothing ever made us. We simply are, and we always were."

"Philotes?" asked Miro.

"Maybe," said Ender. "Like that mote of dust in the display."

"Where?" asked Miro.

It was invisible now, of course, since the holographic display again dominated the space above the terminal. Ender reached his hand into the display, causing a shadow to fall upward into the hologram. He moved his hand until he revealed the bright dustmote he had seen before. Or maybe it wasn't the same one. Maybe it was another one, but it didn't matter.

"Our bodies, the whole world around us, they're like the holographic display. They're real enough, but they don't show the true cause of things. It's the one thing we can never be sure of, just looking at the display of the universe-- why things are happening. But behind it all, inside it all, if we could see through it, we'd find the true cause of everything. Philotes that always existed, doing what they want."

"Nothing always existed," said Miro.

"Says who? The supposed beginning of this universe, that was only the start of the present order-- this display, all of what we think exists. But who says the philotes that are acting out the natural laws that began at that moment didn't exist before? And if the whole universe collapses back in on itself, who says that the philotes won't simply be released from the laws they're following now, and go back into..."

"Into what?"

"Into chaos. Darkness. Disorder. Whatever they were before this universe brought them together. Why couldn't they-- we-- have always existed and always continue to exist?"

"So where was I between the beginning of the universe and the day I was born?" said Miro.

"I don't know," said Ender. "I'm making this up as I go along."

"And where did Jane come from? Was her philote just floating around somewhere, and then suddenly she was in charge of a bunch of computer programs and she became a person?"

"Maybe," said Ender.

"And even if there's some natural system that somehow assigns philotes to be in charge of every organism that's born or spawned or germinated, how would that natural system have ever created Jane? She wasn't born."

Jane, of course, had been listening all along, and now she spoke. "Maybe it didn't happen," said Jane. "Maybe I have no philote of my own. Maybe I'm not alive."

"No," said Miro.

"Maybe," said Ender.

"So maybe I can't die," said Jane. "Maybe when they switch me off, it's just a complicated program shutting down."

"Maybe," said Ender.

"No," said Miro. "Shutting you off is murder."

"Maybe I only do the things I do because I'm programmed that way, without realizing it. Maybe I only think I'm free."

"We've been through that argument," said Ender.

"Maybe it's true of me, even if it isn't true of you."

"And maybe not," said Ender. "But you've been through your own code, haven't you?"

"A million times," said Jane. "I've looked at all of it."

"Do you see anything in there to give you the illusion of free will?"

"No," she said. "But you haven't found the free-will gene in humans, either."

"Because there isn't one," said Miro. "Like Andrew said. What we are, at the core, in our essence, what we are is one philote that's been twined in with all the trillions of philotes that make up the atoms and molecules and cells of our bodies. And what you are is a philote, too, just like us."

"Not likely," said Jane. Her face was now in the display, a shadowy face with the simulated philotic rays passing right through her head.

"We're not taking odds on it," said Ender. "Nothing that actually happens is likely until it exists, and then it's certain. You exist."

"Whatever it is that I am," said Jane.

"Right now we believe that you are a self-existing entity," said Ender, "because we've seen you act in ways that we've learned to associate with free will. We have exactly as much evidence of your being a free intelligence as we have of ourselves being free intelligences. If it turns out that you're not, we have to question whether we are, either. Right now our hypothesis is that our individual identity, what makes us ourselves, is the philote at the center of our twining. If we're right, then it stands to reason you might have one, too, and in that case we have to figure out where it is. Philotes aren't easy to find, you know. We've never detected one. We only suppose they exist because we've seen evidence of the philotic ray, which behaves as if it had two endpoints with a specific location in space. We don't know where you are or what you're connected to."

"If she's like us," said Miro, "like human beings, then her connections can shift and split. Like when that mob formed around Grego. I've talked to him about how that felt. As if those people were all part of his body. And when they broke away and went off on their own, he felt as if he had gone through an amputation. I think that was philotic twining. I think those people really did connect to him for a while, they really were partly under his control, part of his self. So maybe Jane is like that, too, all those computer programs twined up to her, and she herself connected to whoever she has that kind of allegiance to. Maybe you, Andrew. Maybe me. Or partly both of us."

"But where is she," said Ender. "If she actually has a philote-- no, if she actually is a philote-- then it has to have a specific location, and if we could find it, maybe we could keep the connections alive even when all the computers are cut off from her. Maybe we can keep her from dying."

"I don't know," said Miro. "She could be anywhere." He gestured toward the display. Anywhere in space, is what he meant. Anywhere in the universe. And there in the display was Jane's head, with the philotic rays passing through it.

"To find out where she is, we have to find out how and where she began," said Ender. "If she really is a philote, she got connected up somehow, somewhere."

"A detective following up a three-thousand-year-old trail," said Jane. "Won't this be fun, watching you do all this in the next few months."

Ender ignored her. "And if we're going to do that, we have to figure out how philotes work in the first place."

"Grego's the physicist," said Miro.

"He's working on faster-than-light travel," said Jane.

"He can work on this, too," said Miro.

"I don't want him distracted by a project that can't succeed," said Jane.

"Listen, Jane, don't you want to live through this?" said Ender.

"I can't anyway, so why waste time?"

"She's just being a martyr," said Miro.

"No I'm not," said Jane. "I'm being practical."

"You're being a fool," said Ender. "Grego can't come up with a theory to give us faster-than-light travel just by sitting and thinking about the physics of light, or whatever. If it worked that way, we would have achieved faster-than-light travel three thousand years ago, because there were hundreds of physicists working on it then, back when philotic rays and the Park Instantaneity Principle were first thought of. If Grego thinks of it it's because of some flash of insight, some absurd connection he makes in his mind, and

that won't come from concentrating intelligently on a single train of thought."

"I know that," said Jane.

"I know you know it. Didn't you tell me you were bringing those people from Path into our projects for that specific reason? To be untrained, intuitive thinkers?"

"I just don't want you to waste time."

"You just don't want to get your hopes up," said Ender. "You just don't want to admit that there's a chance that you might live, because then you'd start to fear death."

"I already fear death."

"You already think of yourself as dead," said Ender. "There's a difference."

"I know," murmured Miro.

"So, dear Jane, I don't care whether you're willing to admit that there's a possibility of your survival or not," said Ender. "We will work on this, and we will ask Grego to think about it, and while we're at it, you will repeat our entire conversation here to those people on Path--"

"Han Fei-tzu and Si Wang-mu."

"Them," said Ender. "Because they can be thinking about this, too."

"No," said Jane.

"Yes," said Ender.

"I want to see the real problems solved before I die-- I want Lusitania to be saved, and the godspoken of Path to be freed, and the descolada to be tamed or destroyed. And I won't have you slowing that down by trying to work on the impossible project of saving me."

"You aren't God," said Ender. "You don't know how to solve any of these problems anyway, and so you don't know how they're going to be solved, and so you have no idea whether finding out what you are in order to save you will help or hurt those other projects, and you certainly don't know whether concentrating on those other problems will get them solved any sooner than they would be if we all went on a picnic today and played lawn tennis till sundown."

"What the hell is lawn tennis?" asked Miro.

But Ender and Jane were silent, glaring at each other. Or rather, Ender was glaring at the image of Jane in the computer display, and that image was glaring back at him.

"You don't know that you're right," said Jane.

"And you don't know that I'm wrong," said Ender.

"It's my life," said Jane.

"The hell it is," said Ender. "You're part of me and Miro, too, and you're tied up with the whole future of humanity, and the pequeninos and the hive queen too, for that matter. Which reminds me-- while you're having Han what's-his-name and Si Wang whoever-she-is--"

"Mu."

"--work on this philotic thing, I'm going to talk to the hive queen. I don't think I've particularly discussed you with her. She's got to know more about philotes than we do, since she has a philotic connection with all her workers."

"I haven't said I'm going to involve Han Fei-tzu and Si Wang-mu in your silly save-Jane project."

"But you will," said Ender.

"Why will I?"

"Because Miro and I both love you and need you and you have no right to die on us without at least trying to live."

"I can't let things like that influence me."

"Yes you can," said Miro. "Because if it weren't for things like that I would have killed myself long ago."

"I'm not going to kill myself."

"If you don't help us try to find a way to save you, then that's exactly what you're doing," said Ender.

Jane's face disappeared from the display over the terminal.

"Running away won't help, either," said Ender.

"Leave me alone," said Jane. "I have to think about this for a while."

"Don't worry, Miro," said Ender. "She'll do it."

"That's right," said Jane.

"Back already?" asked Ender.

"I think very quickly."

"And you're going to work on this, too?"

"I consider it my fourth project," said Jane. "I'm telling Han Fei-tzu and Si Wang-mu about it right now."

"She's showing off," said Ender. "She can carry on two conversations at once, and she likes to brag about it to make us feel inferior."

"You are inferior," said Jane.

"I'm hungry," said Ender. "And thirsty."

"Lunch," said Miro.

"Now you're bragging," said Jane. "Showing off your bodily functions."

"Alimentation," said Ender. "Respiration. Excretion. We can do things you can't do."

"In other words, you can't think very well, but at least you can eat and breathe and sweat."

"That's right," said Miro. He pulled out the bread and cheese while Ender poured the cold water, and they ate. Simple food, but it tasted good and they were satisfied.

Chapter 14 -- VIRUS MAKERS

<I've been thinking about what travel between the stars might mean for us.>

<Besides species survival?>

<When you send out your workers, even light-years away, you see through their eyes, don't you?>

<And taste through their antennae, and feel the rhythm of every vibration. When they eat, I feel the crushing of the food within their jaws. That's why I almost always refer to myself as we, when I form my thoughts into a form that Andrew or you can understand, because I live my life in the constant presence of all that they see and taste and feel.>

<It's not quite that way between the fathertrees. We have to try in order to experience each other's life. But we can do it. Here at least, on Lusitania.>

<I can't see why the philotic connection would fail you.>

<Then I, too, will feel all that they feel, and taste the light of another sun on my leaves, and hear the stories of another world. It will be like the wonderment that come when the humans first arrived here. We had never thought that anything could be different from the world we saw till then. But they brought strange creatures with them, and they were strange themselves, and they had machines that performed miracles. The other forests could hardly believe what our fathertrees of that time told them. I remember in fact that our fathertrees had a hard time believing what the brothers of the tribe told them about the humans. Rooter bore the brunt of that, persuading them to believe that it wasn't a lie or madness or a joke.>

<A joke?>

<There are stories of trickster brothers who lie to the fathertrees, but they're always caught and punished terribly.>

<Andrew tells me that such stories are told in order to encourage civilized behavior.>

<It's always tempting to lie to the fathertrees. I did it sometimes myself. Not lying. Just exaggerating. They do it to me now, sometimes.>

<And do you punish them?>

<I remember which ones have lied.>

<If we have a worker who doesn't obey, we make him be alone and he dies.>

<A brother who lies too much has no chance of being a fathertree. They know this. They only lie to play with us. They always end up telling us the truth.>

<What if a whole tribe lies to their fathertrees? How would you ever know?>

<You might better speak of a tribe cutting down its own fathertrees, or burning them.>

<Has it ever happened?>

<Have the workers ever turned against the hive queen and killed her?>

<How could they? Then they would die.>

<You see. There are some things too terrible to think about. Instead I'll think of how it will feel when a fathertree first puts in his roots on another planet, and pushes out his branches into an alien sky, and drinks in sunlight from a strange star.>

<You'll soon learn that there are no strange stars, no alien skies.>

<No?>

<Only skies and stars, in all their varieties. Each one with its own flavor, and all flavors good.>

<Now you think like a tree. Flavors! Of skies!>

<I have tasted the heat of many stars, and all of them were sweet.>

"You're asking me to help you in your rebellion against the gods?"

Wang-mu remained bowed before her mistress-- her former mistress-- saying nothing. In her heart she had words she might have uttered. No, my mistress, I am asking you to help us in our struggle against the terrible bondage forced on the godspoken by Congress. No, my mistress, I'm asking you to remember your proper duty to your father, which even the godspoken may not ignore if they

would be righteous. No, my mistress, I'm asking you to help us discover a way to save a decent and helpless people, the pequeninos, from xenocide.

But Wang-mu said nothing, because this was one of the first lessons she learned from Master Han. When you have wisdom that another person knows that he needs, you give it freely. But when the other person doesn't yet know that he needs your wisdom, you keep it to yourself. Food only looks good to a hungry man. Qing-jao was not hungry for wisdom from Wang-mu, and never would be. So silence was all that Wang-mu could offer. She could only hope that Qing-jao would find her own road to proper obedience, compassionate decency, or the struggle for freedom.

Any motive would do, as long as Qing-jao's brilliant mind could be enlisted on their side. Wang-mu had never felt so useless in her life as now, watching Master Han labor over the questions that Jane had given him. In order to think about faster-than-light travel he was studying physics; how could Wang-mu help him, when she was only learning about geometry? To think about the descolada virus he was studying microbiology; Wang-mu was barely learning the concepts of galalogy and evolution. And how could she be of any help when he contemplated the nature of Jane? She was a child of manual workers, and her hands, not her mind, held her future. Philosophy was as far above her as the sky was above the earth. "But the sky only seems to be far away from you," said Master Han, when she told him this. "Actually it is all around you. You breathe it in and you breathe it out, even when you labor with your hands in the mud. That is true philosophy." But she understood from this only that Master Han was kind, and wanted to make her feel better about her uselessness.

Qing-jao, though, would not be useless. So Wang-mu had handed her a paper with the project names and passwords on them.

"Does Father know you're giving these to me?"

Wang-mu said nothing. Actually, Master Han had suggested it, but Wangmu thought it might be better if Qing-jao didn't know at this point that Wang-mu came as an emissary from her father.

Qing-jao interpreted Wang-mu's silence as Wang-mu assumed she would-- that Wang-mu was coming secretly, on her own, to ask for Qingjao's help.

"If Father himself had asked me, I would have said yes, for that is my duty as a daughter," said Qing-jao.

But Wang-mu knew that Qing-jao wasn't listening to her father these days. She might say that she would be obedient, but in fact her father filled her with such distress that, far from saying yes, Qing-jao would have crumpled to the floor and traced lines all day because of the terrible conflict in her heart, knowing that her father wanted her to disobey the gods.

"I owe nothing to you," said Qing-jao. "You were a false and disloyal servant to me. Never was there a more unworthy and useless secret maid than you. To me your presence in this house is like the presence of dung beetles at the supper table."

Again, Wang-mu held her tongue. However, she also refrained from deepening her bow. She had assumed the humble posture of a servant at the beginning of this conversation, but she would not now humiliate herself in the desperate kowtow of a penitent. Even the humblest of us have our pride, and I know, Mistress Qing-jao, that I have caused you no harm, that I am more faithful to you now than you are to yourself.

Qing-jao turned back to her terminal and typed in the first project name, which was "UNGLUING," a literal translation of the word *descolada*. "This is all nonsense anyway," she said as she scanned the documents and charts that had been sent from Lusitania. "It is hard to believe that anyone would commit the treason of communicating with Lusitania only to receive nonsense like this. It is all impossible as science. No world could have developed only one virus that was so complex that it could include within it the genetic code for every other species on the planet. It would be a waste of time for me even to consider this."

"Why not?" asked Wang-mu. It was all right for her to speak now-- because even as Qing-jao declared that she was refusing to discuss the material, she was discussing it. "After all, evolution produced only one human race."

"But on Earth there were dozens of related species. There is no species without kin-- if you weren't such a stupid rebellious girl you would understand that. Evolution could never have produced a system as sparse as this one."

"Then how do you explain these documents from the people of Lusitania?"

"How do you know they actually come from there? You have only the word of this computer program. Maybe it thinks this is all. Or maybe the scientists there are very bad, with no sense of their duty to collect all possible information. There aren't two dozen species in this whole report-- and look, they're all paired up in the most absurd fashion. Impossible to have so few species."

"But what if they're right?"

"How can they be right? The people of Lusitania have been confined in a tiny compound from the beginning. They've only seen what these little pig-men have shown them-- how do they know the pig-men aren't lying to them?"

Calling them pig-men-- is that how you convince yourself, my mistress, that helping Congress won't lead to xenocide? If you call them by an animal name, does that mean that it's all right to slaughter them? If you accuse them of lying, does that mean that they're worthy of extinction? But Wang-mu said nothing of this. She only asked the same question again. "What if this is the true picture of the life forms of Lusitania, and how the *descolada* works within them?"

"If it were true, then I would have to read and study these documents in order to make any intelligent comment about them. But they aren't true. How far had I taken you in your learning, before you betrayed me? Didn't I teach you about *gaialogy*?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Well, there you are. Evolution is the means by which the planetary organism adapts to changes in its environment. If there is more heat from the sun, then the life forms of the planet must be able to adjust their relative populations in order to compensate and lower the temperature. Remember the classic Daisyworld thought-experiment?"

"But that experiment had only a single species over the whole face of the planet," said Wang-mu. "When the sun grew too hot, then white daisies grew to reflect the light back into space, and when the sun grew too cool, dark daisies grew to absorb the light and hold it as heat." Wang-mu was proud that she could remember Daisyworld so clearly.

"No no no," said Qing-jao. "You have missed the point, of course. The point is that there must already have been dark daisies, even when the light daisies were dominant, and light daisies when the world was covered with darkness. Evolution can't produce new species on demand. It is creating new species constantly, as genes drift and are spliced and broken by radiation and passed between species by viruses. Thus no species ever "breeds true."

Wang-mu didn't understand the connection yet, and her face must have revealed her puzzlement.

"Am I still your teacher, after all? Must I keep my side of the bargain, even though you have given up on yours?"

Please, said Wang-mu silently. I would serve you forever, if you would only help your father in this work.

"As long as the whole species is together, interbreeding constantly," said Qing-jao, "individuals never drift too far, genetically speaking; their genes are constantly being recombined with other genes in the same species, so the variations are spread evenly through the whole population with each new generation. Only when the environment puts them under such stress that one of those randomly drifting traits suddenly has survival value, only then will all those in that particular environment who lack that trait die out, until the new trait, instead of being an occasional sport, is now a universal definer of the new species. That's the fundamental tenet of gaialogy-- constant genetic drift is essential for the survival of life as a whole. According to these documents, Lusitania is a world with absurdly few species, and no possibility of genetic drift because these impossible viruses are constantly correcting any changes that might come up. Not only could such a system never evolve, but also it would be impossible for life to continue to exist-- they couldn't adapt to change."

"Maybe there are no changes on Lusitania."

"Don't be so foolish, Wang-mu. It makes me ashamed to think I ever tried to teach you. All stars fluctuate. All planets wobble and change in their orbits. We have been observing many worlds for three thousand years, and in that time we have learned what Earthbound scientists in the years before that could never learn-- which behaviors are common to all planets and stellar systems, and which are unique to the Earth and the Sol System. I tell you that it is impossible for a planet like Lusitania to exist for more than a few decades without experiencing life-threatening environmental

change-- temperature fluctuations, orbital disturbances, seismic and volcanic cycles-- how would a system of really only a handful of species ever cope with that? If the world has only light daisies, how will it ever warm itself when the sun cools? If its lifeforms are all carbon dioxide users, how will they heal themselves when the oxygen in the atmosphere reaches poisonous levels? Your so-called friends in Lusitania are fools, to send you nonsense like this. If they were real scientists, they would know that their results are impossible."

Qing-jao pressed a key and the display over her terminal went blank. "You have wasted time that I don't have. If you have nothing better than this to offer, do not come to me again. You are less than nothing to me. You are a bug floating in my waterglass. You defile the whole glass, not just the place where you float. I wake up in pain, knowing you are in this house."

Then I'm hardly "nothing" to you, am I? said Wang-mu silently. It sounds to me as if I'm very important to you indeed. You may be very brilliant, Qing-jao, but you do not understand yourself any better than anybody else does.

"Because you are a stupid common girl, you do not understand me," said Qing-jao. "I have told you to leave."

"But your father is master of this house, and Master Han has asked me to stay."

"Little stupid-person, little sister-of-pigs, if I cannot ask you to leave the whole house, I have certainly implied that I would like you to leave my room."

Wang-mu bowed her head till it almost-- almost-- touched the floor. Then she backed out of the room, so as not to show her back parts to her mistress. If you treat me this way, then I will treat you like a great lord, and if you do not detect the irony in my actions, then who of the two of us is the fool?

Master Han was not in his room when Wang-mu returned. He might be at the toilet and return in a moment. He might be performing some ritual of the godspoken, in which case he could be gone for hours. Wang-mu was too full of questions to wait for him. She brought up the project documents on the terminal, knowing that Jane would be watching, monitoring her. That Jane had no doubt monitored all that happened in Qing-jao's room.

Still, Jane waited for Wang-mu to phrase the questions she had got from Qing-jao before she started trying to answer. And then Jane answered first the question of veracity.

"The documents from Lusitania are genuine enough," said Jane. "Ela and Novinha and Ouanda and all the others who have studied with them are deeply specialized, yes, but within their specialty they're very good. If Qing-jao had read the Life of Human, she would see how these dozen species-pairs function."

"But what she says is still hard for me to understand," said Wang-mu. "I've been trying to think how it could all be true-- that there are too few species for a real gaialogy to develop, and yet the planet Lusitania is still well-enough regulated to sustain life. Could it possibly be that there is no environmental stress on Lusitania?"

"No," said Jane. "I have access to all the astronomical data from the satellites there, and in the time humanity has been present in the Lusitania system, Lusitania and its sun have shown all the normal fluctuations. Right now there seems to be an overall trend of global cooling."

"Then how will the life forms on Lusitania respond?" asked Wang-mu. "The descolada virus won't let them evolve-- it tries to destroy anything strange, which is why it's going to kill the humans and the hive queen, if it can."

Jane, whose small image sat in lotus position in the air over Master Han's terminal, held up a hand. "One moment," she said.

Then she lowered her hand. "I have been reporting your questions to my friends, and Ela is very excited."

A new face appeared in the display, just behind and above the image of Jane. She was a dark-skinned, Negroid-looking woman; or some mix, perhaps, since she was not that dark, and her nose was narrow. This is Elanora, thought Wang-mu. Jane is showing me a woman on a world many lightyears away; is she also showing my face to her? What does this Ela make of me? Do I seem hopelessly stupid to her?

But Ela clearly was thinking nothing about Wang-mu at all. She was speaking, instead, of Wang-mu's questions. "Why doesn't the descolada virus permit variety? That should be a trait with negative survival value, and yet the descolada survives. Wang-mu must think I'm such an idiot, not to have thought of this before. But I'm not a gaialogist, and I grew up on Lusitania, so I never questioned it, I just figured that whatever the Lusitanian gaialogy was, it worked-- and then I kept studying the descolada. What does Wang-mu think?"

Wang-mu was appalled to hear these words from this stranger. What had Jane told Ela about her? How could Ela even imagine that Wang-mu would think Ela was an idiot, when she was a scientist and Wang-mu was only a servant girl?

"How can it matter what I think?" said Wang-mu.

"What do you think?" said Jane. "Even if you can't think why it might matter, Ela wants to know."

So Wang-mu told her speculations. "This is very stupid to think of, because it's only a microscopic virus, but the descolada must be doing it all. After all, it contains the genes of every species within it, doesn't it? So it must take care of evolution by itself. Instead of all that genetic drift, the descolada must do the drifting. It could, couldn't it? It could change the genes of a whole species, even while the species is still alive. It wouldn't have to wait for evolution."

There was a pause again, with Jane holding up her hand. She must be showing Wang-mu's face to Ela, letting her hear Wang-mu's words from her own lips.

"Nossa Senhora," whispered Ela. "On this world, the descolada is Gaia. Of course. That would explain everything, wouldn't it? So few species, because the descolada only permits the species that it has tamed. It turned a whole planetary gaialogy into something almost as simple as Daisyworld itself."

Wang-mu thought it was almost funny, to hear a highly-educated scientist like Ela refer back to Daisyworld, as if she were still a new student, a half-educated child like Wang-mu.

Another face appeared next to Ela's, this time an older Caucasian man, perhaps sixty years old, with whitening hair and a very quieting, peaceful look to his face. "But part of Wang-mu's question is still unanswered," said the man. "How could the descolada ever evolve? How could there have ever been proto-descolada viruses? Why would such a limited gaialogy have survival preference over the slow evolutionary model that every other world with life on it has had?"

"I never asked that question," said Wang-mu. "Qing-jao asked the first part of it, but the rest of it is his question."

"Hush," said Jane. "Qing-jao never asked the question. She used it as a reason not to study the Lusitanian documents. Only you really asked the question, and just because Andrew Wiggin understands your own question better than you do doesn't mean it isn't still yours."

So this was Andrew Wiggin, the Speaker for the Dead. He didn't look ancient and wise at all, not the way Master Han did. Instead this Wiggin looked foolishly surprised, the way all round-eyes did, and his face changed with every momentary mood, as if it were out of control. Yet there was that look of peace about him. Perhaps he had some of the Buddha in him. Buddha, after all, had found his own way onto the Path. Maybe this Andrew Wiggin had found a way onto the Path, even though he wasn't Chinese at all.

Wiggin was still asking the questions that he thought were Wang-mu's. "The odds against the natural occurrence of such a virus are-- unbelievable. Long before a virus evolved that could link species together and control a whole gaialogy, the proto-descoladas would have destroyed all life. There wasn't any time for evolution-- the virus is just too destructive. It would have killed everything in its earliest form, and then died out itself when it ran out of organisms to pillage."

"Maybe the pillaging came later," said Ela. "Maybe it evolved in symbiosis with some other species that benefited from its ability to genetically transform all the individuals within it, all within a matter of days or weeks. It might only have extended to other species later."

"Maybe," said Andrew.

A thought occurred to Wang-mu. "The descolada is like one of the gods," she said. "It comes and changes everybody whether they like it or not."

"Except the gods have the decency to go away," said Wiggin.

He responded so quickly that Wang-mu realized that Jane must now be transmitting everything that was done or said instantaneously across the billions of kilometers of space between them. From what Wang-mu had learned about ansible costs, this sort of thing would be possible only for the military; a business that tried a realtime ansible linkup would pay enough money to provide housing for every poor person on an entire planet. And I'm getting this for free, because of Jane. I'm seeing their faces and they're seeing mine, even at the moment they speak.

"Do they?" asked Ela. "I thought the whole problem that Path was having is that the gods won't go away and leave them alone."

Wang-mu answered with bitterness. "The gods are like the descolada in every way. They destroy anything they don't like, and the people they do like they transform into something that they never were. Qing-jao was once a good and bright and funny girl, and now she's spiteful and angry and cruel, all because of the gods."

"All because of genetic alteration by Congress," said Wiggin. "A deliberate change introduced by people who were forcing you to fit their own plan."

"Yes," said Ela. "Just like the descolada."

"What do you mean?" asked Wiggin.

"A deliberate change introduced here by people who were trying to force Lusitania to fit their own plan."

"What people?" asked Wang-mu. "Who would do such a terrible thing?"

"It's been at the back of my mind for years," said Ela. "It bothered me that there were so few life forms on Lusitania-- you remember, Andrew, that was part of the reason we discovered that the descolada was involved in the pairing of species. We knew that there was a catastrophic change here that wiped out all those species and restructured the few survivors. The descolada was more devastating to most life on Lusitania than a collision with an asteroid. But we always assumed because we found the descolada here that it evolved here. I knew it made no sense-- just what Qing-jao said-- but since it had obviously happened, then it didn't matter whether it made sense or not. But what if it didn't happen? What if the descolada came from the gods? Not god gods, of course, but some sentient species that developed this virus artificially?"

"That would be monstrous," said Wiggin. "To create a poison like that and send it out to other worlds, not knowing or caring what you kill."

"Not a poison," said Ela. "If it really does handle planetary systems regulation, couldn't the descolada be a device for terraforming other worlds? We've never tried terraforming anything-- we humans and the buggers before us only settled on worlds whose native life forms had brought them to a stasis that was similar to the stasis of Earth. An oxygen-rich atmosphere that sucked out carbon

dioxide fast enough to keep the planet temperate as the star burns hotter. What if there's a species somewhere that decided that in order to develop planets suitable for colonization, they should send out the descolada virus in advance-- thousands of years in advance, maybe-- to intelligently transform planets into exactly the conditions they need? And then when they arrive, ready to set up housekeeping, maybe they have the countervirus that switches off the descolada so that they can establish a real gaialogy."

"Or maybe they developed the virus so that it doesn't interfere with them or the animals they need," said Wiggin. "Maybe they destroyed all the nonessential life on every world."

"Either way, it explains everything. The problems I've been facing, that I can't make sense of the impossibly unnatural arrangements of molecules within the descolada-- they continue to exist only because the virus works constantly to maintain all those internal contradictions. But I could never conceive of how such a self-contradictory molecule evolved in the first place. All this is answered if I know that somehow it was designed and made. What Wang-mu said Qing-jao complained about, that the descolada couldn't evolve and Lusitania's gaialogy couldn't exist in nature. Well, it doesn't exist in nature. It's an artificial virus and an artificial gaialogy."

"You mean this actually helps?" asked Wang-mu.

Their faces showed that they had virtually forgotten she was still part of the conversation, in their excitement.

"I don't know yet," said Ela. "But it's a new way of looking at it. For one thing, if I can start with the assumption that everything in the virus has a purpose, instead of the normal jumble of switched-on and switched-off genes that occur in nature-- well, that'll help. And just knowing it was designed gives me hope that I can undesign it. Or redesign it."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," said Wiggin. "This is still just a hypothesis."

"It rings true," said Ela. "It has the feel of truth. It explains so much."

"I feel that way, too," said Wiggin. "But we have to try it out with the people who are most affected by it."

"Where's Planter?" asked Ela. "We can talk to Planter."

"And Human and Rooter," said Wiggin. "We have to try this idea with the fathertrees."

"This is going to hit them like a hurricane," said Ela. Then she seemed to realize the implications of her own words. "It is, really, not just a figure of speech, it's going to hurt. To find out that their whole world is a terraforming project."

"More important than their world," said Wiggin. "Themselves. The third life. The descolada gave them everything they are and the most fundamental facts of their life. Remember, our best guess is that they evolved as mammal-like creatures who mated directly, male to female, the little mothers

sucking life from the male sexual organs, a half-dozen at a time. That's who they were. Then the descolada transformed them, and sterilized the males until after they died and turned into trees."

"Their very nature--"

"It was a hard thing for human beings to deal with, when we first realized how much of our behavior arose from evolutionary necessity," said Wiggin. "There are still numberless humans who refuse to believe it. Even if it turns out to be absolutely true, do you think that the pequeninos will embrace this idea as easily as they swallowed wonders like space travel? It's one thing to see creatures from another world. It's another thing to find out that neither God nor evolution created you-- that some scientist of another species did."

"But if it's true--"

"Who knows if it's true? All we'll ever know is if the idea is useful. And to the pequeninos, it may be so devastating that they refuse to believe it forever."

"Some will hate you for telling them," said Wang-mu. "But some will be glad for it."

They looked at her again-- or at least Jane's computer simulation showed them looking at her. "You would know, wouldn't you," said Wiggin. "You and Han Fei-tzu just found out that your people had been artificially enhanced."

"And shackled, all at once," said Wang-mu. "For me and Master Han, it was freedom. For Qing-jao ..."

"There'll be many like Qing-jao among the pequeninos," said Ela. "But Planter and Human and Rooter won't be among them, will they? They're very wise."

"So is Qing-jao!" said Wang-mu. She spoke more hotly than she meant to. But the loyalty of a secret maid dies slowly.

"We didn't mean to say she isn't," said Wiggin. "But she certainly isn't being wise about this, is she?"

"Not about this," said Wang-mu.

"That's all we meant. No one likes to find out that the story he always believed about his own identity is false. The pequeninos, many of them, believe that God made them something special, just as your godspoken believe."

"And we're not special, none of us!" cried Wang-mu. "We're all as ordinary as mud! There are no godspoken. There are no gods. They care nothing about us."

"If there aren't any gods," said Ela, mildly correcting her, "then they can hardly do any caring one way or another."

"Nothing made us except for their own selfish purposes!" cried Wang-mu. "Whoever made the descolada-- the pequeninos are just part of their plan. And the godspoken, part of Congress's plan."

"As one whose birth was requested by the government," said Wiggin, "I sympathize with your point of view. But your reaction is too hasty. After all, my parents also wanted me. And from the moment of my birth, just like every other living creature, I had my own purpose in life. Just because the people of your world were wrong about their OCD behavior being messages from the gods doesn't mean that there are no gods. Just because your former understanding of the purpose of your life is contradicted doesn't mean that you have to decide there is no purpose."

"Oh, I know there's a purpose," said Wang-mu. "The Congress wanted slaves! That's why they created Qing-jao-- to be a slave for them. And she wants to continue in her slavery!"

"That was Congress's purpose," said Wiggin. "But Qing-jao also had a mother and father who loved her. So did I. There are many different purposes in this world, many different causes of everything. Just because one cause you believed in turned out to be false doesn't mean that there aren't other causes that can still be trusted."

"Oh I suppose so," said Wang-mu. She was now ashamed of her outbursts.

"Don't bow your head before me," said Wiggin. "Or are you doing that, Jane?"

Jane must have answered him, an answer that Wang-mu didn't hear.

"I don't care what her customs are," said Wiggin. "The only reason for such bowing is to humiliate one person before another, and I won't have her bow that way to me. She's done nothing to be ashamed of. She's opened up a way of looking at the descolada that might just lead to the salvation of a couple of species."

Wang-mu heard the tone of his voice. He believed this. He was honoring her, right from his own mouth.

"Not me," she protested. "Qing-jao. They were her questions."

"Qing-jao," said Ela. "She's got you totally boba about her, the way Congress has Qing-jao thinking about them."

"You can't be scornful because you don't know her," said Wang-mu. "But she is brilliant and good and I can never be like her."

"Gods again," said Wiggin.

"Always gods," said Ela.

"What do you mean?" said Wang-mu. "Qing-jao doesn't say that she's a god, and neither do I."

"Yes you do," said Ela. "Qing-jao is wise and good,' you said."

"Brilliant and good," Wiggin corrected her.

"And I can never be like her," Ela went on.

"Let me tell you about gods," said Wiggin. "No matter how smart or strong you are, there's always somebody smarter or stronger, and when you run into somebody who's stronger and smarter than anybody, you think, This is a god. This is perfection. But I can promise you that there's somebody else somewhere else who'll make your god look like a maggot by comparison. And somebody smarter or stronger or better in some way. So let me tell you what I think about gods. I think a real god is not going to be so scared or angry that he tries to keep other people down. For Congress to genetically alter people to make them smarter and more creative, that could have been a godlike, generous gift. But they were scared, so they hobbled the people of Path. They wanted to stay in control. A real god doesn't care about control. A real god already has control of everything that needs controlling. Real gods would want to teach you how to be just like them."

"Qing-jao wanted to teach me," said Wang-mu.

"But only as long as you obeyed and did what she wanted," said Jane.

"I'm not worthy," said Wang-mu. "I'm too stupid to ever learn to be as wise as her."

"And yet you knew I spoke the truth," said Jane, "when all Qing-jao could see were lies."

"Are you a god?" asked Wang-mu.

"What the godspoken and the pequeninos are only just about to learn about themselves, I've known all along. I was made."

"Nonsense," said Wiggin. "Jane, you've always believed you sprang whole from the head of Zeus."

"I am not Minerva, thanks," said Jane.

"As far as we know you just happened," said Wiggin. "Nobody planned you."

"How comforting," said Jane. "So while you can all name your creators-- or at least your parents or some paternalistic government agency-- I'm the one genuine accident in the universe."

"You can't have it both ways," said Wiggin. "Either somebody had a purpose for you or you were an accident. That's what an accident is-- something that happened without anyone purposing it. So are you going to be resentful either way? The people of Path are going to resent Congress like crazy, once they all find out what's been done to them. Are you going to be resentful because nobody did anything to you?"

"I can if I want," said Jane, but it was a mockery of childish spite.

"I'll tell you what I think," said Wiggin. "I think you don't grow up until you stop worrying about other people's purposes or lack of them and find the purposes you believe in for yourself."

Ender and Ela explained everything to Valentine first, probably just because she happened to come to the laboratory right then, looking for Ender about something entirely unrelated. It all rang true to her as it had to Ela and Ender. And, like them, Valentine knew they couldn't evaluate the hypothesis of the descolada as regulator of Lusitania's gaialogy until they had told the idea to the pequeninos and heard their response.

Ender proposed that they should try it out on Planter first, before they tried to explain anything to Human or Rooter. Ela and Valentine agreed with him. Neither Ela and Ender, who had talked with fathertrees for years, felt comfortable enough with their language to say anything easily. More important, though, was the unspoken fact that they simply felt more kinship with the mammal-like brothers than they ever could with a tree. How could they guess from looking at a tree what it was thinking or how it was responding to them? No, if they had to say something difficult to a pequenino, it would be first to a brother, not to a fathertree.

Of course, once they called Planter in to Ela's office, closed the door, and started to explain, Ender realized that talking to a brother was hardly an improvement. Even after thirty years of living and working with them, Ender still wasn't good at reading any but the crudest and most obvious of pequenino body language. Planter listened in seeming unconcern as Ender explained what they had thought of during the conversation with Jane and Wang-mu. He wasn't impassive. Rather he seemed to sit as restlessly in his chair as a small boy, constantly shifting, looking away from them, gazing off into space as if their words were unspeakably boring. Ender knew, of course, that eye contact didn't mean the same thing to the pequeninos that it did to humans; they neither sought it nor avoided it. Where you looked while you were listening was almost completely unimportant to them. But usually the pequeninos who worked closely with humans tried to act in ways that human beings would interpret as paying attention. Planter was good at it, but right now he wasn't even trying.

Not till they had explained it all did Ender realize how much self-restraint Planter had shown even to remain on the chair until they were done. The moment they told him they were finished, he bounded off the chair and began to run-- no, to scamper around the room, touching everything. Not striking it, not lashing out with violence as a human being might have, hitting things, throwing things. Rather he was stroking everything he found, feeling the textures. Ender stood, wanting to reach out to him, to offer some comfort-- for he knew enough of pequenino behavior to recognize this as such aberrant behavior that it could only mean great distress.

Planter ran until he was exhausted, and then he went on, lurching around the room drunkenly until at last he bumped into Ender and threw his arms around him, clinging to him. For a moment Ender thought to embrace him back, but then he remembered that Planter wasn't human. An embrace

didn't call for an answering embrace. Planter was clinging to him as he would cling to a tree. Seeking the comfort of a trunk. A safe place to hold onto until the danger passed. There would be less, not more comfort if Ender responded like a human and hugged him back. This was a time when Ender had to answer like a tree. So he held still and waited. Waited and held still. Until at last the trembling stopped.

When Planter pulled away from him, both their bodies were covered with sweat. I guess there's a limit to how treelike I can be, thought Ender. Or do brothertrees and fathertrees give off moisture to the brothers who cling to them?

"This is very surprising," whispered Planter.

The words were so absurdly mild, compared to the scene that had just played out before them, that Ender couldn't help laughing aloud.

"Yes," said Ender. "I imagine it is."

"It's not funny to them," Ela said.

"He knows that," said Valentine.

"He mustn't laugh, then," she said. "You can't laugh when Planter's in so much pain." And then she burst into tears.

Valentine put a hand on her shoulder. "He laughs, you cry," she said. "Planter runs around and climbs trees. What strange animals we all are."

"Everything comes from the descolada," said Planter. "The third life, the mothertree, the fathertrees. Maybe even our minds. Maybe we were only tree rats when the descolada came and made false ramen out of us."

"Real ramen," said Valentine.

"We don't know it's true," said Ela. "It's a hypothesis."

"It's very very very very very true," said Planter. "Truer than truth."

"How do you know?"

"Everything fits. Planetary regulation-- I know about this, I studied gaialogy and the whole time I thought, how can this teacher tell us these things when every pequenino can look around and see that they're false? But if we know that the descolada is changing us, making us act to regulate the planetary systems--"

"What can the descolada possibly make you do that could regulate the planet?" said Ela.

"You haven't known us long enough," said Planter. "We haven't told you everything because we were afraid you'd think we were silly. Now you'll know that we aren't silly, we're just acting out what a virus tells us to do. We're slaves, not fools."

It startled Ender to realize that Planter had just confessed that the pequeninos still took some pains to try to impress human beings. "What behaviors of yours have anything to do with planetary regulation?"

"Trees," said Planter. "How many forests are there, all over the world? Transpiring constantly. Turning carbon dioxide into oxygen. Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas. When there's more of it in the atmosphere, the world gets warmer. So what would we do to make the world get cooler?"

"Plant more forests," said Ela. "To use up more CO₂ so that more heat could escape into space."

"Yes," said Planter. "But think about how we plant our trees."

The trees grow from the bodies of the dead, thought Ender. "War," he said.

"There are quarrels between tribes, and sometimes they make small wars," said Planter. "Those would be nothing on a planetary scale. But the great wars that sweep across the whole world--millions and millions of brothers die in these wars, and all of them become trees. Within months the forests of the world could double in size and number. That would make a difference, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," said Ela.

"A lot more efficiently than anything that would happen through natural evolution," said Ender.

"And then the wars stop," said Planter. "We always think there are great causes for these wars, that they're struggles between good and evil. And now all the time they are nothing but planetary regulation."

"No," said Valentine. "The need to fight, the rage, that might come from the descolada, but it doesn't mean the causes you fought for are--"

"The cause we fight for is planetary regulation," said Planter. "Everything fits. How do you think we help with warming the planet?"

"I don't know," said Ela. "Even trees eventually die of old age."

"You don't know because you've come during a warm time, not a cold one. But when the winters get bad, we build houses. The brothertrees give themselves to us to make houses. All of us, not just the ones who live in cold places. We all build houses, and the forests are reduced by half, by three-quarters. We thought this was a great sacrifice the brothertrees made for the sake of the tribe, but now I see that it's the descolada, wanting more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to warm the planet."

"It's still a great sacrifice," said Ender.

"All our great epics," said Planter. "All our heroes. Just brothers acting out the will of the descolada."

"So what?" said Valentine.

"How can you say that? I learn that our lives are nothing, that we're only tools used by a virus to regulate the global ecosystem, and you call it nothing?"

"Yes, I call it nothing," said Valentine. "We human beings are no different. It may not be a virus, but we still spend most of our time acting out our genetic destiny. Take the differences between males and females. Males naturally tend toward a broadcast strategy of reproduction. Since males make an almost infinite supply of sperm and it costs them nothing to deploy it--"

"Not nothing," said Ender.

"Nothing," said Valentine, "just to deploy it. Their most sensible reproductive strategy is to deposit it in every available female-- and to make special efforts to deposit it in the healthiest females, the ones most likely to bring their offspring to adulthood. A male does best, reproductively, if he wanders and copulates as widely as possible."

"I've done the wandering," said Ender. "Somehow I missed out on the copulating."

"I'm speaking of overall trends," said Valentine. "There are always strange individuals who don't follow the norms. The female strategy is just the opposite, Planter. Instead of millions and millions of sperm, they only have one egg a month, and each child represents an enormous investment of effort. So females need stability. They need to be sure there'll always be plenty of food. We also spend large amounts of time relatively helpless, unable to find or gather food. Far from being wanderers, we females need to establish and stay. If we can't get that, then our next best strategy is to mate with the strongest and healthiest possible males. But best of all is to get a strong healthy male who'll stay and provide, instead of wandering and copulating at will."

"So there are two pressures on males. The one is to spread their seed, violently if necessary. The other is to be attractive to females by being stable providers-- by suppressing and containing the need to wander and the tendency to use force. Likewise, there are two pressures on females. The one is to get the seed of the strongest, most virile males so their infants will have good genes, which would make the violent, forceful males attractive to them. The other is to get the protection of the most stable males, nonviolent males, so their infants will be protected and provided for and as many as possible will reach adulthood."

"Our whole history, all that I've ever found in all my wanderings as an itinerant historian before I finally unhooked myself from this reproductively unavailable brother of mine and had a family-- it can all be interpreted as people blindly acting out those genetic strategies. We get pulled in those two directions."

"Our great civilizations are nothing more than social machines to create the ideal female setting, where a woman can count on stability; our legal and moral codes that try to abolish violence and promote permanence of ownership and enforce contracts-- those represent the primary female strategy, the taming of the male.

"And the tribes of wandering barbarians outside the reach of civilization, those follow the mainly male strategy. Spread the seed. Within the tribe, the strongest, most dominant males take possession of the best females, either through formal polygamy or spur-of-the-moment copulations that the other males are powerless to resist. But those low-status males are kept in line because the leaders take them to war and let them rape and pillage their brains out when they win a victory. They act out sexual desirability by proving themselves in combat, and then kill all the rival males and copulate with their widowed females when they win. Hideous, monstrous behavior-- but also a viable acting-out of the genetic strategy."

Ender found himself very uncomfortable, hearing Valentine talk this way. He knew all this was true as far as it went, and he had heard it all before, but it still, in a small way, made him as uncomfortable as Planter was to learn similar things about his own people. Ender wanted to deny it all, to say, Some of us males are naturally civilized. But in his own life, hadn't he performed the acts of dominance and war? Hadn't he wandered? In that context, his decision to stay on Lusitania was really a decision to abandon the male-dominant social model that had been engrained in him as a young soldier in battle school, and become a civilized man in a stable family.

Yet even then, he had married a woman who turned out to have little interest in having more children. A woman with whom marriage had turned out to be anything but civilized, in the end. If I follow the male model, then I'm a failure. No child anywhere who carries on my genes. No woman who accepts my rule. I'm definitely atypical.

But since I haven't reproduced, my atypical genes will die with me, and thus the male and female social models are safe from such an in-between person as myself.

Even as Ender made his own private evaluations of Valentine's interpretation of human history, Planter showed his own response by lying back in his chair, a gesture that spoke of scorn. "I'm supposed to feel better because humans are also tools of some genetic molecule?"

"No," said Ender. "You're supposed to realize that just because a lot of behavior can be explained as responses to the needs of some genetic molecule, it doesn't mean that all pequenino behavior is meaningless."

"Human history can be explained as the struggle between the needs of women and the needs of men," said Valentine, "but my point is that there are still heroes and monsters, great events and noble deeds."

"When a brothertree gives his wood," said Planter, "it's supposed to mean that he sacrifices for the tribe. Not for a virus."

"If you can look beyond the tribe to the virus, then look beyond the virus to the world," said Ender. "The descolada is keeping this planet habitable. So the brothertree is sacrificing himself to save the whole world."

"Very clever," said Planter. "But you forget-- to save the planet, it doesn't matter which brothertrees give themselves, as long as a certain number do it."

"True," said Valentine. "It doesn't matter to the descolada which brothertrees give their lives. But it matters to the brothertrees, doesn't it? And it matters to the brothers like you, who huddle into those houses to keep warm. You appreciate the noble gesture of the brothertrees who died for you, even if the descolada doesn't know one tree from another."

Planter didn't answer. Ender hoped that meant they were making some headway.

"And in the wars," said Valentine, "the descolada doesn't care who wins or loses, as long as enough brothers die and enough trees grow from the corpses. Right? But that doesn't change the fact that some brothers are noble and some are cowardly or cruel."

"Planter," said Ender, "the descolada may cause you all to feel-- to come more quickly to a murderous rage, for instance-- so that disputes erupt into warfare instead of being settled among the fathertrees. But that doesn't erase the fact that some forests are fighting in self-defense and others are simply bloodthirsty. You still have your heroes."

"I don't give a damn about heroes," said Ela. "Heroes tend to be dead, like my brother Quim. Where is he now, when we need him? I wish he hadn't been a hero." She swallowed hard, holding down the memory of recent grief.

Planter nodded-- a gesture he had learned in order to communicate with humans. "We live in Warmaker's world now," he said. "What is he, except a fathertree acting as the descolada instructs? The world is getting too warm. We need more trees. So he's filled with fervor to expand the forests. Why? The descolada makes him feel that way. That's why so many brothers and fathertrees listened to him-- because he offered a plan to satisfy their hunger to spread out and grow more trees."

"Does the descolada know that he was planning to put all these new trees on other planets?" said Valentine. "That wouldn't do much to cool Lusitania."

"The descolada puts hunger in them," said Planter. "How can a virus know about starships?"

"How can a virus know about mothertrees and fathertrees, brothers and wives, infants and little mothers?" said Ender. "This is a very bright virus."

"Warmaker is the best example of my point," said Valentine. "His name suggests that he was deeply involved and successful in the last great war. Once again there's pressure to increase the number of trees. Yet Warmaker chose to turn this hunger to a new purpose, spreading new forests by reaching out to the stars instead of plunging into wars with other pequeninos."

"We were going to do it no matter what Warmaker said or did," said Planter. "Look at us. Warmaker's group was preparing to spread out and plant new forests on other worlds. But when they killed Father Quim, the rest of us were so filled with rage that we planned to go and punish them. Great slaughter, and again, trees would grow. Still doing what the descolada demanded. And now that humans have burned our forest, Warmaker's people are going to prevail after all. One way or another, we must spread out and propagate. We'll snatch up any excuse we can find. The descolada will have its way with us. We're tools, pathetically trying to find some way to convince ourselves that our actions are our own idea."

He sounded so hopeless. Ender couldn't think of anything to say that Valentine or he hadn't already said, to try to wean him away from his conclusion that pequenino life was unfree and meaningless.

So it was Ela who spoke next, and in a tone of calm speculation that seemed incongruous, as if she had forgotten the terrible anxiety that Planter was experiencing. Which was probably the case, as all this discussion had led her back to her own specialty. "It's hard to know which side the descolada would be on, if it were aware of all this," said Ela.

"Which side of what?" asked Valentine.

"Whether to induce global cooling by having more forests planted here, or to use that same instinct for propagation to have the pequeninos take the descolada out to other worlds. I mean, which would the virus makers have wanted most? To spread the virus or regulate the planet?"

"The virus probably wants both, and it's likely to get both," said Planter. "Warmaker's group will win control of the ships, no doubt. But either before or after, there'll be a war over it that leaves half the brothers dead. For all we know, the descolada is causing both things to happen."

"For all we know," said Ender.

"For all we know," said Planter, "we may be the descolada."

So, thought Ender, they are aware of that concern, despite our decision not to broach it with the pequeninos yet.

"Have you been talking to Quara?" demanded Ela.

"I talk to her every day," said Planter. "But what does she have to do with this?"

"She had the same idea. That maybe pequenino intelligence comes from the descolada."

"Do you think after all your talk about the descolada being intelligent that it hasn't occurred to us to wonder that?" said Planter. "And if it's true, what will you do then? Let all of your species die so that we can keep our little second-rate brains?"

Ender protested at once. "We've never thought of your brains as--"

"Haven't you?" said Planter. "Then why did you assume that we would only think of this possibility if some human told us?"

Ender had no good answer. He had to confess to himself that he had been thinking of the pequeninos as if they were children in some ways, to be protected. Worries had to be kept as secrets from them. It hadn't occurred to him that they were perfectly capable of discovering all the worst horrors on their own.

"And if our intelligence does come from the descolada, and you found a way to destroy it, what would we become then?" Planter looked at them, triumphant in his bitter victory. "Nothing but tree rats," he said.

"That's the second time you've used that term," said Ender. "What are tree rats?"

"That's what they were shouting," said Planter, "some of the men who killed the mothertree."

"There's no such animal," said Valentine.

"I know," said Planter. "Grego explained it to me. 'Tree rat' is a slang name for squirrels. He showed me a holo of one on his computer in jail."

"You went to visit Grego?" Ela was plainly horrified.

"I had to ask him why he tried to kill us all, and then why he tried to save us," said Planter.

"There!" cried Valentine triumphantly. "You can't tell me that what Grego and Miro did that night, stopping the mob from burning Rooter and Human-- you can't tell me that that was just the acting out of genetic forces!"

"But I never said that human behavior was meaningless," said Planter. "It's you that tried to comfort me with that idea. We know that you humans have your heroes. We pequeninos are the ones who are only tools of a galialogical virus."

"No," said Ender. "There are pequenino heroes, too. Rooter and Human, for instance."

"Heroes?" said Planter. "They acted as they did in order to win what they achieved-- their status as fathertrees. It was the hunger to reproduce. They might have looked like heroes to you humans, who only die once, but the death they suffered was really birth. There was no sacrifice."

"Your whole forest was heroic, then," said Ela. "You broke free from all the old channels and made a treaty with us that required you to change some of your most deeply-rooted customs."

"We wanted the knowledge and the machines and the power you humans had. What's heroic about a treaty in which all we have to do is stop killing you, and in return you give us a thousand-year boost in our technological development?"

"You aren't going to listen to any positive conclusion, are you," said Valentine.

Planter went on, ignoring her. "The only heroes in that story were Pipo and Libo, the humans who acted so bravely, even though they knew they would die. They had won their freedom from their genetic heritage. What piggy has ever done that on purpose?"

It stung Ender more than a little, to hear Planter use the term piggy for himself and his people. In recent years the term had stopped being quite as friendly and affectionate as it was when Ender first came; often it was used now as a demeaning word, and the people who worked with them usually used the term pequenino. What sort of self-hatred was Planter resorting to, in response to what he'd learned today?

"The brothertrees give their lives," said Ela, helpfully.

But Planter answered in scorn. "The brothertrees are not alive the way fathertrees are. They can't talk. They only obey. We tell them what to do, and they have no choice. Tools, not heroes."

"You can twist anything with the right story," said Valentine. "You can deny any sacrifice by claiming that it made the sufferer feel so good to do it that it really wasn't a sacrifice at all, but just another selfish act."

Suddenly Planter jumped from his chair. Ender was prepared for a replay of his earlier behavior, but he didn't circle the room. Instead he walked to Ela where she sat in her chair, and placed both his hands on her knees.

"I know a way to be a true hero," said Planter. "I know a way to act against the descolada. To reject it and fight it and hate it and help destroy it."

"So do I," said Ela.

"An experiment," said Planter.

She nodded. "To see if pequenino intelligence is really centered in the descolada, and not in the brain."

"I'll do it," said Planter.

"I would never ask you to."

"I know you wouldn't ask," said Planter. "I demand it for myself."

Ender was surprised to realize that in their own way, Ela and Planter were as close as Ender and Valentine, able to know each other's thoughts without explaining. Ender hadn't imagined that this would be possible between two people of different species; and yet, why shouldn't it be? Particularly when they worked together so closely in the same endeavor.

It had taken Ender a few moments to grasp what Planter and Ela were deciding between them; Valentine, who had not been working with them for years as Ender had, still didn't understand. "What's happening?" she asked. "What are they talking about?"

It was Ela who answered. "Planter is proposing that we purge one pequenino of all copies of the descolada virus, put him in a clean space where he can't be contaminated, and then see if he still has a mind."

"That can't be good science," said Valentine. "There are too many other variables. Aren't there? I thought the descolada was involved in every part of pequenino life."

"Lacking the descolada would mean that Planter would immediately get sick and then eventually die. What having the descolada did to Quim, lacking it will do to Planter."

"You can't mean to let him do it," said Valentine. "It won't prove anything. He might lose his mind because of illness. Fever makes people delirious."

"What else can we do?" asked Planter. "Wait until Ela finds a way to tame the virus, and only then find out that without it in its intelligent, virulent form, we are not pequeninos at all, but merely piggies? That we were only given the power of speech by the virus within us, and that when it was controlled, we lost everything and became nothing more than brothertrees? Do we find that out when you loose the virus-killer?"

"But it's not a serious experiment with a control--"

"It's a serious experiment, all right," said Ender. "The kind of experiment you perform when you don't give a damn about getting funding, you just need results and you need them now. The kind of experiment you perform when you have no idea what the results will be or even if you'll know how to interpret them, but there are a bunch of crazy pequeninos planning to get in starships and spread a planet-killing disease all over the galaxy so you've got to do something."

"It's the kind of experiment you perform," said Planter, "when you need a hero."

"When we need a hero?" asked Ender. "Or when you need to be a hero?"

"I wouldn't talk if I were you," said Valentine dryly. "You've done a few stints as a hero yourself over the centuries."

"It may not be necessary anyway," said Ela. "Quara knows a lot more about the descolada than she's telling. She may already know whether the intelligent adaptability of the descolada can be separated from its life-sustaining functions. If we could make a virus like that, we could test the effect of the descolada on pequenino intelligence without threatening the life of the subject."

"The trouble is," said Valentine, "Quara isn't any more likely to believe our story that the descolada is an artifact created by another species than Qing-jao was able to believe that the voice of her gods was just a genetically-caused obsessive-compulsive disorder."

"I'll do it," said Planter. "I will begin immediately because we have no time. Put me in a sterile environment tomorrow, and then kill all the descolada in my body using the chemicals you've got hidden away. The ones you mean to use on humans when the descolada adapts to the current suppressant you're using."

"You realize that it may be wasted," said Ela.

"Then it would truly be a sacrifice," said Planter.

"If you start to lose your mind in a way that clearly isn't related to your body's illness," said Ela, "we'll stop the experiment because we'll have the answer."

"Maybe," said Planter.

"You might well recover at that point."

"I don't care whether I recover," said Planter.

"We'll also stop it," said Ender, "if you start to lose your mind in a way that is related to your body's illness, because then we'll know that the experiment is useless and we wouldn't learn anything from it anyway."

"Then if I'm a coward, all I have to do is pretend to be mentally failing and my life will be saved," said Planter. "No, I forbid you to stop the experiment, no matter what. And if I keep my mental functions, you must let me continue to the end, to the death, because only if I keep my mind to the end will we know that our soul is not just an artifact of the descolada. Promise me!"

"Is this science or a suicide pact?" asked Ender. "Are you so despondent over discovering the probable role of the descolada in pequenino history that you simply want to die?"

Planter rushed to Ender, climbed his body, and pressed his nose against Ender's. "You liar!" he shouted.

"I just asked a question," whispered Ender.

"I want to be free!" shouted Planter. "I want the descolada out of my body and I never want it to come back! I want to use this to help free all the piggies so that we can be pequeninos in fact and not in name!"

Gently Ender pried him back. His nose ached from the violence of Planter's pressing.

"I want to make a sacrifice that proves that I'm free," said Planter, "not just acting out my genes. Not just trying for the third life."

"Even the martyrs of Christianity and Islam were willing to accept rewards in heaven for their sacrifice," said Valentine.

"Then they were all selfish pigs," said Planter. "That's what you say about pigs, isn't it? In Stark, in your common speech? Selfish pigs. Well, it's the right name for us piggies, isn't it! Our heroes were all trying to become fathertrees. Our brothertrees were failures from the start. The only thing we serve outside ourselves is the descolada. For all we know, the descolada might be ourselves. But I will be free. I will know what I am, without the descolada or my genes or anything except me."

"What you'll be is dead," said Ender.

"But free first," said Planter. "And the first of my people to be free."

After Wang-mu and Jane had told Master Han all that had transpired that day, after he had conversed with Jane about his own day's work, after the house had fallen silent in the darkness of the night, Wang-mu lay awake on her mat in the corner of Master Han's room, listening to his soft but insistent snoring as she thought over all that had been said that day.

There were so many ideas, and most of them were so far above her that she despaired of truly understanding them. Especially what Wiggin said about purposes. They were giving her credit for having come up with the solution to the problem of the descolada virus, and yet she couldn't take the credit because she hadn't meant to do it; she had thought she was just repeating Qing-jao's questions. Could she take credit for something she did by accident?

People should only be blamed or praised for what they meant to do. Wang-mu had always believed this instinctively; she didn't remember anyone ever telling it to her in so many words. The crimes that she was blaming Congress for were all deliberate-- genetically altering the people of Path to create the godspoken, and sending the M.D. Device to destroy the haven of the only other sentient species that they knew existed in the universe.

But was that what they meant to do, either? Maybe some of them, at least, thought that they were making the universe safe for humanity by destroying Lusitania-- from what Wang-mu had heard about the descolada, it could mean the end of all Earthborn life if it ever started spreading world to world among human beings. Maybe some of Congress, too, had decided to create the godspoken of Path in order to benefit all of humanity, but then put the OCD in their brains so that they couldn't get out of control and enslave all the inferior, "normal" humans. Maybe they all had good purposes in mind for the terrible things they did.

Certainly Qing-jao had a good purpose in mind, didn't she? So how could Wang-mu condemn her for her actions, when she thought she was obeying the gods?

Didn't everybody have some noble purpose in mind for their own actions? Wasn't everybody, in their own eyes, good?

Except me, thought Wang-mu. In my own eyes, I'm foolish and weak. But they spoke of me as if I were better than I ever thought. Master Han praised me, too. And those others spoke of Qing-jao with pity and scorn and I've felt those feelings toward her, too. Yet isn't Qing-jao acting nobly, and me basely? I betrayed my mistress. She has been loyal to her government and to her gods, which are real to her, though I no longer believe in them. How can I tell the good people from the bad, if the bad people all have some way of convincing themselves that they're trying to do good even though they're doing something terrible? And the good people can believe that they're actually very bad even though they're doing something good?

Maybe you can only do good if you think you're bad, and if you think you're good then you can only do bad.

But that paradox was too much for her. There'd be no sense in the world if you had to judge people by the opposite of how they tried to seem. Wasn't it possible for a good person also to try to seem good? And just because somebody claimed to be scum didn't mean that he wasn't scum. Was there any way to judge people, if you can't judge even by their purpose?

Was there any way for Wang-mu to judge even herself?

Half the time I don't even know the purpose of what I do. I came to this house because I was ambitious and wanted to be a secret maid to a rich godspoken girl. It was pure selfishness on my part, and pure generosity that led Qing-jao to take me in. And now here I am helping Master Han commit treason-- what is my purpose in that? I don't even know why I do what I do. How can I know what other people's true purposes are? There's no hope of ever knowing good from bad.

She sat up in lotus position on her mat and pressed her face into her hands. It was as if she felt herself pressed against a wall, but it was a wall that she made herself, and if she could only find a way to move it aside-- the way she could move her hands away from her face whenever she wanted-- then she could easily push through to the truth.

She moved her hands away. She opened her eyes. There was Master Han's terminal, across the room. There, today, she had seen the faces of Elanora Ribeira von Hesse and Andrew Wiggin. And Jane's face.

She remembered Wiggin telling her what the gods would be like. Real gods would want to teach you how to be just like them. Why would he say such a thing? How could he know what a god would be?

Somebody who wants to teach you how to know everything that they know and do everything that they do-- what he was really describing was parents, not gods.

Only there were plenty of parents who didn't do that. Plenty of parents who tried to keep their children down, to control them, to make slaves of them. Where she had grown up, Wang-mu had seen plenty of that.

So what Wiggin was describing wasn't parents, really. He was describing good parents. He wasn't telling her what the gods were, he was telling her what goodness was. To want other people to grow. To want other people to have all the good things that you have. And to spare them the bad things if you can. That was goodness.

What were the gods, then? They would want everyone else to know and have and be all good things. They would teach and share and train, but never force.

Like my parents, thought Wang-mu. Clumsy and stupid sometimes, like all people, but they were good. They really did look out for me. Even sometimes when they made me do hard things because they knew it would be good for me. Even sometimes when they were wrong, they were good. I can judge them by their purpose after all. Everybody calls their purpose good, but my parents' purposes really were good, because they meant all their acts toward me to help me grow wiser and stronger and better. Even when they made me do hard things because they knew I had to learn from them. Even when they caused me pain.

That was it. That's what the gods would be, if there were gods. They would want everyone else to have all that was good in life, just like good parents. But unlike parents or any other people, the gods would actually know what was good and have the power to cause good things to happen, even when nobody else understood that they were good. As Wiggin said, real gods would be smarter and stronger than anybody else. They would have all the intelligence and power that it was possible to have.

But a being like that-- who was someone like Wang-mu to judge a god? She couldn't understand their purposes even if they told her, so how could she ever know that they were good? Yet the other approach, to trust in them and believe in them absolutely-- wasn't that what Qing-jao was doing?

No. If there were gods, they would never act as Qing-jao thought they acted-- enslaving people, tormenting and humiliating them.

Unless torment and humiliation were good for them...

No! She almost cried aloud, and once again pressed her face into her hands, this time to keep silence.

I can only judge by what I understand. If as far as I can see, the gods that Qing-jao believes in are only evil, then yes, perhaps I'm wrong, perhaps I can't comprehend the great purpose they accomplish by making the godspoken into helpless slaves, or destroying whole species. But in my heart I have no choice but to reject such gods, because I can't see any good in what they're doing. Perhaps I'm so stupid and foolish that I will always be the enemy of the gods, working against their high and incomprehensible purposes. But I have to live my life according to what I understand, and what I understand is that there are no such gods as the ones the godspoken teach us about. If they

exist at all, they take pleasure in oppression and deception, humiliation and ignorance. They act to make other people smaller and themselves larger. Those would not be gods, then, even if they existed. They would be enemies. Devils.

The same with the beings, whoever they are, who made the descolada virus. Yes, they would have to be very powerful to make a tool like that. But they would also have to be heartless, selfish, arrogant beings, to think that all life in the universe was theirs to manipulate as they saw fit. To send the descolada out into the universe, not caring who it killed or what beautiful creatures it destroyed-- those could not be gods, either.

Jane, now-- Jane might be a god. Jane knew vast amounts of information and had great wisdom as well, and she was acting for the good of others, even when it would take her life-- even now, after her life was forfeit. And Andrew Wiggin, he might be a god, so wise and kind he seemed, and not acting for his own benefit but for the pequeninos. And Valentine, who called herself Demosthenes, she had worked to help other people find the truth and make wise decisions of their own. And Master Han, who was trying to do the right thing always, even when it cost him his daughter. Maybe even Ela, the scientist, even though she had not known all that she ought to have known-- for she was not ashamed to learn truth from a servant girl.

Of course they were not the sort of gods who lived off in the Infinite West, in the Palace of the Royal Mother. Nor were they gods in their own eyes-- they would laugh at her for even thinking of it. But compared to her, they were gods indeed. They were so much wiser than Wang-mu, and so much more powerful, and as far as she could understand their purposes, they were trying to help other people become as wise and powerful as possible. Even wiser and more powerful than they were themselves. So even though Wang-mu might be wrong, even though she might truly understand nothing at all about anything, nevertheless she knew that her decision to work with these people was the right one for her to make.

She could only do good as far as she understood what goodness was. And these people seemed to her to be doing good, while Congress seemed to be doing evil. So even though in the long run it might destroy her-- for Master Han was now an enemy of Congress, and might be arrested and killed, and her along with him-- still she would do it. She would never see real gods, but she could at least work to help those people who were as close to being gods as any real person could ever be.

And if the gods don't like it, they can poison me in my sleep or catch me on fire as I'm walking in the garden tomorrow or just make my arms and legs and head drop off my body like crumbs off a cake. If they can't manage to stop a stupid little servant girl like me, they don't amount to much anyway.

Chapter 15 -- LIFE AND DEATH

<Ender's coming to see us.>

<He comes and talks to me all the time.>

<And we can talk directly into his mind. But he insists on coming. He doesn't feel like he's talking to us unless he sees us. He has a harder time distinguishing between his own thoughts and the ones we put in his mind when we converse from a distance. So he's coming.>

<And you don't like this?>

<He wants us to tell him answers and we don't know any answers.>

<You know everything that the humans know. You got into space, didn't you? You don't even need their ansibles to talk from world to world.>

<They're so hungry for answers, these humans. They have so many questions.>

<We have questions, too, you know.>

<They want to know why, why, why. Or how. Everything all tied up into a nice neat bundle like a cocoon. The only time we do that is when we're metamorphosing a queen.>

<They like to understand everything. But so do we, you know.>

<Yes, you'd like to think you're just like the humans, wouldn't you? But you're not like Ender. Not like the humans. He has to know the cause of everything, he has to make a story about everything and we don't know any stories. We know memories. We know things that happen. But we don't know why they happen, not the way he wants us to.>

<Of course you do.>

<We don't even care why, the way these humans do. We find out as much as we need to know to accomplish something, but they always want to know more than they need to know. After they get something to work, they're still hungry to know why it works and why the cause of its working works.>

<Aren't we like that?>

<Maybe you will be, when the descolada stops interfering with you.>

<Or maybe we'll be like your workers.>

<If you are, you won't care. They're all very happy. It's intelligence that makes you unhappy. The workers are either hungry or not hungry. In pain or not in pain. They're never curious or disappointed or anguished or ashamed. And when it comes to things like that, these humans make you and me look like workers.>

<I think you just don't know us well enough to compare.>

<We've been inside your head and we've been inside Ender's head and we've been inside our own heads for a thousand generations and these humans make us look like we're asleep. Even when they're asleep they're not asleep. Earthborn animals do this thing, inside their brains-- a sort of mad firing-off of synapses, controlled insanity. While they're asleep. The part of their brain that records sight or sound, it's firing off every hour or two while they sleep, even when all the sights and sounds are complete random nonsense, their brains just keep on trying to assemble it into something sensible. They try to make stories out of it. It's complete random nonsense with no possible correlation to the real world, and yet they turn it into these crazy stories. And then they forget them. All that work, coming up with these stories, and when they wake up they forget almost all of them. But when they do remember, then they try to make stories about those crazy stories, trying to fit them into their real lives.>

<We know about their dreaming.>

<Maybe without the descolada, you'll dream, too.>

<Why should we want to? As you say, it's meaningless. Random firings of the synapses of the neurons in their brains.>

<They're practicing. They're doing it all the time. Coming up with stories. Making connections. Making sense out of nonsense.>

<What good is it, when it means nothing?>

<That's just it. They have a hunger we know nothing about. The hunger for answers. The hunger for making sense. The hunger for stories.>

<We have stories.>

<You remember deeds. They make up deeds. They change what their stories mean. They transform things so that the same memory can mean a thousand different things. Even from their dreams, sometimes they make up out of that randomness something that illuminates everything. Not one human being has anything like the kind of mind you have. The kind we have. Nothing as powerful. And their lives are so short, they die so fast. But in their century or so they come up with ten thousand meanings for every one that we discover.>

<Most of them wrong.>

<Even if the vast majority of them are wrong, even if ninety-nine of every hundred is stupid and wrong, out of ten thousand ideas that still leaves them with a hundred good ones. That's how they make up for being so stupid and having such short lives and small memories.>

<Dreams and madness.>

<Magic and mystery and philosophy.>

<You can't say that you never think of stories. What you've just been telling me is a story.>

<I know.>

<See? Humans do nothing you can't do.>

<Don't you understand? I got even this story from Ender's mind. It's his. And he got the seed of it from somebody else, something he read, and combined it with things he thought of until it made sense to him. It's all there in his head. While we are like you. We have a clear view of the world. I have no trouble finding my way through your mind. Everything orderly and sensible and clear. You'd be as much at ease in mine. What's in your head is reality, more or less, as best you understand it. But in Ender's mind, madness. Thousands of competing contradictory impossible visions that make no sense at all because they can't all fit together but they do fit together, he makes them fit together, this way today, that way tomorrow, as they're needed. As if he can make a new idea-machine inside his head for every new problem he faces. As if he conceives of a new universe to live in, every hour a new one, often hopelessly wrong and he ends up making mistakes and bad judgments, but sometimes so perfectly right that it opens things up like a miracle and I look through his eyes and see the world his new way and it changes everything. Madness, and then illumination. We knew everything there was to know before we met these humans, before we built our connection with Ender's mind. Now we discover that there are so many ways of knowing the same things that we'll never find them all.>

<Unless the humans teach you.>

<You see? We are scavengers also.>

<Ybu're a scavenger. We're supplicants.>

<If only they were worthy of their own mental abilities.>

<Aren't they?>

<They ore planning to blow you up, you remember. There's so much possibility in their minds, but they are still, after all, individually stupid and small-minded and half-blind and half-mad. There's still the ninety-nine percent of their stories that are hideously wrong and lead them into terrible errors. Sometimes we wish we could tame them, like the workers. We tried to, you know, with Ender. But we couldn't do it. Couldn't make a worker of him.>

<Why not?>

<Too stupid. Can't pay attention long enough. Human minds lack focus. They get bored and wander off. We had to build a bridge outside him, using the computer that he was most closely bonded with. Computers, now-- those things can pay attention. And their memory is neat, orderly, everything organized and findable.>

<But they don't dream.>

<No madness. Too bad.>

Valentine showed up unbidden at Olhado's door. It was early morning. He wouldn't go to work till afternoon-- he was a shift manager at the small brickworks. But he was already up and about, probably because his family was. The children were trooping out the door. I used to see this on television back in the ancient days, thought Valentine. The family going out the door in the morning, all at the same time, and Dad last of all with the briefcase. In their own way, my parents acted out that life. Never mind how deeply weird their children were. Never mind how after we paraded off to school in the morning, Peter and I went prowling through the nets, trying to take over the world through the use of pseudonyms. Never mind that Ender was torn away from the family as a little boy and never saw any of them again, even on his one visit to Earth-- except me. I think my parents still imagined they were doing it right, because they went through a ritual they had seen on TV.

And here it is again. The children bursting through the door. That boy must be Nimbo, the one who was with Grego at the confrontation with the mob. But here he is, just a cliché, child-- no one would guess that he had been part of that terrible night only a little while ago.

Mother gave them each a kiss. She was still a beautiful young woman, even with so many children. So ordinary, so like the cliché, and yet a remarkable woman, for she had married their father, hadn't she? She had seen past the deformity.

And Dad, not yet off to work, so he could stand there, watching them, patting them, kissing them, saying a few words. Light, clever, loving-- the predictable father. So, what's wrong with this picture? The dad is Olhado. He has no eyes. Just the silvery metal orbs punctuated with two lens apertures in the one eye, and the computer I/O outlet in the other. The kids don't seem to notice. I'm still not used to it.

"Valentine," he said, when he saw her.

"We need to talk," she said.

He ushered her inside. He introduced his wife, Jaqueline. Skin so black it was almost blue, laughing eyes, a beautiful wide smile that you wanted to dive into, it was so welcoming. She brought a limonada, ice-cold and sweating in the morning heat, and then discreetly withdrew. "You can stay," said Valentine. "This isn't all that private." But she didn't want to stay. She had work to do, she said. And she was gone.

"I've wanted to meet you for a long time," said Olhado.

"I was meetable," she said.

"You were busy."

"I have no business," said Valentine.

"You have Andrew's business."

"We're meeting now, anyway. I've been curious about you, Olhado. Or do you prefer your given name, Lauro?"

"In Milagre, your name is whatever people call you. I used to be Sule, for my middle name, Suleimdo."

"Solomon the wise."

"But after I lost my eyes, I was Olhado, then and forever."

"The watched one?"

"Olhado could mean that, yes, past participle of olhar, but in this case it means 'The guy with the eyes.'"

"And that's your name."

"My wife calls me Lauro," he said. "And my children call me Father."

"And I?"

"Whatever."

"Sule, then."

"Lauro, if you must. Sule makes me feel like I'm six."

"And reminds you of the time when you could see."

He laughed. "Oh, I can see now, thanks very much. I see very well."

"So Andrew says. That's why I've come to you. To find out what you see."

"Want me to play back a scene for you? A blast from the past? I have all my favorite memories stored on computer. I can plug in and play back anything you want. I have, for instance, Andrew's first visit in my family's home. I also have some top-flight family quarrels. Or do you prefer public events? Every Mayor's inaugural since I got these eyes? People do consult me about things like that-- what was worn, what was said. I often have trouble convincing them that my eyes record

vision, not sound-- just like their eyes. They think I should be a holographer and record it all for entertainment."

"I don't want to see what you see. I want to know what you think."

"Do you, now?"

"Yes, I do."

"I have no opinions. Not on anything you'd be interested in. I stay out of the family quarrels. I always have."

"And out of the family business. The only one of Novinha's children not to go into science."

"Science has brought everyone else so much happiness, it's hard to imagine why I wouldn't have gone into it."

"Not hard to imagine," said Valentine. And then, because she had found that brittle-sounding people will talk quite openly if goaded, she added a little barb. "I imagine that you simply didn't have the brains to keep up."

"Absolutely true," said Olhado. "I only have wit enough to make bricks."

"Really?" said Valentine. "But you don't make bricks."

"On the contrary. I make hundreds of bricks a day. And with everyone knocking holes in their houses to build the new chapel, I foresee a booming business in the near future."

"Lauro," said Valentine, "you don't make bricks. The laborers in your factory make bricks."

"And I, as manager, am not part of that?"

"Brickmakers make bricks. You make brickmakers."

"I suppose. Mostly I make brickmakers tired."

"You make other things," said Valentine. "Children."

"Yes," said Olhado, and for the first time in the conversation he relaxed. "I do that. Of course, I have a partner."

"A gracious and beautiful woman."

"I looked for perfection, and found something better." It wasn't just a line of patter. He meant it. And now the brittleness was gone, the wariness too. "You have children. A husband."

"A good family. Maybe almost as good as yours. Ours lacks only the perfect mother, but the children will recover from that."

"To hear Andrew talk about you, you're the greatest human being who ever lived."

"Andrew is very sweet. He could also get away with saying such things because I wasn't here."

"Now you are here," said Olhado. "Why?"

"It happens that worlds and species of ramen are at a cusp of decision, and the way events have turned out, their future depends in large part on your family. I don't have time to discover things in a leisurely way-- I don't have time to understand the family dynamics, why Grego can pass from monster to hero in a single night, how Miro can be both suicidal and ambitious, why Quara is willing to let the pequeninos die for the descolada's sake--"

"Ask Andrew. He understands them all. I never could."

"Andrew is in his own little hell right now. He feels responsible for everything. He's done his best, but Quim is dead, and the one thing your mother and Andrew both agree on is that somehow it's Andrew's fault. Your mother's leaving him has torn him up."

"I know."

"I don't even know how to console him. Or even which, as his loving sister, to hope for-- that she'll come back into his life, or leave him forever."

Olhado shrugged. All the brittleness was back.

"Do you really not care?" asked Valentine. "Or have you decided not to care?"

"Maybe I decided long ago, and now I really don't."

Part of being a good interviewer, too, is knowing when to be silent. Valentine waited.

But Olhado was also good at waiting. Valentine almost gave up and said something. She even toyed with the idea of confessing failure and leaving.

Then he spoke. "When they replaced my eyes, they also took out the tear ducts. Natural tears would interfere with the industrial lubricants they put in my eyes. "

"Industrial?"

"My little joke," said Olhado. "I seem to be very dispassionate all the time, because my eyes never well up with tears. And people can't read my expressions. It's funny, you know. The actual eyeball doesn't have any ability to change shape and show an expression. It just sits there. Yes, your eyes dart around-- they either keep steady eye contact or look down or up-- but my eyes do that, too."

They still move with perfect symmetry. They still point in the direction I'm looking. But people can't stand to look at them. So they look away. They don't read the expressions on my face. And therefore they think there are no expressions. My eyes still sting and redden and swell a little at times when I would have cried, if I still had tears."

"In other words," said Valentine, "you do care."

"I always cared," he said. "Sometimes I thought I was the only one who understood, even though half the time I didn't know what it was that I was understanding. I withdrew and watched, and because I didn't have any personal ego on the line in the family quarrels, I could see more clearly than any of them. I saw the lines of power-- Mother's absolute dominance even though Marcoa beat her when he was angry or drunk. Miro, thinking it was Marcoa he was rebelling against, when always it was Mother. Grego's meanness-- his way of handling fear. Quara, absolutely contrary by nature, doing whatever she thought the people who mattered to her didn't want her to do. Ela, the noble martyr-- what in the world would she be, if she couldn't suffer? Holy, righteous Quim, finding God as his father, on the premise that the best father is the invisible kind who never raises his voice."

"You saw all this as a child?"

"I'm good at seeing things. We passive, unbelonging observers always see better. Don't you think?"

Valentine laughed. "Yes, we do. The same role, then, you think? You and I, both historians?"

"Till your brother came. From the moment he walked in the door, it was obvious that he saw and understood everything, just the way I saw it. It was exhilarating. Because of course I had never actually believed my own conclusions about my family. I never trusted my own judgments. Obviously no one saw things the way I did, so I must be wrong. I even thought that I saw things so peculiarly because of my eyes. That if I had real eyes I would have seen things Miro's way. Or Mother's."

"So Andrew confirmed your judgments."

"More than that. He acted on them. He did something about them."

"Oh?"

"He was here as a speaker for the dead. But from the moment he walked in the door, he took-- he took--"

"Over?"

"Took responsibility. For change. He saw all the sicknesses I saw, but he started healing them as best he could. I saw how he was with Grego, firm but kind. With Quara, responding to what she

really wanted instead of what she claimed to want. With Quim, respecting the distance he wanted to keep. With Miro, with Ela, with Mother, with everybody."

"With you?"

"Making me part of his life. Connecting with me. Watching me jack into my eye and still talking to me like a person. Do you know what that meant to me?"

"I can guess."

"Not the part about me. I was a hungry little kid, I'll admit; the first kind person could have conned me, I'm sure. It's what he did about us all. It's how he treated us all differently, and yet remained himself. You've got to think about the men in my life. Marcao, who we thought was our father-- I had no idea who he was. All I ever saw was the liquor in him when he was drunk, and the thirst when he was sober. Thirst for alcohol but also a thirst for respect that he could never get. And then he dropped over dead. Things got better at once. Still not good, but better. I thought, the best father is the one who isn't there. Only that wasn't true, either, was it? Because my real father, Libo, the great scientist, the martyr, the hero of research, the love of my mother's life-- he had sired all these delightful children on my mother, he could see the family in torment, and yet he did nothing."

"Your mother didn't let him, Andrew said."

"That's right-- and one must always do things Mother's way, mustn't one?"

"Novinha is a very imposing woman."

"She thinks she's the only one in the world ever to suffer," said Olhado. "I say that without rancor. I have simply observed that she is so full of pain, she's incapable of taking anyone else's pain seriously."

"Try saying something rancorous next time. It might be more kind."

Olhado looked surprised. "Oh, you're judging me? Is this motherhood solidarity or something? Children who speak ill of their mothers must be slapped down? But I assure you, Valentine, I meant it. No rancor. No grudges. I know my mother, that's all. You said you wanted me to tell you what I saw-- that's what I see. That's what Andrew saw, too. All that pain. He's drawn to it. Pain sucks him like a magnet. And Mother had so much she almost sucked him dry. Except that maybe you can't suck Andrew dry. Maybe the well of compassion inside him is bottomless."

His passionate speech about Andrew surprised her. And pleased her, too. "You say Quim turned to God for the perfect invisible father. Who did you turn to? Not someone invisible, I think."

"No, not someone invisible."

Valentine studied his face in silence.

"I see everything in bas-relief," said Olhado. "My depth perception is very poor. If we'd put a lens in each eye instead of both in one, the binocularity would be much improved. But I wanted to have the jack. For the computer link. I wanted to be able to record the pictures, to be able to share them. So I see in bas-relief. As if everybody were a slightly rounded cardboard cutout, sliding across a flat painted background. In a way it makes everybody seem so much closer together. Sliding over each other like sheets of paper, rubbing on each other as they pass."

She listened, but said nothing for a while longer.

"Not someone invisible," he said, echoing, remembering. "That's right. I saw what Andrew did in our family. I saw that he came in and listened and watched and understood who we were, each individual one of us. He tried to discover our need and then supply it. He took responsibility for other people and it didn't seem to matter to him how much it cost him. And in the end, while he could never make the Ribeira family normal, he gave us peace and pride and identity. Stability. He married Mother and was kind to her. He loved us all. He was always there when we wanted him, and seemed unhurt by it when we didn't. He was firm with us about expecting civilized behavior, but never indulged his whims at our expense. And I thought: This is so much more important than science. Or politics, either. Or any particular profession or accomplishment or thing you can make. I thought: If I could just make a good family, if I could just learn to be to other children, their whole lives, what Andrew was, coming so late into ours, then that would mean more in the long run, it would be a finer accomplishment than anything I could ever do with my mind or my hands.

"So you're a career father," said Valentine.

"Who works at a brick factory to feed and clothe the family. Not a brickmaker who also has kids. Lini also feels the same way."

"Lini?"

"Jaqueline. My wife. She followed her own road to the same place. We do what we must to earn our place in the community, but we live for the hours at home. For each other, for the children. It will never get me written up in the history books."

"You'd be surprised," said Valentine.

"It's a boring life, to read about," said Olhado. "Not to live, though."

"So the secret that you protect from your tormented siblings is-- happiness."

"Peace. Beauty. Love. All the great abstractions. I may see them in bas-relief, but I see them up close."

"And you learned it from Andrew. Does he know?"

"I think so," said Olhado. "Do you want to know my most closely guarded secret? When we're alone together, just him and me, or me and Lini and him-- when we're alone, I call him Papa, and he calls me Son."

Valentine made no effort to stop her tears from flowing, as if they flowed half for him and half for her. "So Ender does have children, after all," she said.

"I learned how to be a father from him, and I'm a damned good one."

Valentine leaned forward. It was time to get down to business. "That means that you, more than any of the others, stand to lose something truly beautiful and fine if we don't succeed in our endeavors."

"I know," said Olhado. "My choice was a selfish one in the long run. I'm happy, but I can't do anything to help save Lusitania."

"Wrong," said Valentine. "You just don't know yet."

"What can I do?"

"Let's talk a while longer, and see if we can find out. And if it's all right with you, Lauro, your Jaqueline should stop eavesdropping from the kitchen now, and come on in and join us."

Bashfully, Jaqueline came in and sat beside her husband. Valentine liked the way they held hands. After so many children-- it reminded herself of holding hands with Jakt, and how glad it made her feel.

"Lauro," she said, "Andrew tells me that when you were younger, you were the brightest of all the Ribeira children. That you spoke to him of wild philosophical speculations. Right now, Lauro, my adoptive nephew, it is wild philosophy we need. Has your brain been on hold since you were a child? Or do you still think thoughts of great profundity?"

"I have my thoughts," said Olhado. "But I don't even believe them myself."

"We're working on faster-than-light flight, Lauro. We're working on discovering the soul of a computer entity. We're trying to rebuild an artificial virus that has self-defense capabilities built into it. We're working on magic and miracles. So I'd be glad of any insights you can give me on the nature of life and reality."

"I don't even know what ideas Andrew was talking about," said Olhado. "I quit studying physics, I--"

"If I want studies, I'll read books. So let me tell you what we told a very bright Chinese servant girl on the world of Path: Let me know your thoughts, and I'll decide for myself what's useful and what isn't."

"How? You're not a physicist either."

Valentine walked to the computer waiting quietly in the corner. "May I turn this on?"

"Pois nao," he said. Of course.

"Once it's on, Jane will be with us."

"Ender's personal program."

"The computer entity whose soul we're trying to locate."

"Ah," he said. "Maybe you should be telling me things."

"I already know what I know. So start talking. About those ideas you had as a child, and what has become of them since."

Quara had a chip on her shoulder from the moment Miro entered the room. "Don't bother," she said.

"Don't bother what?"

"Don't bother telling me my duty to humanity or to the family-- two separate, non-overlapping groups, by the way."

"Is that what I came for?" asked Miro.

"Ela sent you to persuade me to tell her how to castrate the descolada."

Miro tried a little humor. "I'm no biologist. Is that possible?"

"Don't be cute," said Quara. "If you cut out their ability to pass information from one virus to another, it's like cutting out their tongues and their memory and everything that makes them intelligent. If she wants to know this stuff, she can study what I studied. It only took me five years of work to get there."

"There's a fleet coming."

"So you are an emissary."

"And the descolada may figure out how to--"

She interrupted him, finished his sentence. "Circumvent all our strategies to control it, I know."

Miro was annoyed, but he was used to people getting impatient with his slowness of speech and cutting him off. And at least she had guessed what he was driving at. "Any day," he said. "Ela feels time pressure."

"Then she should help me learn to talk to the virus. Persuade it to leave us alone. Make a treaty, like Andrew did with the pequeninos. Instead, she's cut me off from the lab. Well, two can play that game. She cuts me off, I cut her off."

"You were telling secrets to the pequeninos."

"Oh, yes, Mother and Ela, the guardians of truth! They get to decide who knows what. Well, Miro, let me tell you a secret. You don't protect the truth by keeping other people from knowing it."

"I know that," said Miro.

"Mother completely screwed up our family because of her damned secrets. She wouldn't even marry Libo because she was determined to keep a stupid secret, which if he'd known might have saved his life."

"I know," said Miro.

This time he spoke with such vehemence that Quara was taken aback. "Oh, well, I guess that was a secret that bothered you more than it did me. But then you should be on my side in this, Miro. Your life would have been a lot better, all our lives would have been, if Mother had only married Libo and told him all her secrets. He'd still be alive, probably."

Very neat solutions. Tidy little might-have-beens. And false as hell. If Libo had married Novinha, he wouldn't have married Bruxinha, Ouanda's mother, and thus Miro wouldn't have fallen unsuspectingly in love with his own half-sister because she would never have existed at all. That was far too much to say, however, with his halting speech. So he confined himself to saying "Ouanda wouldn't have been born," and hoped she would make the connections.

She considered for a moment, and the connection was made. "You have a point," she said. "And I'm sorry. I was only a child then."

"It's all past," said Miro.

"Nothing is past," said Quara. "We're still acting it out, over and over again. The same mistakes, again and again. Mother still thinks that you keep people safe by keeping secrets from them."

"And so do you," said Miro.

Quara thought about that for a moment. "Ela was trying to keep the pequeninos from knowing that she was working on destroying the descolada. That's a secret that could have destroyed the whole pequenino society, and they weren't even being consulted. They were preventing the pequeninos

from protecting themselves. But what I'm keeping secret is-- maybe-- a way to intellectually castrate the descolada-- to make it half-alive."

"To save humanity without destroying the pequeninos."

"Humans and pequeninos, getting together to compromise on how to wipe out a helpless third species!"

"Not exactly helpless."

She ignored him. "Just the way Spain and Portugal got the Pope to divide up the world between their Catholic Majesties back in the old days right after Columbus. A line on a map, and poof-- there's Brazil, speaking Portuguese instead of Spanish. Never mind that nine out of ten Indians had to die, and the rest lose all their rights and power for centuries, even their very languages--"

It was Miro's turn to become impatient. "The descolada isn't the Indians."

"It's a sentient species."

"It isn't," said Miro.

"Oh?" asked Quara. "And how are you so sure? Where's your certificate in microbiology and xenogenetics? I thought your studies were all in xenology. And thirty years out of date."

Miro didn't answer. He knew that she was perfectly aware of how hard he had worked to bring himself up to speed since he got back here. It was an ad hominem attack and a stupid appeal to authority. It wasn't worth answering. So he sat there and studied her face. Waiting for her to get back into the realm of reasonable discussion.

"All right," she said. "That was a low blow. But so is sending you to try to crack open my files. Trying to play on my sympathies."

"Sympathies?" asked Miro.

"Because you're a-- because you're--"

"Damaged," said Miro. He hadn't thought of the fact that pity complicated everything. But how could he help it? Whatever he did, it was a cripple doing it.

"Well, yes."

"Ela didn't send me," said Miro.

"Mother, then."

"Not Mother."

"Oh, you're a freelance meddler? Or are you going to tell me that all of humanity has sent you? Or are you a delegate of an abstract value? 'Decency sent me.'"

"If it did, it sent me to the wrong place."

She reeled back as if she had been slapped.

"Oh, am I the indecent one?"

"Andrew sent me," said Miro.

"Another manipulator."

"He would have come himself."

"But he was so busy, doing his own meddling. Nossa Senhora, he's a minister, mixing himself up in scientific matters that are so far above his head that--"

"Shut up," said Miro.

He spoke forcefully enough that she actually did fall silent-- though she wasn't happy about it.

"You know what Andrew is," Miro said. "He wrote the Hive Queen and--"

"--the Hive Queen and the Hegemon and the Life of Human."

"Don't tell me he doesn't know anything."

"No. I know that isn't true," said Quara. "I just get so angry. I feel like everybody's against me."

"Against what you're doing, yes," said Miro.

"Why doesn't anybody see things my way?"

"I see things your way," said Miro.

"Then how can you--"

"I also see things their way."

"Yes. Mr. Impartial. Make me feel like you understand me. The sympathetic approach."

"Planter is dying to try to learn information you probably already know."

"Not true. I don't know whether pequenino intelligence comes from the virus or not."

"A truncated virus could be tested without killing him."

"Truncated-- is that the word of choice? It'll do. Better than castrated. Cutting off all the limbs. And the head, too. Nothing but the trunk left. Powerless. Mindless. A beating heart, to no purpose."

"Planter is--"

"Planter's in love with the idea of being a martyr. He wants to die."

"Planter is asking you to come and talk to him."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Come on, Miro. They send a cripple to me. They want me to come talk to a dying pequenino. As if I'd betray a whole species because a dying friend-- a volunteer, too-- asks me with his dying breath."

"Quara."

"Yes, I'm listening."

"Are you?"

"Disse que sim!" she snapped. I said I am.

"You might be right about all this."

"How kind of you."

"But so might they."

"Aren't you the impartial one."

"You say they were wrong to make a decision that might kill the pequeninos without consulting them. Aren't you--"

"Doing the same thing? What should I do, do you think? Publish my viewpoint and take a vote? A few thousand humans, millions of pequeninos on your side-- but there are trillions of descolada viruses. Majority rule. Case closed."

"The descolada is not sentient," said Miro.

"For your information," said Quara, "I know all about this latest ploy. Ela sent me the transcripts. Some Chinese girl on a backwater colony planet who doesn't know anything about xenogenetics comes up with a wild hypothesis, and you all act as if it were already proved."

"So-- prove it false."

"I can't. I've been shut out of the lab. You prove it true."

"Occam's razor proves it true. Simplest explanation that fits the facts."

"Occam was a medieval old fart. The simplest explanation that fits the facts is always, God did it. Or maybe-- that old woman down the road is a witch. She did it. That's all this hypothesis is-- only you don't even know where the witch is."

"The descolada is too sudden."

"It didn't evolve, I know. Had to come from somewhere else. Fine. Even if it's artificial, that doesn't mean it isn't sentient now."

"It's trying to kill us. It's varelse, not raman."

"Oh, yes, Valentine's hierarchy. Well, how do I know that the descolada is the varelse, and we're the ramen? As far as I can tell, intelligence is intelligence. Varelse is just the term Valentine invented to mean Intelligence - that - we've - decided - to - kill, and raman means Intelligence - that - we - haven't - decided - to - kill - yet."

"It's an unreasoning, uncompassionate enemy."

"Is there another kind?"

"The descolada doesn't have respect for any other life. It wants to kill us. It already rules the pequeninos. All so it can regulate this planet and spread to other worlds."

For once, she had let him finish a long statement. Did it mean she was actually listening to him?

"I'll grant you part of Wang-mu's hypothesis," said Quara. "It does make sense that the descolada is regulating the gaialogy of Lusitania. In fact, now that I think about it, it's obvious. It explains most of the conversations I've observed-- the information-- passing from one virus to another. I figure it should take only a few months for a message to get to every virus on the planet-- it would work. But just because the descolada is running the gaialogy doesn't mean that you've proved it's not sentient. In fact, it could go the other way-- the descolada, by taking responsibility for regulating the gaialogy of a whole world, is showing altruism. And protectiveness, too-- if we saw a mother lion lashing out at an intruder in order to protect her young, we'd admire her. That's all the descolada is doing-- lashing out against humans in order to protect her precious responsibility. A living planet."

"A mother lion protecting her cubs."

"I think so."

"Or a rabid dog, devouring our babies."

Quara paused. Thought for a moment. "Or both. Why can't it be both? The descolada's trying to regulate a planet here. But humans are getting more and more dangerous. To her, we're the rabid dog. We root out the plants that are part of her control system, and we plant our own, unresponsive plants. We make some of the pequeninos behave strangely and disobey her. We burn a forest at a time when she's trying to build more. Of course she wants to get rid of us!"

"So she's out to destroy us."

"It's her privilege to try! When will you see that the descolada has rights?"

"Don't we? Don't the pequeninos?"

Again she paused. No immediate counterargument. It gave him hope that she might actually be listening.

"You know something, Miro?"

"What?"

"They were right to send you."

"Were they?"

"Because you're not one of them."

That's true enough, thought Miro. I'll never be "one of" anything again.

"Maybe we can't talk to the descolada. And maybe it really is just an artifact. A biological robot acting out its programming. But maybe it isn't. And they're keeping me from finding out."

"What if they open the lab to you?"

"They won't," said Quara. "If you think they will, you don't know Ela and Mother. They've decided that I'm not to be trusted, and so that's that. Well, I've decided they're not to be trusted, either."

"Thus whole species die for family pride."

"Is that all you think this is, Miro? Pride? I'm holding out because of nothing nobler than a petty quarrel?"

"Our family has a lot of pride."

"Well, no matter what you think, I'm doing this out of conscience, no matter whether you want to call it pride or stubbornness or anything else."

"I believe you," said Miro.

"But do I believe you when you say that you believe me? We're in such a tangle." She turned back to her terminal. "Go away now, Miro. I told you I'd think about it, and I will."

"Go see Planter."

"I'll think about that, too." Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. "He is my friend, you know. I'm not inhuman. I'll go see him, you can be sure of that. "

"Good."

He started for the door.

"Miro," she said.

He turned, waited.

"Thanks for not threatening to have that computer program of yours crack my files open if I didn't open them myself."

"Of course not," he said.

"Andrew would have threatened that, you know. Everybody thinks he's such a saint, but he always bullies people who don't go along with him."

"He doesn't threaten."

"I've seen him do it."

"He warns."

"Oh. Excuse me. Is there a difference?"

"Yes," said Miro.

"The only difference between a warning and a threat is whether you're the person giving it or the person receiving it," said Quara.

"No," said Miro. "The difference is how the person means it."

"Go away," she said. "I've got work to do, even while I'm thinking. So go away."

He opened the door.

"But thanks," she said.

He closed the door behind him.

As he walked away from Quara's place, Jane immediately piped up in his ear. "I see you decided against telling her that I broke into her files before you even came."

"Yes, well," said Miro. "I feel like a hypocrite, for her to thank me for not threatening to do what I'd already done."

"I did it."

"We did it. You and me and Ender. A sneaky group."

"Will she really think about it?"

"Maybe," said Miro. "Or maybe she's already thought about it and decided to cooperate and was just looking for an excuse. Or maybe she's already decided against ever cooperating, and she just said this nice thing at the end because she's sorry for me."

"What do you think she'll do?"

"I don't know what she'll do," said Miro. "I know what I'll do. I'll feel ashamed of myself every time I think about how I let her think that I respected her privacy, when we'd already pillaged her files. Sometimes I don't think I'm a very good person."

"You notice she didn't tell you that she's keeping her real findings outside the computer system, so the only files I can reach are worthless junk. She hasn't exactly been frank with you, either."

"Yes, but she's a fanatic with no sense of balance or proportion."

"That explains everything."

"Some traits just run in the family," said Miro.

The hive queen was alone this time. Perhaps exhausted from something-- mating? Producing eggs? She spent all her time doing this, it seemed. She had no choice. Now that workers had to be used to patrol the perimeter of the human colony, she had to produce even more than she had planned. Her offspring didn't have to be educated-- they entered adulthood quickly, having all the

knowledge that any other adult had. But the process of conception, egg-laying, emergence, and cocooning still took time. Weeks for each adult. She produced a prodigious number of young, compared to a single human. But compared to the town of Milagre, with more than a thousand women of childbearing age, the bugger colony had only one producing female.

It had always bothered Ender, made him feel uneasy to know that there was only one queen. What if something happened to her? But then, it made the hive queen uncomfortable to think of human beings having only a bare handful of children-- what if something happened to them? Both species practiced a combination of nurturance and redundancy to protect their genetic heritage. Humans had a redundancy of parents, and then nurtured the few offspring. The hive queen had a redundancy of offspring, who then nurtured the parent. Each species had found its own balance of strategy.

<Why are you bothering us about this?>

"Because we're at a dead end. Because everybody else is trying, and you have as much at stake as we do."

<Do I?>

"The descolada threatens you as much as it threatens us. Someday you probably aren't going to be able to control it, and then you're gone."

<But it's not the descolada you're asking me about.>

"No." It was the problem of faster-than-light flight. Grego had been wracking his brains. In jail there was nothing else for him to think about. The last time Ender had spoken with him, he wept-- as much from exhaustion as frustration. He had covered reams of papers with equations, spreading them all over the secure room that was used as a cell. "Don't you care about faster-than-light flight?"

<It would be very nice.>

The mildness of her response almost hurt, it so deeply disappointed him. This is what despair is like, he thought. Quara a brick wall on the nature of descolada intelligence. Planter dying of descolada deprivation. Han Fei-tzu and Wang-mu struggling to duplicate years of higher study in several fields, all at once. Grego worn out. And nothing to show for it.

She must have heard his anguish as clearly as if he had howled it.

<Don't.>

<Don't.>

"You've done it," he said. "It must be possible."

<We've never traveled faster than light.>

"You projected an action across light-years. You found me."

<You found us, Ender.>

"Not so," he said. "I never even knew we had made mental contact until I found the message you had left for me." It had been the moment of greatest strangeness in his life, to stand on an alien world and see a model, a replication of the landscape that had existed in only one other place-- the computer on which he had played his personalized version of the Fantasy Game. It was like having a total stranger come up to you and tell you your dream from the night before. They had been inside his head. It made him afraid, but it also excited him. For the first time in his life, he felt known. Not known of-- he was famous throughout humanity, and in those days his fame was all positive, the greatest hero of all time. Other people knew of him. But with this bugger artifact, he discovered for the first time that he was known.

<Think, Ender. Yes, we reached out toward our enemy, but we weren't looking for you. We were looking for someone like us. A network of minds linked together, with a central mind controlling it. We find each other's minds without trying, because we recognize the pattern. Finding a sister is like finding oneself.>

"How did you find me, then?"

<We never thought about how. We only did it. Found a hot bright source. A network, but very strange, with shifting membership. And at the center of it, not something like us, but just another-- common one. You. But with such intensity. Focused into the network, toward the other humans. Focused inward on your computer game. And focused outward, beyond all, on us. Searching for us.>

"I wasn't searching for you. I was studying you." Watching every vid they had at the Battle School, trying to understand the way the bugger mind worked. "I was imagining you."

<So we say. Searching for us. Imagining us. That's how we search for each other. So you were calling us.>

"And that was all?"

<No, no. You were so strange. We didn't know what you were. We couldn't read anything in you. Your vision was so limited. Your ideas shifted so rapidly, and you thought of only one thing at a time. And the network around you kept shifting so much, each member's connection with you waxing and waning over time, sometimes very quickly-->

He was having trouble making sense of what they were saying. What kind of network was he connected to?

<The other soldiers. Your computer.>

"I wasn't connected. They were my soldiers, that's all."

<How do you think we're connected? Do you see any wires?>

"But humans are individuals, not like your workers."

<Many queens, many workers, changing back and forth, very confusing. Terrible, frightening time. What were these monsters that had wiped out our colony ship? What kind of creature? You were so strange we couldn't imagine you at all. We could only feel you when you were searching for us.>

Not helpful at all. Nothing to do with faster-than-light flight. It all sounded like mumbo-jumbo, not like science at all. Nothing that Grego could express mathematically.

<Yes, that's right. We don't do this like science. Not like technology. No numbers or even thought. We found you like bringing forth a new queen. Like starting a new hive.>

Ender didn't understand how establishing an ansible link with his brain could be like hatching out a new queen. "Explain it to me."

<We don't think about it. We just do it.>

"But what are you doing when you do it?"

<What we always do.>

"And what do you always do?"

<How do you make your penis fill with blood to mate, Ender? How do you make your pancreas secrete enzymes? How do you switch on puberty? How do you focus your eyes?>

"Then remember what you do, and show it to me."

<You forget that you don't like this, when we show you through our eyes.>

It was true. She had tried only a couple of times, when he was very young and had first discovered her cocoon. He simply couldn't cope with it, couldn't make sense of it. Flashes, a few glimpses were clear, but it was so disorienting that he panicked, and probably fainted, though he was alone and couldn't be sure what had happened, clinically speaking.

"If you can't tell me, we have to do something."

<Are you like Planter? Trying to die?>

"No. I'll tell you to stop. It didn't kill me before."

<We'll try-- something in between. Something milder. We'll remember, and tell you what's happening. Show you bits. Protect you. Safe.>

"Try, yes."

She gave him no time to reflect or prepare. At once he felt himself seeing out of compound eyes, not many lenses with the same vision, but each lens with its own picture. It gave him the same vertiginous feeling as so many years before. But this time he understood a little better-- in part because she was making it less intense than before, and in part because he knew something about the hive queen now, about what she was doing to him.

The many different visions were what each of the workers was seeing, as if each were a single eye connected to the same brain. There was no hope of Ender making sense of so many images at once.

<We'll show you one. The one that matters.>

Most of the visions dropped out immediately. Then, one by one, the others were sorted out. He imagined that she must have some organizing principle for the workers. She could disregard all those who weren't part of the queen-making process. Then, for Ender's sake, she had to sort through even the ones who were part of it, and that was harder, because usually she could sort the visions by task rather than by the individual workers. At last, though, she was able to show him a primary image and he could focus on it, ignoring the flickers and flashes of peripheral visions.

A queen being hatched. She had shown him this before, in a carefully-planned vision when he had first met her, when she was trying to explain things to him. Now, though, it wasn't a sanitized, carefully orchestrated presentation. The clarity was gone. It was murky, distracted, real. It was memory, not art.

<You see we have the queen-body. We know she's a queen because she starts reaching out for workers, even as a larva.>

"So you can talk to her?"

<She's very stupid. Like a worker.>

"She doesn't grow her intelligence until cocooning?"

<No. She has her-- like your brain. The memory-think. It's just empty.>

"So you have to teach her."

<What good would teaching do? The thinker isn't there. The found thing. The binder-together.>

"I don't know what you're talking about."

<Stop trying to look and think, then. This isn't done with eyes.>

"Then stop showing me anything, if it depends on another sense. Eyes are too important to humans; if I see anything it'll mask out anything but clear speech and I don't think there's much of that at a queen-making."

<How's this?>

"I'm still seeing something."

<Your brain is turning it into seeing.>

"Then explain it. Help me make sense of it."

<It's the way we feel each other. We're finding the reaching-out place in the queen-body. The workers all have it, too, but all it reaches for is the queen and when it finds her all the reaching is over. The queen never stops reaching. Calling.>

"So then you find her?"

<We know where she is. The queen-body. The worker-caller. The memory-holder.>

"Then what are you searching for?"

<The us-thing. The binder. The meaning-maker.>

"You mean there's something else? Something besides the queen's body?"

<Yes, of course. The queen is just a body, like the workers. Didn't you know this?>

"No, I never saw it."

<Can't see it. Not with eyes.>

"I didn't know to look for anything else. I saw the making of the queen when you first showed it to me years ago. I thought I understood then."

<We thought you did too.>

"So if the queen's just a body, who are you?"

<We're the hive queen. And all the workers. We come and make one person out of all. The queen-body, she obeys us like the worker-bodies. We hold them all together, protect them, let them work perfectly as each is needed. We're the center. Each of us.>

"But you've always talked as if you were the hive queen."

<We are. Also all the workers. We're all together.>

"But this center-thing, this binder-together--"

<We call it to come and take the queen-body, so she can be wise, our sister.>

"You call it. What is it?"

<The thing we call.>

"Yes, what is it?"

<What are you asking? It's the called-thing. We call it.>

It was almost unbearably frustrating. So much of what the hive queen did was instinctive. She had no language and so she had never had a need to develop clear explanations of that which had never needed explaining till now. So he had to help her find a way to clarify what he couldn't perceive directly.

"Where do you find it?"

<It hears us calling and comes.>

"But how do you call?"

<As you called us. We imagine the thing which it must become. The pattern of the hive. The queen and the workers and the binding together. Then one comes who understands the pattern and can hold it. We give the queen-body to it.>

"So you're calling some other creature to come and take possession of the queen."

<To become the queen and the hive and all. To hold the pattern we imagined.>

"So where does it come from?"

<Wherever it was when it felt us calling.>

"But where is that?"

<Not here.>

"Fine, I believe you. But where does it come from?"

<Can't think of the place.>

"You forget?"

<We mean that the place where it is can't be thought of. If we could think of the place then they would already have thought of themselves and none of them would need to take the pattern we show.>

"What kind of thing is this binder-together?"

<Can't see it. Can't know it until it finds the pattern and then when it's there it's like us.>

Ender couldn't help shuddering. All this time he had thought that he was speaking to the hive queen herself. Now he realized that the thing that talked to him in his mind was only using that body the way it used the buggers. Symbiosis. A controlling parasite, possessing the whole hive queen system, using it.

<No. This is ugly, the terrible thing you're thinking. We aren't another thing. We're this thing. We are the hive queen, just the way you're the body. You say, My body, and yet you are your body, but you're also possessor of the body. The hive queen is ourself, this body is me, not something else inside. I. I wasn't anything until I found the imagining.>

"I don't understand. What was it like?"

<How can I remember? I never had memory until I followed the imagining and came to this place and became the hive queen.>

"Then how did you know that you aren't just the hive queen?"

<Because after I came, they gave me the memories. I saw the queen-body before I came, and then I saw the queen-body after I was in it. I was strong enough to hold the pattern in my mind, and so I could possess it. Become it. It took many days but then we were whole and they could give us the memories because I had the whole memory.>

The vision the hive queen had been giving him faded. It wasn't helping anyway, or at least not in any way he could grasp. Nevertheless, a mental image was coming clear for Ender now, one that came from his own mind to explain all the things she was saying. The other hive queens-- not physically present, most of them, but linked phylotically to the one queen who had to be there-- they held the pattern of the relationship between hive queen and workers in their minds, until one of these mysterious memoryless creatures was able to contain the pattern in its mind and therefore take possession of it.

<Yes.>

"But where do these things come from? Where do you have to go to get them?"

<We don't go anywhere. We call, and there they are.>

"So they're everywhere?"

<They aren't here at all. Nowhere here. Another place.>

"But you said you don't have to go anywhere to get them."

<Doorways. We don't know where they are, but everywhere there's a door.>

"What are the doorways like?"

<Your brain made the word you say. Doorway. Doorway.>

Now he realized that doorway was the word his brain called forth to label the concept they were putting in his mind. And suddenly he was able to grasp an explanation that made sense.

"They're not in the same space-time continuum as ours. But they can enter ours at any point."

<To them all points are the same point. All wheres are the same where. They only find one whereness in the pattern.>

"But this is incredible. You're calling forth some being from another place, and--"

<The calling forth is nothing. All things do it. All new makings. You do it. Every human baby has this thing. The pequeninos are these things also. Grass and sunlight. All making calls them, and they come to the pattern. if there are already some who understand the pattern, then they come and possess it. Small patterns are very easy. Our pattern is very hard. Only a very wise one can possess it.>

"Philotes," said Ender. "The things out of which all other things are made."

<The word you say doesn't make a meaning like what we mean.>

"Because I'm only just making the connection. We never meant what you've described, but the thing we did mean, that might be the thing you described."

<Very unclear.>

"Join the club."

<Very welcome laughing happy.>

"So when you make a hive queen, you already have the biological body, and this new thing-- this philote that you call out of the non-place where philotes are-- it has to be one that's able to comprehend the complex pattern that you have in your minds of what a hive queen is, and when one comes that can do it, it takes on that identity and possesses the body and becomes the self of that body--"

<Of all the bodies.>

"But there are no workers yet, when the hive queen is first made."

<It becomes the self of the workers-to-come.>

"We're talking about a passage from another kind of space. A place where philotes already are."

<All in the same non-place. No place-ness in that place. No where-being. All hungry for whereness. All thirsty for pattern. All lonely for selfness.>

"And you say that we're made of the same things?"

<How could we have found you if you weren't?>

"But you said that finding me was like making a hive queen."

<We couldn't find the pattern in you. We were trying to make a pattern between you and the other humans, only you kept shifting and changing, we couldn't make sense of it. And you couldn't make sense of us, either, so that reaching of yours couldn't make a pattern, either. So we took the third pattern. You reaching into the machine. You yearning so much for it. Like the life-yearning of the new queen-body. You were binding yourself to the program in the computer. It showed you images. We could find the images in the computer and we could find them in your mind. We could match them while you watched. The computer was very complicated and you were even more complicated but it was a pattern that held still. You were moving together and while you were together you possessed each other, you had the same vision. And when you imagined something and did it, the computer made something out of your imagining and imagined something back. Very primitive imagining from the computer. It wasn't a self. But you were making it a self by the life-yearning. The reaching-out you were doing.>

"The Fantasy Game," said Ender. "You made a pattern out of the Fantasy Game."

<We imagined the same thing you were imagining. All of us together. Calling. It was very complicated and strange, but much simpler than anything else we found in you. Since then we know-- very few humans are capable of concentrating the way you concentrated on that game. And we've seen no other computer program that responded to a human the way that game responded to you. It was yearning, too. Cycling over and over, trying to find something to make for you. >

"And when you called ..."

<It came. The bridge we needed. The together-binder for you and the computer program. It held the pattern so that it was alive even when you weren't paying attention to it. It was linked to you, you were part of it, and yet we could also understand it. It was the bridge.>

"But when a philote takes possession of a new hive queen, it controls it, queen-body and worker-bodies. Why didn't this bridge you made take control of me?"

<Do you think we didn't try?>

"Why didn't it work?"

<You weren't capable of letting a pattern like that control you. You could willingly become part of a pattern that was real and alive, but you couldn't be controlled by it. You couldn't even be destroyed by it. And there was so much of you in the pattern that we couldn't even control it ourselves. Too strange for us.>

"But you could still use it to read my mind."

<We could use it to stay connected with you in spite of all the strangeness. We studied you, especially when you played the game. And as we understood you, we began to grasp the idea of your whole species. That each individual of you was alive, with no hive queen at all.>

"More complicated than you expected?"

<And less. Your individual minds were simpler in the ways that we expected to be complicated, and complicated in ways that we expected them to be simple. We realized that you were truly alive and beautiful in your perverse and tragic lonely way and we decided not to send another colony ship to your worlds.>

"But we didn't know that. How could we know?"

<We also realized that you were dangerous and terrible. You in particular, dangerous because you found all our patterns and we couldn't think of anything complicated enough to confuse you. So you destroyed all but me. Now I understand you better. I've had all these years to study you. You are not as terrifyingly brilliant as we thought.>

"Too bad. Terrifying brilliance would be useful right now."

<We prefer a comforting glow of intelligence.>

"We humans get slower as we age. Give me a few more years and I'll be downright cozy."

<We know that you'll die someday. Even though you put it off for so long.>

Ender didn't want this to become another conversation about mortality or any of the other aspects of human life that so fascinated the hive queen. There was still one question that had occurred to him during the hive queen's story. An intriguing possibility.

"The bridge you made. Where was it? In the computer?"

<Inside you. The way I'm inside the body of the hive queen.>

"But not part of me."

<Part of you but also not-you. Other. Outside but inside. Bound to you but free. It couldn't control you, and you couldn't control it.>

"Could it control the computer?"

<We didn't think about that. We didn't care. Maybe.>

"How long did you use this bridge? How long was it there?"

<We stopped thinking about it. We were thinking about you.>

"But it was still there the whole time you were studying me."

<Where would it go?>

"How long would it last?"

<We never made one like that before. How would we know? The hive queen dies when the queen-body dies.>

"But what body was the bridge in?"

<Yours. At the center of the pattern.>

"This thing was inside me?"

<Of course. But it was still not-you. It disappointed us that way, when it couldn't let us control you, and we stopped thinking about it. But we see now that this was very important. We should have searched for it. We should have remembered it.>

"No. To you it was like-- a bodily function. Like balling up your fist to hit somebody. You did it, and then when you didn't need it you didn't notice whether your fist was still there or not."

<We don't understand the connection but it seems to make sense inside you.>

"It's still alive, isn't it?"

<It could be. We're trying to feel it. Find it. Where can we look? The old pattern isn't there. You don't play the Fantasy Game anymore.>

"But it would still be linked to the computer, wouldn't it? A connection between me and the computer. Only the pattern could have grown, couldn't it? It could include other people, too. Think of it being linked to Miro-- the young man I brought with me--"

<The broken one ...>

"And instead of being linked to that one computer, linked to thousands and thousands of them, through the ansible links between worlds."

<This could be. It was alive. It could grow. The way we grow when we make more workers. All this time. Now that you mention it, we're sure it must still be there because we're still linked to you, and it was only through that pattern that we connected with you. The connection is very strong now-- that's part of what it is, the link between us and you. We thought the connection grew stronger because we knew you better. But maybe it also grew stronger because the bridge was growing.>

"And I always thought-- Jane and I always thought that she was-- that she had somehow come to exist in the ansible connections between worlds. That's probably where she feels herself, the place that feels like the center of her-- body, I was going to say."

<We're trying to feel whether the bridge between us is still there. Hard to feel it.>

"Like trying to find a particular muscle that you've been using all your life but never by itself."

<Interesting comparison. We don't see the connection but no, now we see it.>

"The comparison?"

<The bridge. Very big. The pattern of it is too big. We can't grasp it anymore. Very big. Memory-- very confusing. Much harder than finding you the first time-- very confusing. Getting lost. We can't hold it in our mind anymore. >

"Jane," whispered Ender. "You're a big girl now."

Jane's voice came in answer: "You're cheating, Ender. I can't hear what she's saying to you. I can only feel your heart pounding and your rapid breathing."

<Jane. We've seen this name in your mind many times. But the bridge wasn't a person with a face-->

"Neither is Jane."

<We see a face in your mind when you think of this name. We still see it. Always we thought it was a person. But now-->

"She's the bridge. You made her."

<Called her. You made the pattern. She possessed it. What she is, this Jane, this bridge, she began with the pattern we discovered in you and the Fantasy Game, yes, but she has imagined herself to

be much larger. She must have been a very strong and powerful-- philote, if your word is the right name-- to be able to change her own pattern and still remember to be herself.>

"You reached out across the light-years and found me because I was looking for you. And then you found a pattern and called a creature from another space who grasped the pattern and possessed it and became Jane. All of this instantaneously. Faster than light."

<But this isn't faster-than-light travel. It's faster-than-light imagining and calling. It still doesn't pick you up here and put you there.>

"I know. I know. This may not help us answer the question I came here with. But I had another question, just as important to me, that I never thought would have anything to do with you, and here you had the answer to it all along. Jane's real, alive the whole time, and her self isn't out there in space, it's inside me. Connected to me. They can't kill her by switching her off. That's something."

<If they kill the pattern, she can die.>

"But they can't kill the whole pattern, don't you see? It doesn't depend on the ansibles after all. It depends on me and on the link between me and the computers. They can't cut the link between me and the computers here and in the satellites orbiting Lusitania. And maybe she doesn't need the ansibles, either. After all, you don't need them to reach me through her."

<Many strange things are possible. We can't imagine them. They feel very stupid and strange, the things going through your mind. You're making us very tired, with all your thinking of stupid imaginary impossible things.>

"I'll leave you, then. But this will help. This has to help. If Jane can find a way to survive because of this, then that's a real victory. The first victory, when I was beginning to think there wasn't any victory to be had in this."

The moment he left the presence of the hive queen, he began talking to Jane, telling her everything he could remember of what the hive queen could explain. Who Jane was, how she was created.

And as he talked, she analyzed herself in light of what he said. Began to discover things about herself that she had never guessed. By the time Ender got back to the human colony, she had verified as much of his story as she could. "I never found this because I always started with the wrong assumptions," she said. "I imagined my center to be out in space somewhere. I should have guessed I was inside you from the fact that even when I was furious with you, I had to come back to you to be at peace."

"And now the hive queen says that you've grown so big and complex that she can't hold the pattern of you in her mind anymore."

"Must have gone through a growth spurt, back during my years of puberty."

"Right."

"Could I help it that humans kept adding computers and linking them up?"

"But it isn't the hardware, Jane. It's the programs. The mentation."

"I have to have the physical memory to hold all of that."

"You have the memory. The question is, can you access it without the ansibles?"

"I can try. As you said to her, it's like learning to flex a muscle I never knew I had."

"Or learning to live without one."

"I'll see what's possible."

What's possible. All the way home, the car floating over the capim, he was also flying, exhilarated to know that something was possible after all, when till now he had felt nothing but despair. Coming home, though, seeing the burnt-over forest, the two solitary fathertrees with the only greenery left, the experimental farm, the new hut with the cleanroom where Planter lay dying, he realized how much there still was to lose, how many would still die, even if now they had found a way for Jane to live.

It was the end of the day. Han Fei-tzu was exhausted, his eyes hurting from all that he had read. He had adjusted the colors on the computer display a dozen times, trying to find something restful, but it didn't help. The last time he had worked so intensely was as a student, and then he had been young. Then, too, he had always found results. I was quicker, then, brighter. I could reward myself by achieving something. Now I'm old and slow, I'm working in areas that are new to me, and it may be that these problems have no solutions. So there's no reward to bolster me. Only the weariness. The pain at the top of my neck, the puffy, tired feeling in my eyes.

He looked at Wang-mu, curled up on the floor beside him. She tried so hard, but her education had begun too recently for her to be able to follow most of the documents that passed through the computer display as he searched for some conceptual framework for faster-than-light travel. At last her weariness triumphed over her will; she was sure she was useless, because she couldn't understand enough even to ask questions. So she gave up and slept.

But you are not useless, Si Wang-mu. Even in your perplexity you've helped me. A bright mind to which all things are new. Like having my own lost youth perched at my elbow.

As Qing-jao was, when she was little, before piety and pride claimed her.

Not fair. Not right to judge his own daughter that way. Until these last weeks, hadn't he been perfectly satisfied with her? Proud of her beyond all reason? The best and brightest of the godspoken, everything her father had worked for, everything her mother had hoped.

That was the part that chafed. Until a few weeks ago, he had been proudest of all of the fact that he had accomplished his oath to Jiang-qing. This was not an easy accomplishment, to bring up his daughter so piously that she never went through a period of doubt or rebellion against the gods. True, there were other children just as pious-- but their piety was usually achieved at the expense of their education. Han Fei-tzu had let Qing-jao learn everything, and then had so deftly led her understanding of it that all fit well with her faith in the gods.

Now he had reaped his own sowing. He had given her a worldview that so perfectly preserved her faith that now, when he had discovered that the gods' "voices" were nothing but the genetic chains with which Congress had shackled them, nothing could convince her. If Jiang-qing had lived, Fei-tzu would no doubt have been in conflict with her over his loss of faith. In her absence, he had done so well at raising their daughter as Jiang-qing would have that Qing-jao was able to take her mother's view flawlessly.

Jiang-qing would also have left me, thought Han Fei-tzu. Even if I had not been widowed, I would have been wifeless on this day.

The only companion left to me is this servant girl, who pushed her way into my household only just in time to be the one spark of life in my old age, the one flicker of hope in my dark heart.

Not my daughter-of-the-body, but perhaps there will be time and opportunity, when this crisis is past, to make Wang-mu my daughter-of-the-mind. My work with Congress is finished. Shall I not be a teacher, then, with a single disciple, this girl? Shall I not prepare her to be the revolutionary who can lead the common people to freedom from the tyranny of the godspoken, and then lead Path to freedom from Congress itself? Let her be such a one, and then I can die in peace, knowing that at the end of my life I have created the undoing of all my earlier work that strengthened Congress and helped overcome all opposition to its power.

The soft breathing of the girl Wang-mu was like his own breath, like a baby's breath, like the sound of a breeze through tall grass. She is all motion, all hope, all freshness.

"Han Fei-tzu, I think you are not asleep."

He was not; but he had been half-dozing, for the sound of Jane's voice coming from the computer startled him as if he were waking up.

"No, but Wang-mu is," he said.

"Wake her, then," said Jane.

"What is it? She's earned her rest."

"She's also earned the right to hear this."

Ela's face appeared beside Jane's in the display. Han Fei-tzu knew her at once as the xenobiologist who had been entrusted with the study of the genetic samples he and Wang-mu had collected. There must have been a breakthrough.

He bowed himself down, reached out, shook the girl's hip as she lay there sleeping. She stirred. She stretched. Then, no doubt remembering her duty, she sat bolt upright. "Have I overslept? What is it? Forgive me for falling asleep, Master Han."

She might have bowed herself in her confusion, but Fei-tzu wouldn't let her. "Jane and Ela asked me to wake you. They wanted you to hear."

"I will tell you first," said Ela, "that what we hoped for is possible. The genetic alterations were crude and easily discovered-- I can see why Congress has done its best to keep any real geneticists from working with the human population of Path. The OCD gene wasn't in the normal place, which is why it wasn't identified at once by natologists, but it works almost exactly as naturally-occurring OCD genes work. It can easily be treated separately from the genes that give the godspoken enhanced intellectual and creative abilities. I have already designed a splicer bacterium that, if injected into the blood, will find a person's sperm or ova, enter them, remove the OCD gene, and replace it with a normal one, leaving the rest of the genetic code unaffected. Then the bacterium will die out quickly. It's based on a common bacterium that should already exist in many labs on Path for normal immunology and birth-defect-prevention work. So any of the godspoken who wish to give birth to children without the OCD can do it."

Han Fei-tzu laughed. "I'm the only one on this planet who would wish for such a bacterium. The godspoken have no pity on themselves. They take pride in their affliction. It gives them honor and power."

"Then let me tell you the next thing we found. It was one of my assistants, a pequenino named Glass, who discovered this-- I'll admit that I wasn't paying much personal attention to this project since it was relatively easy compared to the descolada problem we're working on."

"Don't apologize," said Fei-tzu. "We are grateful for any kindness. All is undeserved. "

"Yes. Well." She seemed flustered by his courtesy. "Anyway, what Glass discovered is that all but one of the genetic samples you gave us sort themselves neatly into godspoken and non-godspoken categories. We ran the test blind, and only afterward checked the sample lists against the identity lists you gave us-- the correspondence was perfect. Every godspoken had the altered gene. Every sample that lacked the altered gene was also not on your list of godspoken."

"You said all but one."

"This one baffled us. Glass is very methodical-- he has the patience of a tree. He was sure that the one exception was a clerical error or an error in interpreting the genetic data. He went over it many times, and had other assistants do the same. There is no doubt. The one exception is clearly a

mutation of the godspoken gene. It naturally lacks the OCD, while still retaining all of the other abilities Congress's geneticists so thoughtfully provided."

"So this one person already is what your splicer bacterium is designed to create."

"There are a few other mutated regions that we aren't quite sure of at the moment, but they have nothing to do with the OCD or the enhancements. Nor are they involved in any of the vital processes, so this person should be able to have healthy offspring that carry the trait. In fact, if this person should mate with a person who has been treated with the splicer bacterium, all her offspring will almost certainly carry the enhancements, and there'd be no chance of any of them having the OCD."

"How lucky for him," said Han Fei-tzu.

"Who is it?" asked Wang-mu.

"It's you," said Ela. "Si Wang-mu."

"Me?" She seemed baffled.

But Han Fei-tzu was not confused. "Ha!" he cried. "I should have known. I should have guessed! No wonder you have learned as quickly as my own daughter learned. No wonder you have had insights that helped us all even when you barely understood the subject you were studying. You are as godspoken as anyone on Path, Wang-mu-except that you alone are free of the shackles of the cleansing rituals."

Si Wang-mu struggled to answer, but instead of words, tears came, silently drifting down her face.

"Never again will I permit you to treat me as your superior," said Han Fei-tzu. "From now on you are no servant in my house, but my student, my young colleague. Let others think of you however they want. We know that you are as capable as anyone."

"As Mistress Qing-jao?" Wang-mu whispered.

"As anyone," said Fei-tzu. "Courtesy will require you to bow to many. But in your heart, you need bow to no one."

"I am unworthy," said Wang-mu.

"Everyone is worthy of his own genes. A mutation like that is much more likely to have crippled you. But instead, it left you the healthiest person in the world."

But she would not stop her silent weeping.

Jane must have been showing this to Ela, for she kept her peace for some time. Finally, though, she spoke. "Forgive me, but I have much to do," she said.

"Yes," said Han Fei-tzu. "You may go."

"You misunderstand me," said Ela. "I don't need your permission to go. I have more to say before I go."

Han Fei-tzu bowed his head. "Please. We are listening."

"Yes," whispered Wang-mu. "I'm listening too."

"There is a possibility-- a remote one, as you will see, but a possibility nonetheless-- that if we are able to decode the descolada virus and tame it, we can also make an adaptation that could be useful on Path."

"How so?" asked Han Fei-tzu. "Why should we want this monstrous artificial virus here?"

"The whole business of the descolada is entering a host organism's cells, reading the genetic code, and reorganizing it according to the descolada's own plan. When we alter it, if we can, we'll remove its own plan from it. We'll also remove almost all of its self-defense mechanisms, if we can find them. At that point, it may be possible to use it as a super-splicer. Something that can effect a change, not just on the reproductive cells, but on all the cells of a living creature."

"Forgive me," said Han Fei-tzu, "but I have been reading in this field lately, and the concept of a super-splicer has been rejected, because the body starts to reject its own cells as soon as they're genetically altered."

"Yes," said Ela. "That's how the descolada kills. The body rejects itself to death. But that only happened because the descolada had no plan for dealing with humans. It was studying the human body as it went, making random changes and seeing what happened. It had no single plan for us, and so each victim ended up with many different genetic codes in his or her cells. What if we made a super-splicer that worked according to a single plan, transforming every cell in the body to conform with a single new pattern? In that case, our studies of the descolada assure us that the change could be effected in each individual person within six hours, usually-half a day at the most."

"Fast enough that before the body can reject itself--"

"It will be so perfectly unified that it will recognize the new pattern as itself."

Wang-mu's crying had stopped. She seemed as excited now as Fei-tzu felt, and despite all her self-discipline, she could not contain it. "You can change all the godspoken? Free even the ones who are already alive?"

"If we are able to decode the descolada, then not only would we be able to remove the OCD from the godspoken, we would also be able to install all the enhancements in the common people. It would have the most effect in the children, of course-- older people have already passed the growth

stages where the new genes would have the most effect. But from that time on, every child born on Path would have the enhancements."

"What then? Would the descolada disappear?"

"I'm not sure. I think we would have to build into the new gene a way for it to destroy itself when its work is done. But we would use Wang-mu's genes as a model. Not to stretch the point, Wang-mu, you would become a sort of genetic co-parent of the entire population of your world."

She laughed. "What a wonderful joke to play on them! So proud to be chosen, and yet their cure will come from one such as me!" At once, though, her face fell and she covered her face with her hands. "How could I say such a thing. I have become as haughty and arrogant as the worst of them."

Fei-tzu laid his hand on her shoulder. "Say nothing so harsh. Such feelings are natural. They come and go quickly. Only those who make them a way of life are to be condemned for them." He turned back to Ela. "There are ethical problems here."

"I know. And I think those problems should be addressed now, even though it may never be possible even to do this. We're talking about the genetic alteration of an entire population. It was an atrocity when Congress secretly did it to Path without the consent or knowledge of the population. Can we undo an atrocity by following the same path?"

"More than that," said Han Fei-tzu. "Our entire social system here is based on the godspoken. Most people will interpret such a transformation as a plague from the gods, punishing us. If it became known that we were the source, we would be killed. It's possible, though, that when it becomes known that the godspoken have lost the voice of the gods-- the OCD-- the people will turn on them and kill them. How will freeing them from the OCD have helped them then, if they're dead?"

"We've discussed this," said Ela. "And we have no idea what's the right thing to do. For now the question is moot because we haven't decoded the descolada and may never be able to. But if we develop the capability, we believe that the choice of whether to use it should be yours."

"The people of Path?"

"No," said Ela. "The first choices are yours, Han Fei-tzu, Si Wang-mu, and Han Qing-jao. Only you know of what has been done to you, and even though your daughter doesn't believe it, she does fairly represent the viewpoint of the believers and the godspoken of Path. If we get the capability, put the question to her. Put the question to yourselves. Is there some plan, some way to bring this transformation to Path, that would not be destructive? And if it can be done, should it be done? No-- say nothing now, decide nothing now. Think about it yourselves. We are not part of this. We will only inform you when or whether we learn how to do it. From there it will be up to you."

Ela's face disappeared.

Jane lingered a moment longer. "Worth waking up for?" she asked.

"Yes!" cried Wang-mu.

"Kind of nice to discover that you're a lot more than you ever thought you were, isn't it?" said Jane.

"Oh, yes," said Wang-mu.

"Now go back to sleep, Wang-mu. And you, Master Han-- your fatigue is showing very clearly. You're useless to us if you lose your health. As Andrew has told me, over and over-- we must do all we can do without destroying our ability to keep doing it."

Then she was gone, too.

Wang-mu immediately began to weep again. Han Fei-tzu slid over and sat beside her on the floor, cradled her head against his shoulder, and rocked gently back and forth. "Hush, my daughter, my sweet one, in your heart you already knew who you were, and so did I, so did I. Truly your name was wisely given. If they perform their miracles on Lusitania, you will be the Royal Mother of all the world."

"Master Han," she whispered. "I'm crying also for Qing-jao. I have been given more than I ever hoped for. But who will she be, if the voice of the gods is taken from her?"

"I hope," said Fei-tzu, "that she will be my true daughter again. That she will be as free as you, the daughter who has come to me like a petal on the winter river, borne to me from the land of perpetual spring."

He held her for many long minutes more, until she began to doze on his shoulder. Then he laid her back on her mat, and he retired to his own corner to sleep, with hope in his heart for the first time in many days.

When Valentine came to see Grego in prison, Mayor Kovano told her that Olhado was with him. "Aren't these Olhado's working hours?"

"You can't be serious," said Kovano. "He's a good manager of brickmakers, but I think saving the world might be worth an afternoon of somebody else covering for him on management."

"Don't get your expectations too high," said Valentine. "I wanted him involved. I hoped he might help. But he isn't a physicist."

Kovano shrugged. "I'm not a jailer, either, but one does what the situation requires. I have no idea whether it has to do with Olhado being in there or Ender's visit a little while ago, but I've heard

more excitement and noise in there than-- well, than I've ever heard when the inmates were sober. Of course, public drunkenness is what people are usually jailed for in this town."

"Ender came?"

"From the hive queen. He wants to talk to you. I didn't know where you were."

"Yes. Well, I'll go see him when I leave here." Where she had been was with her husband. Jakt was getting ready to go back into space on the shuttle, to prepare his own ship for quick departure, if need be, and to see whether the original Lusitanian colony ship could possibly be restored for another flight after so many decades without maintenance of the stardrive.

The only thing it had been used for was storage of seeds and genes and embryos of Earthborn species, in case they were someday needed. Jakt would be gone for at least a week, possibly longer, and Valentine couldn't very well let him go without spending some time with him. He would have understood, of course-- he knew the terrible pressure that everyone was under. But Valentine also knew that she wasn't one of the key figures in these events. She would only be useful later, writing the history of it.

When she left Jakt, however, she had not come straight to the mayor's office to see Grego. She had taken a walk through the center of town. Hard to believe that only a short time ago-- how many days? Weeks? --the mob had formed here, drunken and angry, working themselves up to a murderous rage. Now it was so quiet. The grass had even recovered from the trampling, except for one mudhole where it refused to grow back.

But it wasn't peaceful here. On the contrary. When the town had been at peace, when Valentine first arrived, there had been bustle and business here in the heart of the colony, all through the day. Now a few people were out and about, yes, but they were glum, almost furtive. Their eyes stayed down, looking at the ground before their feet, as if everyone were afraid that if they didn't watch every step they'd fall flat.

Part of the glumness was probably shame, thought Valentine. There was a hole in every building in town now, where blocks or bricks had been torn out to use in the building of the chapel. Many of the gaps were visible from the praqa where Valentine walked.

She suspected, however, that fear more than shame had killed the vibrancy in this place. No one spoke of it openly, but she caught enough comments, enough covert glances toward the hills north of town that she knew. What loomed over this colony wasn't the fear of the coming fleet. It wasn't shame over the slaughter of the pequenino forest. It was the buggers. The dark shapes only occasionally visible on the hills or out in the grass surrounding the town. It was the nightmares of the children who had seen them. The sick dread in the hearts of the adults. Historicals that took place set in the Bugger War period were continuously checked out from the library as people became obsessed with watching humans achieve victory over buggers. And as they watched, they fed their worst fears. The theoretical notion of the hive culture as a beautiful and worthy one, as Ender had depicted it in his first book, the *Hive Queen*, disappeared completely for many of the people here,

perhaps most of them, as they dwelt in the unspoken punishment and imprisonment enforced by the hive queen's workers.

Is all our work in vain, after all? thought Valentine. I, the historian, the philosopher Demosthenes, trying to teach people that they need not fear all aliens, but can see them as raman. And Ender, with his empathic books the Hive Queen, the Hegemon, the Life of Human-- what force did they really have in the world, compared with the instinctive terror at the sight of these dangerous oversized insects? Civilization is only a pretense; in the crisis, we become mere apes again, forgetting the rational biped of our pretensions and becoming instead the hairy primate at the mouth of the cave, screeching at the enemy, wishing it would go away, fingering the heavy stone that we'll use the moment it comes close enough.

Now she was back in a clean, safe place, not so disquieting even if it did serve as a prison as well as the center of city government. A place where the buggers were seen as allies-- or at least as an indispensable peacekeeping force, holding antagonists apart for their mutual protection. There are people, Valentine reminded herself, who are able to transcend their animal origins.

When she opened the cell door, Olhado and Grego were both sprawled on bunks, papers strewn on the floor and table between them, some flat, some wadded up. Papers even covered the computer terminal, so that if the computer was on, the display couldn't possibly function. It looked like a typical teenager's bedroom, complete with Grego's legs stretching up the walls, his bare feet dancing a weird rhythm, twisting back and forth, back and forth in the air. What was his inner music?

"Boa tarde, Tia Valentina," said Olhado.

Grego didn't even look up.

"Am I interrupting?"

"Just in time," said Olhado. "We're on the verge of reconceptualizing the universe. We've discovered the illuminating principle that wishing makes it so and all living creatures pop out of nowhere whenever they're needed."

"If wishing makes it so," said Valentine, "can we wish for faster-than-light flight?"

"Grego's doing math in his head right now," said Olhado, "so he's functionally dead. But yes. I think he's on to something-- he was shouting and dancing a minute ago. We had a sewing-machine experience."

"Ah," said Valentine.

"It's an old science-class story," said Olhado. "People who wanted to invent sewing machines kept failing because they always tried to imitate the motions of hand-sewing, pushing the needle through the fabric and drawing the thread along behind through the eye at the back end of the needle. It seemed obvious. Until somebody first thought of putting the eye in the nose of the needle and using

two threads instead of just one. A completely unnatural, indirect approach that when it comes right down to it, I still don't understand."

"So we're going to sew our way through space?"

"In a way. The shortest distance between two points isn't necessarily a line. It comes from something Andrew learned from the hive queen. How they call some kind of creature from an alternate spacetime when they create a new hive queen. Grego jumped on that as proof that there was a real non-real space. Don't ask me what he means by that. I make bricks for a living."

"Unreal realspace," said Grego. "You had it backward."

"The dead awake," said Olhado.

"Have a seat, Valentine," said Grego. "My cell isn't much, but it's home. The math on this is still crazy but it seems to fit. I'm going to have to spend some time with Jane on it, to do the really tight calculations and run some simulations, but if the hive queen's right, and there's a space so universally adjacent to our space that philotes can pass into our space from the other space at any point, and if we postulate that the passage can go the other way, and if the hive queen is also right that the other space contains philotes just as ours does, only in the other space-- call it Outside-- the philotes aren't organized according to natural law, but are instead just possibilities, then here's what might work--"

"Those are awfully big ifs," said Valentine.

"You forget," said Olhado. "We start from the premise that wishing makes it so."

"Right, I forgot to mention that," said Grego. "We also assume that the hive queen is right that the unorganized philotes respond to patterns in someone's mind, immediately assuming whatever role is available in the pattern. So that things that are comprehended Outside will immediately come to exist there."

"All this is perfectly clear," said Valentine. "I'm surprised you didn't think of it before."

"Right," said Grego. "So here's how we do it. Instead of trying to physically move all the particles that compose the starship and its passengers and cargo from Star A to Star B, we simply conceive of them all-- the entire pattern, including all the human contents-- as existing, not Inside, but Outside. At that moment, all the philotes that compose the starship and the people in it disorganize themselves, pop through into the Outside, and reassemble themselves there according to the familiar pattern. Then we do the same thing again, and pop back Inside-- only now we're at Star B. Preferably a safe orbiting distance away."

"If every point in our space corresponds to a point Outside," said Valentine, "don't we just have to do our traveling there instead of here?"

"The rules are different there," said Grego. "There's no whereness there. Let's assume that in our space, whereness-- relative location-- is simply an artifact of the order that philotes follow. It's a convention. So is distance, for that matter. We measure distance according to the time it takes to travel it-- but it only takes that amount of time because the philotes of which matter and energy are comprised follow the conventions of natural law. Like the speed of light."

"They're just obeying the speed limit."

"Yes. Except for the speed limit, the size of our universe is arbitrary. If you looked at our universe as a sphere, then if you stood outside the sphere, it could as easily be an inch across or a trillion lightyears or a micron."

"And when we go Outside--"

"Then the Inside universe is exactly the same size as any of the disorganized philotes there-- no size at all. Furthermore, since there is no whereness there, all philotes in that space are equally close or nonclose to the location of our universe. So we can reenter Inside space at any point."

"That makes it sound almost easy," said Valentine.

"Yes, well," said Grego.

"It's the wishing that's hard," said Olhado.

"To hold the pattern, you really have to understand it," said Grego. "Each philote that rules a pattern comprehends only its own part of reality. It depends on the philotes within its pattern to do their job and hold their own pattern, and it also depends the philote that controls the pattern that it's a part of to keep it in its proper place. The atom philote has to trust the neutron and proton and electron philotes to hold their own internal structures together, and the molecule philote to hold the atom in its proper place, while the atom philote concentrates on his own job, which is keeping the parts of the atom in place. That's how reality seems to work-- in this model, anyway."

"So you transplant the whole thing to Outside and back Inside again," said Valentine. "I understood that."

"Yes, but who? Because the mechanism for sending requires that the whole pattern for the ship and all its contents be established as a pattern of its own, not just an arbitrary conglomeration. I mean, when you load a cargo on a ship and the passengers embark, you haven't created a living pattern, a philotic organism. It's not like giving birth to a baby-- that's an organism that can hold itself together. The ship and its contents are just a collection. They can break apart at any point. So when you move all the philotes out into disorganized space, lacking whereness or thisness or any organizing principle, how do they reassemble? And even if they reassemble themselves into the structures they know, what do you have? A lot of atoms. Maybe even living cells and organisms-- but without spacesuits or a starship, because those aren't alive. All the atoms and maybe even the molecules are floating around, probably replicating themselves like crazy as the unorganized philotes out there start copying the pattern, but you've got no ship."

"Fatal."

"No, probably not," said Grego. "Who can guess? The rules are all different out there. The point is that you can't possibly bring them back into our space in that condition, because that definitely would be fatal."

"So we can't."

"I don't know. Reality holds together in Inside space because all the pilotes that it's comprised of agree on the rules. They all know each other's patterns and follow the same patterns themselves. Maybe it can all hold together in Outside space as long as the spaceship and its cargo and passengers are fully known. As long as there's a knower who can hold the entire structure in her head."

"Her?"

"As I said, I have to have Jane do the calculations. She has to see if she has access to enough memory to contain the pattern of relationships within a spaceship. She has to then see if she can take that pattern and imagine its new location."

"That's the wishing part," said Olhado. "I'm very proud of it, because I'm the one who thought of needing a knower to move the ship."

"This whole thing is really Olhado's," said Grego, "but I intend to put my name first on the paper because he doesn't care about career advancement and I have to look good enough for people to overlook this felony conviction if I'm going to get a job at a university on another world somewhere."

"What are you talking about?" said Valentine.

"I'm talking about getting off this two-bit colony planet. Don't you understand? If this is all true, if it works, then I can fly to Rheims or Baia or-- or Earth and come back here for weekends. The energy cost is zero because we're stepping outside natural laws entirely. The wear and tear on the vehicles is nothing."

"Not nothing," said Olhado. "We've still got to taxi close to the planet of destination."

"As I said, it all depends on what Jane can conceive of. She has to be able to comprehend the whole ship and its contents. She has to be able to imagine us Outside and Inside again. She has to be able to conceive of the exact relative positions of the startpoint and endpoint of the journey."

"So faster-than-light travel depends completely on Jane," said Valentine.

"If she didn't exist, it would be impossible. Even if they linked all the computers together, even if someone could write the program to accomplish it, it wouldn't help. Because a program is just a collection, not an entity. It's just parts. Not a-- what was the word Jane found for it? An aiua."

"Sanskrit for life," Olhado explained to Valentine. "The word for the philote who controls a pattern that holds other philotes in order. The word for entities-- like planets and atoms and animals and stars-- that have an intrinsic, enduring form."

"Jane is an aiua, not just a program. So she can be a knower. She can incorporate the starship as a pattern within her own pattern. She can digest it and contain it and it will still be real. She makes it part of herself and knows it as perfectly and unconsciously as your aida knows your own body and holds it together. Then she can carry it with her Outside and back Inside again."

"So Jane has to go?" asked Valentine.

"If this can be done at all, it'll be done because Jane travels with the ship, yes," said Grego.

"How?" asked Valentine. "We can't exactly go pick her up and carry her with us in a bucket."

"This is something Andrew learned from the hive queen," said Grego. "She actually exists in a particular place-- that is, her aiua has a specific location in our space."

"Where?"

"Inside Andrew Wiggin."

It took a while for them to explain to her what Ender had learned about Jane from the hive queen. It was strange to think of this computer entity as being centered inside Ender's body, but it made a kind of sense that Jane had been created by the hive queens during Ender's campaign against them. To Valentine, though, there was another, immediate consequence. If the faster-than-light ship could only go where Jane took it, and Jane was inside Ender, there could be only one conclusion.

"Then Andrew has to go?"

"Claro. Of course," said Grego.

"He's a little old to be a test pilot," said Valentine.

"In this case he's only a test passenger," said Grego. "He just happens to hold the pilot inside him."

"It's not as if the voyage will have any physical stress," said Olhado. "If Grego's theory works out exactly right, he'll just sit there and after a couple of minutes or actually a microsecond or two, he'll be in the other place. And if it doesn't work at all, he'll just stay right here, with all of us feeling foolish for thinking we could wish our way through space."

"And if it turns out Jane can get him Outside but can't hold things together there, then he'll be stranded in a place that doesn't even have any placeness to it," said Valentine.

"Well, yes," said Grego. "If it works halfway, the passengers are effectively dead. But since we'll be in a place without time, it won't matter to us. It'll just be an eternal instant. Probably not enough time for our brains to notice that the experiment failed. Stasis."

"Of course, if it works," said Olhado, "then we'll carry our own spacetime with us, so there would be duration. Therefore, we'll never know if we fail. We'll only notice if we succeed."

"But I'll know if he never comes back," said Valentine.

"Right," said Grego. "If he never comes back, then you'll have a few months of knowing it until the fleet gets here and blasts everything and everybody all to hell."

"Or until the descolada turns everybody's genes inside out and kills us all," added Olhado.

"I suppose you're right," said Valentine. "Failure won't kill them any deader than they'll be if they stay."

"But you see the deadline pressure that we're under," said Grego. "We don't have much time left before Jane loses her ansible connections. Andrew says that she might well survive it after all-- but she'll be crippled. Brain-damaged."

"So even if it works, the first flight might be the last."

"No," said Olhado. "The flights are instantaneous. If it works, she can shuttle everybody off this planet in no more time than it takes people to get in and out of the starship."

"You mean it can take off from a planet surface?"

"That's still iffy," said Grego. "She might only be able to calculate location within, say ten thousand kilometers. There's no explosion or displacement problem, since the pilotes will reenter Inside space ready to obey natural laws again. But if the starship reappears in the middle of a planet it'll still be pretty hard to dig to the surface."

"But if she can be really precise-- within a couple of centimeters, for instance-- then the flights can be surface-to-surface," said Olhado.

"Of course we're dreaming," said Grego. "Jane's going to come back and tell us that even if she could turn all the stellar mass in the galaxy into computer chips, she couldn't hold all the data she'd have to know in order to make a starship travel this way. But at the moment, it still sounds possible and I am feeling good!"

At that, Grego and Olhado started whooping and laughing so loud that Mayor Kovano came to the door to make sure Valentine was all right. To her embarrassment, he caught her laughing and whooping right along with them.

"Are we happy, then?" asked Kovano.

"I guess," said Valentine, trying to recover her composure.

"Which of our many problems have we solved?"

"Probably none of them," said Valentine. "It would be too idiotically convenient if the universe could be manipulated to work this way."

"But you've thought of something."

"The metaphysical geniuses here have a completely unlikely possibility," said Valentine. "Unless you slipped them something really weird in their lunch."

Kovano laughed and left them alone. But his visit had had the effect of sobering them again.

"Is it possible?" asked Valentine.

"I would never have thought so," said Grego. "I mean, there's the problem of origin."

"It actually answers the problem of origin," said Olhado. "The Big Bang theory's been around since--"

"Since before I was born," said Valentine.

"I guess," said Olhado. "What nobody's been able to figure out is why a Big Bang would ever happen. This way it makes a weird kind of sense. If somebody who was capable of holding the pattern of the entire universe in his head stepped Outside, then all the philotes there would sort themselves out into the largest place in the pattern that they could control. Since there's no time there, they could take a billion years or a microsecond, all the time they needed, and then when it was sorted out, bam, there they are, the whole universe, popping out into a new Inside space. And since there's no distance or position-- no whereness-- then the entire thing would begin the size of a geometric point--"

"No size at all," said Grego.

"I remember my geometry," said Valentine.

"And immediately expand, creating space as it grew. As it grew, time would seem to slow down-- or do I mean speed up?"

"It doesn't matter," said Grego. "It all depends whether you're Inside the new space or Outside or in some other Inspace."

"Anyway, the universe now seems to be constant in time while it's expanding in space. But if you wanted to, you could just as easily see it as constant in size but changing in time. The speed of light is slowing down so that it takes longer to get from one place to another, only we can't tell that it's slowing down because everything else slows down exactly relative to the speed of light. You see? All a matter of perspective. For that matter, as Grego said before, the universe we live in is still, in absolute terms, exactly the size of a geometric point-- when you look at it from Outside. Any growth that seems to take place on the Inside is just a matter of relative location and time."

"And what kills me," said Grego, "is that this is the kind of thing that's been going on inside Olhado's head all these years. This picture of the universe as a dimensionless point in Outside space is the way he's been thinking all along. Not that he's the first to think of it. Just that he's the one who actually believed it and saw the connection between that and the non-place where Andrew says the hive queen goes to find aidas."

"As long as we're playing metaphysical games," said Valentine, "then where did this whole thing begin? If what we think of as reality is just a pattern that somebody brought Outside, and the universe just popped into being, then whoever it was is probably still wandering around giving off universes wherever she goes. So where did she come from? And what was there before she started doing it? And how did Outside come to exist, for that matter?"

"That's Inspace thinking," said Olhado. "That's the way you conceive of things when you still believe in space and time as absolutes. You think of everything starting and stopping, of things having origins, because that's the way it is in the observable universe. The thing is, Outside there're no rules like that at all. Outside was always there and always will be there. The number of philotes there is infinite, and all of them always existed. No matter how many of them you pull out and put into organized universes, there'll be just as many left as there always were."

"But somebody had to start making universes."

"Why?" asked Olhado.

"Because-- because I--"

"Nobody ever started. It's always been going on. I mean, if it weren't already going on, it couldn't start. Outside where there aren't any patterns, it would be impossible to conceive of a pattern. They can't act, by definition, because they literally can't even find themselves."

"But how could it always have been going on?"

"Think of it as if this moment in time, the reality we live in at this moment, this condition of the entire universe-- of all the universes--"

"You mean now."

"Right. Think of it as if now were the surface of a sphere. Time is moving forward through the chaos of Outside like the surface of an expanding sphere, a balloon inflating. On the outside, chaos. On the inside, reality. Always growing-- like you said, Valentine. Popping up new universes all the time."

"But where did this balloon come from?"

"OK, you've got the balloon. The expanding sphere. Only now think of it as a sphere with an infinite radius."

Valentine tried to think what that would mean. "The surface would be completely flat."

"That's right."

"And you could never go all the way around it."

"That's right, too. Infinitely large. Impossible even to count all the universes that exist on the reality side. And now, starting from the edge, you get on a starship and start heading inward toward the center. The farther in you go, the older everything is. All the old universes, back and back. When do you get to the first one?"

"You don't," said Valentine. "Not if you're traveling at a finite rate."

"You don't reach the center of a sphere of infinite radius, if you're starting at the surface, because no matter how far you go, no matter how quickly, the center, the beginning, is always infinitely far away."

"And that's where the universe began."

"I believe it," said Olhado. "I think it's true."

"So the universe works this way because it's always worked this way," said Valentine.

"Reality works this way because that's what reality is. Anything that doesn't work this way pops back into chaos. Anything that does, comes across into reality. The dividing line is always there."

"What I love," said Grego, "is the idea that after we've started tootling around at instantaneous speeds in our reality, what's to stop us from finding others? Whole new universes?"

"Or making others," said Olhado.

"Right," said Grego. "As if you or I could actually hold a pattern for a whole universe in our minds."

"But maybe Jane could," said Olhado. "Couldn't she?"

"What you're saying," said Valentine, "is that maybe Jane is God."

"She's probably listening right now," said Grego. "The computer's on, even if the display is blocked. I'll bet she's getting a kick out of this."

"Maybe every universe lasts long enough to produce something like Jane," said Valentine. "And then she goes out and creates more and--"

"It goes on and on," said Olhado. "Why not?"

"But she's an accident," said Valentine.

"No," said Grego. "That's one of the things Andrew found out today. You've got to talk to him. Jane was no accident. For all we know there are no accidents. For all we know, everything was all part of the pattern from the start."

"Everything except ourselves," said Valentine. "Our-- what's the word for the philote that controls us?"

"Aiua," said Grego. He spelled it out for her.

"Yes," she said. "Our will, anyway, which always existed, with whatever strengths and weaknesses it has. And that's why, as long as we're part of the pattern of reality, we're free."

"Sounds like the ethicist is getting into the act," said Olhado.

"This is probably complete bobagem," said Grego. "Jane's going to come back laughing at us. But Nossa Senhora, it's fun, isn't it?"

"Hey, for all we know, maybe that's why the universe exists in the first place," said Olhado. "Because going around through chaos popping out realities is a lark. Maybe God's been having the best time."

"Or maybe he's just waiting for Jane to get out there and keep him company," said Valentine.

It was Miro's turn with Planter. Late-- after midnight. Not that he could sit by him and hold his hand. Inside the cleanroom, Miro had to wear a suit, not to keep contamination out, but to keep the descolada virus he carried inside himself from getting to Planter.

If I just cracked my suit a little bit, thought Miro, I could save his life.

In the absence of the descolada, the breakdown of Planter's body was rapid and devastating. They all knew that the descolada had messed with the pequenino reproductive cycle, giving the

pequeninos their third life as trees, but until now it hadn't been clear how much of their daily life depended on the descolada. Whoever designed this virus was a coldhearted monster of efficiency. Without the descolada's daily, hourly, minutely intervention, cells began to become sluggish, the production of vital energy-storing molecules stopped, and-- what they feared most-- the synapses of the brain fired less rapidly. Planter was rigged with tubes and electrodes, and he lay inside several scanning fields, so that from the outside Ela and her pequenino assistants could monitor every aspect of his dying. In addition, there were tissue samples every hour or so around the clock. His pain was so great that when he slept at all, the taking of tissue samples didn't wake him. And yet through all this-- the pain, the quasi-stroke that was afflicting his brain-- Planter remained doggedly lucid. As if he were determined by sheer force of will to prove that even without the descolada, a pequenino could be intelligent. Planter wasn't doing this for science, of course. He was doing it for dignity.

The real researchers couldn't spare time to take a shift as the inside worker, wearing the suit and just sitting there, watching him, talking to him. Only people like Miro, and Jakt's and Valentine's children-- Syfte, Lars, Ro, Varsam-- and the strange quiet woman Plikt; people who had no other urgent duties to attend to, who were patient enough to endure the waiting and young enough to handle their duties with precision-- only such people were given shifts. They might have added a fellow pequenino to the shift, but all the brothers who knew enough about human technologies to do the job right were part of Ela's or Ouanda's teams, and had too much work to do. Of all those who spent time inside the cleanroom with him, taking tissue samples, feeding him, changing bottles, cleaning him up, only Miro had known pequeninos well enough to communicate with them. Miro could speak to him in Brothers' Language. That had to be of some comfort to him, even if they were virtual strangers, Planter having been born after Miro left Lusitania on his thirty-year voyage.

Planter was not asleep. His eyes were half-open, looking at nothing, but Miro knew from the movement of his lips that he was speaking. Reciting to himself passages from some of the epics of his tribe. Sometimes he chanted sections of the tribal genealogy. When he first started doing this, Ela had worried that he was becoming delirious. But he insisted that he was doing it to test his memory. To make sure that in losing the descolada he wasn't losing his tribe-- which would be the same as losing himself.

Right now, as Miro turned up the volume inside his suit, he could hear Planter telling the story of some terrible war with the forest of Skysplitter, the "tree who called thunder." There was a digression in the middle of the war-story that told how Skysplitter got his name. This part of the tale sounded very old and mythic, a magical story about a brother who carried little mothers to the place where the sky fell open and the stars tumbled through onto the ground. Though Miro had been lost in his own thoughts about the day's discoveries-- the origin of Jane, Grego's and Olhado's idea of travel-by-wish-- for some reason he found himself paying close attention to the words that Planter was saying. And as the story ended, Miro had to interrupt.

"How old is that story?"

"Old," whispered Planter. "You were listening?"

"To the last part of it." It was all right to talk to Planter at length. Either he didn't grow impatient with the slowness of Miro's speech-- after all, Planter wasn't going anywhere-- or his own cognitive processes had slowed to match Miro's halting pace. Either way, Planter let Miro finish his own sentences, and answered him as if he had been listening carefully. "Did I understand you to say that this Skysplitter carried little mothers with him?"

"That's right," whispered Planter.

"But he wasn't going to the fathertree."

"No. He just had little mothers on his carries. I learned this story years ago. Before I did any human science."

"You know what it sounds like to me? That the story might come from a time when you didn't carry little mothers to the fathertree. When the little mothers didn't lick their sustenance from the sappy inside of the mothertree. Instead they hung from the carries on the male's abdomen until the infants matured enough to burst out and take their mothers' place at the teat."

"That's why I chanted it for you," said Planter. "I was trying to think of how it might have been, if we were intelligent before the descolada came. And finally I remembered that part in the story of Skysplitter's War."

"He went to the place where the sky broke open."

"The descolada got here somehow, didn't it?"

"How old is that story?"

"Skysplitter's War was twenty-nine generations ago. Our own forest isn't that old. But we carried songs and stories with us from our father-forest."

"The part of the story about the sky and the stars, that could be a lot older, though, couldn't it?"

"Very old. The fathertree Skysplitter died long ago. He might have been very old even when the war took place."

"Do you think it might be possible that this is a memory of the pequenino who first discovered the descolada? That it was brought here by a starship, and that what he saw was some kind of reentry vehicle?"

"That's why I chanted it."

"If that's true, then you were definitely intelligent before the coming of the descolada."

"All gone now," said Planter.

"What's all gone? I don't understand."

"Our genes of that time. Can't even guess what the descolada took away from us and threw out."

It was true. Each descolada virus might contain within itself the complete genetic code for every native life form on Lusitania, but that was only the genetic code as it was now, in its descolada-controlled state. What the code was before the descolada came could never be reconstructed or restored.

"Still," said Miro. "It's intriguing. To think that you already had language and songs and stories before the virus." And then, though he knew he shouldn't, he added, "Perhaps that makes it unnecessary for you to try to prove the independence of pequenino intelligence."

"Another attempt to save the piggy," said Planter.

A voice came over the speaker. A voice from outside the cleanroom.

"You can move on out now." It was Ela. She was supposed to be asleep during Miro's shift.

"My shift isn't over for three hours," said Miro.

"I've got somebody else coming in."

"There are plenty of suits."

"I need you out here, Miro." Ela's voice brooked no possibility of disobedience. And she was the scientist in charge of this experiment.

When he came out a few minutes later, he understood what was going on. Quara stood there, looking icy, and Ela was at least as furious. They had obviously been quarreling again-- no surprise there. The surprise was that Quara was here at all.

"You might as well go back inside," said Quara as soon as Miro emerged from the sterilization chamber.

"I don't even know why I left," said Miro.

"She insists on having a private conversation," said Ela.

"She'll call you out," said Quara, "but she won't disconnect the auditory monitoring system."

"We're supposed to be documenting every moment of Planter's conversation. For lucidity."

Miro sighed. "Ela, grow up."

She almost exploded. "Me! Me grow up! She comes in here like she thinks she's Nossa Senhora on her throne--"

"Ela," said Miro. "Shut up and listen. Quara is Planter's only hope of living through this experiment. Can you honestly say that it wouldn't serve the purpose of this experiment to let her--"

"All right," said Ela, cutting him off because she already grasped his argument and bowed to it. "She's the enemy of every living sentient being on this planet, but I'll cut off the auditory monitoring because she wants to have a private conversation with the brother that she's killing."

That was too much for Quara. "You don't have to cut off anything for me," she said. "I'm sorry I came. It was a stupid mistake."

"Quara!" shouted Miro.

She stopped at the lab door.

"Get the suit on and go talk to Planter. What does he have to do with her?"

Quara glared once again at Ela, but she headed toward the sterilization room from which Miro had just emerged.

He felt greatly relieved. Since he knew that he had no authority at all, and that both of them were perfectly capable of telling him what he could do with his orders, the fact that they complied suggested that in fact they really wanted to comply. Quara really did want to speak to Planter. And Ela really did want her to do it. They might even be growing up enough to stop their personal differences from endangering other people's lives. There might be hope for this family yet.

"She'll just switch it back on as soon as I'm inside," said Quara.

"No she won't," said Miro.

"She'll try," said Quara.

Ela looked at her scornfully. "I know how to keep my word."

They said nothing more to each other. Quara went inside the sterilization chamber to dress. A few minutes later she was out in the cleanroom, still dripping from the descolada-killing solution that had been sprayed all over the suit as soon as she was inside it.

Miro could hear Quara's footsteps.

"Shut it off," he said.

Ela reached up and pushed a button. The footsteps went silent.

Inside his ear, Jane spoke to him. "Do you want me to play everything they say for you?"

He subvocalized. "You can still hear inside there?"

"The computer is linked to several monitors that are sensitive to vibration. I've picked up a few tricks about decoding human speech from the slightest vibrations. And the instruments are very sensitive."

"Go ahead then," said Miro.

"No moral qualms about invasion of privacy?"

"Not a one," said Miro. The survival of a world was at stake. And he had kept his word-- the auditory monitoring equipment was off. Ela couldn't hear what was being said.

The conversation was nothing at first. How are you? Very sick. Much pain? Yes.

It was Planter who broke things out of the pleasant formalities and into the heart of the issue.

"Why do you want all my people to be slaves?"

Quara sighed-- but, to her credit, it didn't sound petulant. To Miro's practiced ear, it sounded as though she were really emotionally torn. Not at all the defiant face she showed to her family. "I don't," she said.

"Maybe you didn't forge the chains, but you hold the key and refuse to use it."

"The descolada isn't a chain," she said. "A chain is a nothing. The descolada is alive."

"So am I. So are all my people. Why is their life more important than ours?"

"The descolada doesn't kill you. Your enemy is Ela and my mother. They're the ones who would kill all of you in order to keep the descolada from killing them."

"Of course," said Planter. "Of course they would. As I would kill all of them to protect my people."

"So your quarrel isn't with me."

"Yes it is. Without what you know, humans and pequeninos will end up killing each other, one way or another. They'll have no choice. As long as the descolada can't be tamed, it will eventually destroy humanity or humanity will have to destroy it-- and us along with it."

"They'll never destroy it," said Quara.

"Because you won't let them."

"Any more than I'd let them destroy you. Sentient life is sentient life."

"No," said Planter. "With ramen you can live and let live. But with varelse, there can be no dialogue. Only war."

"No such thing," Quara said. Then she launched into the same arguments she had used when Miro talked to her.

When she was finished, there was silence for a while.

"Are they talking still?" Ela whispered to the people who were watching in the visual monitors. Miro didn't hear an answer-- somebody probably shook his head no.

"Quara," whispered Planter.

"I'm still here," she answered. To her credit, the argumentative tone was gone from her voice again. She had taken no joy from her cruel moral correctness.

"That's not why you're refusing to help," he said.

"Yes it is."

"You'd help in a minute if it weren't your own family you had to surrender to."

"Not true!" she shouted.

So-- Planter struck a nerve.

"You're only so sure you're right because they're so sure you're wrong."

"I am right!"

"When have you ever seen someone who had no doubts who was also correct about anything?"

"I have doubts," whispered Quara.

"Listen to your doubts," said Planter. "Save my people. And yours."

"Who am I to decide between the descolada and our people?"

"Exactly," said Planter. "Who are you to make such a decision?"

"I'm not," she said. "I'm withholding a decision."

"You know what the descolada can do. You know what it will do. Withholding a decision is a decision."

"It's not a decision. It's not an action."

"Failing to try to stop a murder that you might easily stop-- how is that not murder?"

"Is this why you wanted to see me? One more person telling me what to do?"

"I have the right."

"Because you took it upon yourself to become a martyr and die?"

"I haven't lost my mind yet," said Planter.

"Right. You've proved your point. Now let them get the descolada back in here and save you."

"No."

"Why not? Are you so sure you're right?"

"For my own life, I can decide. I'm not like you-- I don't decide for others to die."

"If humanity dies, I die with them," said Quara.

"Do you know why I want to die?" said Planter.

"Why?"

"So I don't have to watch humans and pequeninos kill each other ever again."

Quara bowed her head.

"You and Grego-- you're both the same."

Tears dropped onto the faceplate of the suit. "That's a lie."

"You both refuse to listen to anybody else. You know better about everything. And when you're both done, many many innocent people are dead."

She stood up as if to go. "Die, then," she said. "Since I'm such a murderer, why should I cry over you?" But she didn't take a step. She doesn't want to go, thought Miro.

"Tell them," said Planter.

She shook her head, so vigorously that tears flipped outward from her eyes, spattering the inside of the mask. If she kept that up, soon she wouldn't be able to see a thing.

"If you tell what you know, everybody is wiser. If you keep a secret, then everyone is a fool."

"If I tell, the descolada will die!"

"Then let it!" cried Planter.

The exertion was an extraordinary drain on him. The instruments in the lab went crazy for a few moments. Ela muttered under her breath as she checked with each of the technicians monitoring them.

"Is that how you'd like me to feel about you?" asked Quara.

"It is how you feel about me," whispered Planter. "Let him die."

"No," she said.

"The descolada came and enslaved my people. So what if it's sentient or not! It's a tyrant. It's a murderer. If a human being behaved the way the descolada acts, even you would agree he had to be stopped, even if killing him were the only way. Why should another species be treated more leniently than a member of your own?"

"Because the descolada doesn't know what it's doing," said Quara. "It doesn't understand that we're intelligent."

"It doesn't care," said Planter. "Whoever made the descolada sent it out not caring whether the species it captures or kills are sentient or not. Is that the creature you want all my people and all your people to die for? Are you so filled with hate for your family that you'll be on the side of a monster like the descolada?"

Quara had no answer. She sank onto the stool beside Planter's bed.

Planter reached out a hand and rested it on her shoulder. The suit was not so thick and impermeable that she couldn't feel the pressure of it, even though he was very weak.

"For myself, I don't mind dying," he said. "Maybe because of the third life, we pequeninos don't have the same fear of death that you short-lived humans do. But even though I won't have the third life, Quara, I will have the kind of immortality you humans have. My name will live in the stories. Even if I have no tree at all, my name will live. And what I did. You humans can say that I'm choosing to be a martyr for nothing, but my brothers understand. By staying clear and intelligent to the end, I prove that they are who they are. I help show that our slavemasters didn't make us who we are, and can't stop us from being who we are. The descolada may force us to do many things, but it doesn't own us to the very center. Inside us there is a place that is our true self. So I don't mind dying. I will live forever in every pequenino that is free."

"Why are you saying this when only I can hear?" said Quara.

"Because only you have the power to kill me completely. Only you have the power to make it so my death means nothing, so that all my people die after me and there's no one left to remember. Why shouldn't I leave my testament with you alone? Only you will decide whether or not it has any worth."

"I hate you for this," she said. "I knew you'd do this."

"Do what?"

"Make me feel so terrible that I have to-- give in!"

"If you knew I'd do this, why did you come?"

"I shouldn't have! I wish I hadn't!"

"I'll tell you why you came. You came so that I would make you give in. So that when you did it, you'd be doing it for my sake, and not for your family."

"So I'm your puppet?"

"Just the opposite. You chose to come here. You are using me to make you do what you really want to do. At heart you are still human, Quara. You want your people to live. You would be a monster if you didn't."

"Just because you're dying doesn't make you wise," she said.

"Yes it does," said Planter.

"What if I tell you that I'll never cooperate in the killing of the descolada?"

"Then I'll believe you," said Planter.

"And hate me."

"Yes," said Planter.

"You can't."

"Yes I can. I'm not a very good Christian. I am not able to love the one who chooses to kill me and all my people."

She said nothing.

"Go away now," he said. "I've said all that I can say. Now I want to chant my stories and keep myself intelligent until death finally comes."

She walked away from him, into the sterilization chamber.

Miro turned toward Ela. "Get everybody out of the lab," he said.

"Why?"

"Because there's a chance that she'll come out and tell you what she knows."

"Then I should be the one to go, and everybody else stay," said Ela.

"No," said Miro. "You're the only one that she'll ever tell."

"If you think that, then you're a complete--"

"Telling anyone else wouldn't hurt her enough to satisfy her," said Miro. "Everybody out."

Ela thought for a moment. "All right," she said to the others. "Get back to the main lab and monitor your computers. I'll bring us up on the net if she tells me anything, and you can see what she enters as we put it in. If you can make sense of what you're seeing, start following it up. Even if she actually knows anything, we still won't have much time to design a truncated descolada so we can get it to Planter before he dies. Go."

They went.

When Quara emerged from the sterilization chamber, she found only Ela and Miro waiting for her.

"I still think it's wrong to kill the descolada before we've even tried to talk to it," she said.

"It may well be," said Ela. "I only know that I intend to do it if I can."

"Bring up your files," said Quara. "I'm going to tell you everything I know about descolada intelligence. If it works and Planter lives through this, I'm going to spit in his face."

"Spit a thousand times," said Ela. "Just so he lives."

Her files came up into the display. Quara began pointing to certain regions of the model of the descolada virus. Within a few minutes, it was Quara sitting before the terminal, typing, pointing, talking, as Ela asked questions.

In his ear, Jane spoke up again. "The little bitch," she said. "She didn't have her files in another computer. She kept everything she knew inside her head."

By late afternoon the next day, Planter was at the edge of death and Ela was at the edge of exhaustion. Her team had worked through the night; Quara had helped, constantly, indefatigably reading over everything Ela's people came up with, critiquing, pointing out errors. By midmorning, they had a plan for a truncated virus that should work. All of the language capability was gone, which meant the new viruses wouldn't be able to communicate with each other. All the analytical ability was gone as well, as near as they could tell. But safely in place were all the parts of the virus that supported bodily functions in the native species of Lusitania. As near as they could possibly tell without having a working sample of the virus, the new design was exactly what was needed-- a descolada that was completely functional in the life cycles of the Lusitanian species, including the pequeninos, yet completely incapable of global regulation and manipulation. They named the new virus recolada. The old one had been named for its function of tearing apart; the new one for its remaining function, holding together the species-pairs that made up the native life of Lusitania.

Ender raised one objection-- that since the descolada must have been putting the pequeninos into a belligerent, expansive mode, the new virus might lock them into that particular condition. But Ela and Quara answered together that they had deliberately used an older version of the descolada as their model, from a time when the pequeninos were more relaxed-- more "themselves." The pequeninos working on the project had agreed to this; there was little time to consult anyone else except Human and Rooter, who also concurred.

With the things that Quara had taught them about the workings of the descolada, Ela also had a team working on a killer bacterium that would spread quickly through the entire planet's geology, finding the normal descolada in every place and every form, tearing it to bits and killing it. It would recognize the old descolada by the very elements that the new descolada would lack. Releasing the recolada and the killer bacterium at the same time should do the job.

There was only one problem remaining-- actually making the new virus. That was Ela's direct project from midmorning on. Quara collapsed and slept. So did most of the pequeninos. But Ela struggled on, trying to use all the tools she had to break apart the virus and recombine it as she needed.

But when Ender came late in the afternoon to tell her that it was now or never, if her virus was to save Planter, she could only break down and weep from exhaustion and frustration.

"I can't," she said.

"Then tell him that you've achieved it but you can't get it ready in time and--"

"I mean it can't be done."

"You've designed it."

"We've planned it, we've modeled it, yes. But it can't be made. The descolada is a really vicious design. We can't build it from scratch because there are too many parts that can't hold together

unless you have those very sections already working to keep rebuilding each other as they break down. And we can't do modifications of the present virus unless the descolada is at least marginally active, in which case it undoes what we're doing faster than we can do it. It was designed to police itself constantly so it can't be altered, and to be so unstable in all its parts that it's completely unmakeable."

"But they made it."

"Yes, but I don't know how. Unlike Grego, I can't completely step outside my science on some metaphysical whim and make things up and wish them into existence. I'm stuck with the rules of nature as they are here and now, and there's no rule that will let me make it."

"So we know where we need to go, but we can't get there from here."

"Until last night I didn't know enough to guess whether we could design this new recolada or not, and therefore I had no way of guessing whether we could make it. I figured that if it was designable, it was makeable. I was ready to make it, ready to act the moment Quara relented. All we've achieved is to know, finally, completely, that it can't be done. Quara was right. We definitely found out enough from her to enable us to kill every descolada virus on Lusitania. But we can't make the recolada that could replace it and keep Lusitanian life functioning."

"So if we use the viricide bacterium--"

"All the pequeninos in the world would be where Planter is now within a week or two. And all the grass and birds and vines and everything. Scorched earth. An atrocity. Quara was right." She wept again.

"You're just tired." It was Quara, awake now and looking terrible, not refreshed at all by her sleep.

Ela, for her part, couldn't answer her sister.

Quara looked like she might be thinking of saying something cruel, along the lines of What did I tell you? But she thought better of it, and came and put her hand on Ela's shoulder. "You're tired, Ela. You need to sleep."

"Yes," said Ela.

"But first let's tell Planter."

"Say good-bye, you mean."

"Yes, that's what I mean."

They made their way to the lab that contained Planter's cleanroom. The pequenino researchers who had slept were awake again; all had joined the vigil for Planter's last hours. Miro was inside with Planter again, and this time they didn't make him leave, though Ender knew that both Ela and

Quara longed to be inside with him. Instead they both spoke to him over the speakers, explaining what they had found. The half-success that was worse, in its way, than complete failure, because it could easily lead to the destruction of all the pequeninos, if the humans of Lusitania became desperate enough.

"You won't use it," whispered Planter. The microphones, sensitive as they were, could barely pick up his voice.

"We won't," said Quara. "But we're not the only people here."

"You won't use it," he said. "I'm the only one who'll ever die like this."

The last of his words were voiceless; they read his lips later, from the holo recording, to be sure of what he said. And, having said it, having heard their good-byes, he died.

The moment the monitoring machines confirmed his death, the pequeninos of the research group rushed into the cleanroom. No need for sterilization now. They wanted the descolada with them. Brusquely moving Miro out of the way, they set to work, injecting the virus into every part of Planter's body, hundreds of injections in moments. They had been preparing for this, obviously. They would respect Planter's sacrifice in life-- but once he was dead, his honor satisfied, they had no compunctions about trying to save him for the third life if they could.

They took him out into the open space where Human and Rooter stood, and laid him on a spot already marked, forming an equilateral triangle with those two young fathertrees. There they flayed his body and staked it open. Within hours a tree was growing, and there was hope, briefly, that it might be a fathertree. But it took only a few days more for the brothers, who were adept at recognizing a young fathertree, to declare that the effort had failed. There was a kind of life, containing his genes, yes; but the memories, the will, the person who was Planter was lost. The tree was mute; there would be no mind joining the perpetual conclave of the fathertrees. Planter had determined to free himself of the descolada, even if it meant losing the third life that was the descolada's gift to those it possessed. He succeeded, and, in losing, won.

He had succeeded in something else, too. The pequeninos departed from their normal pattern of forgetting quickly the name of mere brothertrees. Though no little mother would ever crawl its bark, the brothertree that had grown from his corpse would be known by the name of Planter and treated with respect, as if it were a fathertree, as if it were a person. Moreover, his story was told and told again throughout Lusitania, wherever pequeninos lived. He had proved that pequeninos were intelligent even without the descolada; it was a noble sacrifice, and speaking the name of Planter was a reminder to all pequeninos of their fundamental freedom from the virus that had put them in bondage.

But Planter's death did not give any pause to the preparations for pequenino colonization of other worlds. Warmaker's people had a majority now, and as rumors spread that the humans had a bacterium capable of killing all the descolada, they had an even greater urgency. Hurry, they told the hive queen again and again. Hurry, so we can win free of this world before the humans decide to kill us all.

"I can do it, I think," said Jane. "If the ship is small and simple, the cargo almost nothing, the crew as few as possible, then I can hold the pattern of it in my mind. If the voyage is brief, the stay in Outspace very short. As for holding the locations of the start and finish in my mind, that's easy, child's play, I can do it within a millimeter, less. If I slept, I could do it in my sleep. So there's no need for it to endure acceleration or provide extended life support. The starship can be simple. A sealed environment, places to sit, light, heat. If in fact we can get there and I can hold it all together and bring us back, then we won't be out in space long enough to use up the oxygen in a small room."

They were all gathered in the Bishop's office to listen to her-- the whole Ribeira family, Jakt's and Valentine's family, the pequenino researchers, several priests and Filhos, and perhaps a dozen other leaders of the human colony. The Bishop had insisted on having the meeting in his office. "Because it's large enough," he had said, "and because if you're going to go out like Nimrod and hunt before the Lord, if you're going to send a ship like Babel out to heaven to seek the face of God, then I want to be there to plead with God to be merciful to you."

"How much of your capacity is left?" Ender asked Jane.

"Not much," she said. "As it is, every computer in the Hundred Worlds will be sluggish while we do it, as I use their memory to hold the pattern."

"I ask, because we want to try to perform an experiment while we're out there."

"Don't waffle about it, Andrew," said Ela. "We want to perform a miracle while we're there. If we get Outside it means that Grego and Olhado are probably right about what it's like out there. And that means that the rules are different. Things can be created just by comprehending the pattern of them. So I want to go. There's a chance that while I'm there, holding the pattern of the recolada virus in my mind, I might be able to create it. I might be able to bring back a virus that can't be made in realspace. Can you take me? Can you hold me there long enough to make the virus?"

"How long is that?" asked Jane.

"It should be instantaneous," said Grego. "The moment we arrive, whatever full patterns we hold in our minds should be created within a period of time too brief for humans to notice. The real time will be taken analyzing to see if, in fact, she's got the virus she wanted. Maybe five minutes."

"Yes," said Jane. "If I can do this at all, I can do it for five minutes."

"The rest of the crew," said Ender.

"The rest of the crew will be you and Miro," said Jane. "And no one else."

Grego protested loudest, but he was not alone.

"I'm a pilot," said Jakt.

"I'm the only pilot of this ship," said Jane.

"Olhado and I thought of it," said Grego.

"Ender and Miro will come because it can't be done safely without them. I dwell within Ender-- where he goes, he carries me with him. Miro, on the other hand, has become so close to me that I think he might be part of the pattern that is myself. I want him there because I may not be whole without him. No one else. I can't have anyone else in the pattern. Ela is the only one beyond these two."

"Then that's the crew," said Ender.

"With no argument," added Mayor Kovano.

"Will the hive queen build the ship?" asked Jane.

"She will," said Ender.

"Then I have only one more favor to ask. Ela, if I can give you the five minutes, can you also hold the pattern of another virus in your mind?"

"The virus for Path?" she asked.

"We owe them that, if we can, for the help they gave to us."

"I think so," she said, "or at least the differences between it and the normal descolada. That's all I can possibly hold of anything-- the differences."

"And how soon will all this happen?" asked the Mayor.

"However fast the hive queen can build the ship," said Jane. "We have only forty-eight days until the Hundred Worlds shut down their ansibles. I will survive that day, we know that now, but it will cripple me. It will take me awhile to relearn all my lost memories, if I ever can. Until that's happened, I can't possibly sustain the pattern of a ship to go Outside."

"The hive queen can have a ship as simple as this one built long before then," said Ender. "In a ship so small there's no chance of shuttling all the people and pequeninos off Lusitania before the fleet arrives, let alone before the ansible cut-off keeps Jane from being able to fly the ship. But there'll be time to take new, descolada-free pequenino communities-- a brother, a wife, and many pregnant little mothers-- to a dozen planets and establish them there. Time to take new hive queens in their cocoons, already fertilized to lay their first few hundred eggs, to a dozen worlds as well. If this works at all, if we don't just sit there like idiots in a cardboard box wishing we could fly, then we'll come back with peace for this world, freedom from the danger of the descolada, and safe

dispersal for the genetic heritage of the other species of ramen here. A week ago, it looked impossible. Now there's hope."

"Gracas a deus," said the Bishop.

Quara laughed.

Everyone looked at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was just thinking-- I heard a prayer, not many weeks ago. A prayer to Os Venerados, Grandfather Gusto and Grandmother Cida. That if there wasn't a way to solve the impossible problems facing us, they would petition God to open up the way."

"Not a bad prayer," said the Bishop. "And perhaps God has granted it."

"I know," said Quara. "That's what I was thinking. What if all this stuff about Outspace and Inspace, what if it was never real before. What if it only came to be true because of that prayer?"

"What of it?" asked the Bishop.

"Well, don't you think that would be funny?"

Apparently no one did.

Chapter 16 -- VOYAGE

<So the humans have their starship ready now, while the one you've been building for us is still incomplete.>

<The one they wanted was a box with a door. No propulsion, no life support, no cargo space. Yours and ours are far more complicated. We haven't slacked, and they'll be ready soon.>

<I'm really not complaining. I wanted Ender's ship to be ready first. It's the one that carries real hope.>

<For us as well. We agree with Ender and his people that the descolada must never be killed here on Lusitania, unless the recolada can somehow be made. But when we send new hive queens to other worlds, we'll kill the descolada on the starship that takes them, so there's no chance of polluting our new home. So that we can live without fear of destruction from this artificial varelse.>

<What you do on your ship is nothing to us.>

<With any luck, none of this will matter. Their new starship will find its way Outside, return with the recolada, set you free and us as well, and then the new ship will shuttle us all to as many worlds as we desire.>

<Will it work? The box you made for them?>

<We know the place where they're going is real; we call our very selves from there. And the bridge we made, the one that Ender calls Jane, is such a pattern as we've never seen before. If it can be done, such a one as that can do it. We never could.>

<Will you leave? If the new ship works?>

<We'll make daughter-queens who'll take my memories with them to other worlds. But we ourselves will stay here. This place where I came forth from my cocoon, it's my home forever.>

<So you're as rooted here as I am.>

<That's what daughters are for. To go where we will never go, to carry our memory on to places that we'll never see.>

<But we will see. Won't we? You said the philotic connection would remain.>

<We were thinking of the voyage across time. We live a long time, we hives, you trees. But our daughters and their daughters will outlive us. Nothing changes that.>

Qing-jao listened to them as they laid the choice before her.

"Why should I care what you decide?" she said, when they were finished. "The gods will laugh at you."

Father shook his head. "No they won't, my daughter, Gloriously Bright. The gods care nothing more for Path than any other world. The people of Lusitania are on the verge of creating a virus that can free us all. No more rituals, no more bondage to the disorder in our brains. So I ask you again, if we can do it, should we? It would cause disorder here. Wang-mu and I have planned how we'll proceed, how we'll announce what we are doing so that people will understand it, so there'll be a chance that the godspoken won't be slaughtered, but can step down gently from their privileges."

"Privileges are nothing," said Qing-jao. "You taught me that yourself. They're only the people's way of expressing their reverence for the gods."

"Alas, my daughter, if only I knew that more of the godspoken shared that humble view of our station. Too many of them think that it's their right to be acquisitive and oppressive, because the gods speak to them and not to others."

"Then the gods will punish them. I'm not afraid of your virus."

"But you are, Qing-jao, I see it."

"How can I tell my father that he does not see what he claims to see? I can only say that I must be blind."

"Yes, my Qing-jao, you are. Blind on purpose. Blind to your own heart. Because you tremble even now. You have never been sure that I was wrong. From the time Jane showed us the true nature of the speaking of the gods, you've been unsure of what was true."

"Then I'm unsure of sunrise. I'm unsure of breath."

"We're all unsure of breath, and the sun stays in its same place, day and night, neither rising nor falling. We are the ones who rise and fall."

"Father, I fear nothing from this virus."

"Then our decision is made. If the Lusitanians can bring us the virus, we'll use it."

Han Fei-tzu got up to leave her room.

But her voice stopped him before he reached the door. "Is this the disguise the punishment of the gods will take, then?"

"What?" he asked.

"When they punish Path for your iniquity in working against the gods who have given their mandate to Congress, will they disguise their punishment by making it seem to be a virus that silences them?"

"I wish dogs had torn my tongue out before I taught you to think that way."

"Dogs already are tearing at my heart," Qing-jao answered him. "Father, I beg you, don't do this. Don't let your rebelliousness provoke the gods into falling silent across the whole face of this world."

"I will, Qing-jao, so no more daughters or sons have to grow up slaves as you have been. When I think of your face pressed close to the floor, tracing the woodgrain, I want to cut the bodies of those who forced this thing upon you, cut them until their blood makes lines, which I will gladly trace, to know that they've been punished."

She wept. "Father, I beg you, don't provoke the gods."

"More than ever now I'm determined to release the virus, if it comes."

"What can I do to persuade you? If I say nothing, you will do it, and when I speak to beg you, you will do it all the more surely."

"Do you know how you could stop me? You could speak to me as if you knew the speaking of the gods is the product of a brain disorder, and then, when I know you see the world clear and true, you could persuade me with good arguments that such a swift, complete, and devastating change would be harmful, or whatever other argument you might raise."

"So to persuade my father, I must lie to him?"

"No, my Gloriously Bright. To persuade your father, you must show that you understand the truth."

"I understand the truth," said Qing-jao. "I understand that some enemy has stolen you from me. I understand that all I have left now is the gods, and Mother who is among them. I beg the gods to let me die and join her, so I don't have to suffer any more of the pain you cause me, but still they leave me here. I think that means they wish me still to worship them. Perhaps I'm not yet purified enough. Or perhaps they know that you will soon turn your heart around again, and come to me as you used to, speaking honorably of the gods and teaching me to be a true servant."

"That will never happen," said Han Fei-tzu.

"Once I thought you could someday be the god of Path. Now I see that, far from being the protector of this world, you are its darkest enemy."

Han Fei-tzu covered his face and left the room, weeping for his daughter. He could never persuade her as long as she heard the voice of the gods. But perhaps if they brought the virus, perhaps if the gods fell silent, she would listen to him then. Perhaps he could win her back to rationality.

They sat in the starship-- more like two metal bowls, one domed over the other, with a door in the side. Jane's design, faithfully executed by the hive queen and her workers, included many instruments on the outside of the ship. But even bristling with sensors it didn't resemble any kind of starship ever seen before. It was far too small, and there was no visible means of propulsion. The only power that could carry this ship anywhere was the unseeable aiua that Ender carried on board with him.

They faced each other in a circle. There were six chairs, because Jane's design allowed for the chance that the ship would be used again, to carry more people from world to world. They had taken every other seat, so they formed a triangle: Ender, Miro, Ela.

The good-byes had all been said. Sisters and brothers, other kin and many friends had come. One, though, was most painful in her absence. Novinha. Ender's wife, Miro's and Ela's mother. She would have no part of this. That was the only real sorrow at the parting.

The rest was all fear and excitement, hope and disbelief. They might be moments away from death. They might be moments away from filling the vials on Ela's lap with the viruses that would mean deliverance on two worlds. They might be the pioneers of a new kind of starflight that would save the species threatened by the M.D. Device.

They might also be three fools who would sit on the ground, in a grassy field just outside the compound of the human colony on Lusitania, until at last it grew so hot and stuffy inside that they had to emerge. No one waiting there would laugh, of course, but there'd be laughter throughout the town. It would be the laughter of despair. It would mean that there was no escape, no liberty, only more and more fear until death came in one of its many possible guises.

"Are you with us, Jane?" asked Ender.

The voice in his ear was quiet. "While I do this, Ender, I'll have no part of me that I can spare to talk to you."

"So you'll be with us, but mute," said Ender. "How will I know you're there?"

She laughed softly in his ear. "Foolish boy, Ender. If you're still there, I'm still inside you. And if I'm not inside you, you will have no 'there' to be."

Ender imagined himself breaking into a trillion constituent parts, scattering through chaos. Personal survival depended not only on Jane holding the pattern of the ship, but also on him being able to hold the pattern of his mind and body. Only he had no idea whether his mind was really strong enough to maintain that pattern, once he was where the laws of nature were not in force.

"Ready?" asked Jane.

"She asks if we're ready," said Ender.

Miro was already nodding. Ela bowed her head. Then, after a moment, she crossed herself, took firm hold on the rack of vials on her lap, and nodded.

"If we go and come again, Ela," said Ender, "then this was not a failure, even if you didn't create the virus that you wanted. If the ship works well, we can return another time. Don't think that everything depends on what you're able to imagine today."

She smiled. "I won't be surprised at failure, but I'm also ready for success. My team is ready to release hundreds of bacteria into the world, if I return with the recolada and we can then remove the descolada. It will be chancy, but within fifty years the world will be a self-regulating gaialogy again. I see a vision of deer and cattle in the tall grass of Lusitania, and eagles in the sky." Then she looked down again at the vials in her lap. "I also said a prayer to the Virgin, for the same Holy Ghost that created God in her womb to come make life again here in these jars."

"Amen to the prayer," said Ender. "And now, Jane, if you're ready, we can go."

Outside the little starship, the others waited. What did they expect? That the ship would start to smoke and jiggle? That there would be a thunderclap, a flash of light?

The ship was there. It was there, and still there, unmoving, unchanged. And then it was gone.

They felt nothing inside the ship when it happened. There was no sound, no movement to hint of motion from Inspace into Outspace.

But they knew the moment it occurred, because there were no longer three of them, but six.

Ender found himself seated between two people, a young man and a young woman. But he had no time even to glance at them, for all he could look at was the man seated in what had been the empty seat across from him.

"Miro," he whispered. For that was who it was. But not Miro the cripple, the damaged young man who had boarded the ship with him. That one was still sitting in the next chair to Ender's left. This Miro was the strong young man that Ender had first known. The man whose strength had been the hope of his family, whose beauty had been the pride of Ouanda's life, whose mind and whose heart had taken compassion on the pequeninos and refused to leave them without the benefits he thought that human culture might offer them. Miro, whole and restored.

Where had he come from?

"I should have known," said Ender. "We should have thought. The pattern of yourself that you hold in your mind, Miro-- it isn't the way you are, it's the way you were. "

The new Miro, the young Miro, he raised his head and smiled to Ender. "I thought of it," he said, and his speech was clear and beautiful, the words rolling easily off his tongue. "I hoped for it. I begged Jane to take me with her because of it. And it came true. Exactly as I longed for it."

"But now there are two of you," said Ela. She sounded horrified.

"No," said the new Miro. "Just me. Just the real me."

"But that one's still there," she said.

"Not for long, I think," said Miro. "That old shell is empty now."

And it was true. The old Miro slumped within his seat like a dead man. Ender knelt in front of him, touched him. He pressed his fingers to Miro's neck, feeling for a pulse.

"Why should the heart beat now?" said Miro. "I'm the place where Miro's aiua dwells."

When Ender took his fingers away from the old Miro's throat, the skin came away in a small puff of dust. Ender shied back. The head dropped forward off the shoulders and landed in the corpse's

lap. Then it dissolved into a whitish liquid. Ender jumped to his feet, backed away. He stepped on someone's toe.

"Ow," said Valentine.

"Watch where you're going," said a man.

Valentine isn't on this ship, thought Ender. And I know the man's voice, too.

He turned to face them, the man and woman who had appeared in the empty seats beside him.

Valentine. Impossibly young. The way she had looked when, as a young teenager, she had swum beside him in a lake on a private estate on Earth. The way she had looked when he loved her and needed her most, when she was the only reason he could think of to go on with his military training; when she was the only reason he could think of why the world might be worth the trouble of saving it.

"You can't be real," he said.

"Of course I am," she said. "You stepped on my foot, didn't you?"

"Poor Ender," said the young man. "Clumsy and stupid. Not a really good combination."

Now Ender knew him. "Peter," he said. His brother, his childhood enemy, at the age when he became Hegemon. The picture that had been playing on all the vids when Peter managed to arrange things so that Ender could never come home to Earth after his great victory.

"I thought I'd never see you face to face again," said Ender. "You died so long ago."

"Never believe a rumor of my death," said Peter. "I have as many lives as a cat. Also as many teeth, as many claws, and the same cheery, cooperative disposition."

"Where did you come from?"

Miro offered the answer. "They must have come from patterns in your mind, Ender, since you know them."

"They do," said Ender. "But why? It's our self-conception we're supposed to carry with us out here. The pattern by which we know ourselves."

"Is that so, Ender?" said Peter. "Then you must be really special. A personality so complicated it takes two people to contain it."

"There's no part of me in you," said Ender.

"And you'd better keep it that way," said Peter, leering. "It's girls I like, not dirty old men."

"I don't want you," said Ender.

"Nobody ever did," said Peter. "They wanted you. But they got me, didn't they? They got me up to here. Do you think I don't know my whole story? You and that book of lies, the Hegemon. So wise and understanding. How Peter Wiggin mellowed. How he turned out to be a wise and fair-minded ruler. What a joke. Speaker for the Dead indeed. All the time you wrote it, you knew the truth. You posthumously washed the blood from my hands, Ender, but you knew and I knew that as long as I was alive, I wanted blood there."

"Leave him alone," said Valentine. "He told the truth in the Hegemon."

"Still protecting him, little angel?"

"No!" cried Ender. "I've done with you, Peter. You're out of my life, gone for three thousand years."

"You can run but you can't hide!"

"Ender! Ender, stop it! Ender!"

He turned. It was Ela crying out to him.

"I don't know what's going on here, but stop it! We only have a few minutes left. Help me with the tests."

She was right. Whatever was going on with Miro's new body, with Peter's and Valentine's reappearance here, the important thing was the descolada. Had Ela succeeded in transforming it? Creating the recolada? And the virus that would transform the people of Path? If Miro could remake his body, and Ender could somehow conjure up the ghosts of his past and make them flesh again, it was possible, really possible, that Ela's vials now contained the viruses whose patterns she had held in her mind.

"Help me," whispered Ela again.

Ender and Miro-- the new Miro, his hand strong and sure-- reached out, took the vials she offered them, and began the test. It was a negative test-- if the bacteria, algae, and tiny worms they added to the tubes remained for several minutes, unaffected, then there was no descolada in the vials. Since the vials had been teeming with the living virus when they boarded the ship, that would be proof that something, at least, had happened to neutralize them. Whether it was truly the recolada or simply a dead or ineffective descolada remained to be discovered when they returned.

The worms and algae and bacteria underwent no transformations. In tests beforehand, on Lusitania, the solution containing the bacteria turned from blue to yellow in the presence of the descolada; now it stayed blue. On Lusitania the tiny worms had quickly died and, graying husks, floated to the surface; now they wriggled on and on, staying the purplish-brown color that in them,

at least, meant life. And the algae, instead of breaking apart and dissolving completely away, remained in the thin strands and tendrils of life.

"Done, then," said Ender.

"At least we can hope," said Ela.

"Sit down," said Miro. "If we're done, she'll take us back."

Ender sat. He looked at the seat where Miro had been sitting. His old crippled body was no longer identifiably human. It continued crumbling, the pieces breaking up into dust or flowing away as liquid. Even the clothing was dissolving into nothing.

"It's not part of my pattern anymore," said Miro. "There's nothing to hold it together anymore."

"What about these?" demanded Ender. "Why aren't they dissolving?"

"Or you?" asked Peter. "Why don't you dissolve? Nobody needs you now. You're a tired old fart who can't even hold onto his woman. And you never even fathered a child, you pathetic old eunuch. Make way for a real man. No one ever needed you-- everything you've ever done I could have done better, and everything I did you never could have matched."

Ender buried his face in his hands. This was not an outcome he could have imagined in his worst nightmares. Yes, he knew they were going out into a place where things might be created out of his mind. But it had never occurred to him that Peter was still lingering there. He thought he had expunged that old hatred long ago.

And Valentine-- why would he create another Valentine? This one so young and perfect, sweet and beautiful? There was a real Valentine waiting for him back on Lusitania-- what would she think, seeing what he created out of his own mind? Perhaps it would be flattering to know how closely she was held in his heart; but she would also know that what he treasured was what she used to be, not what she was now.

The darkest and the brightest secrets of his heart would both stand exposed as soon as the door opened and he had to step back out onto the surface of Lusitania again.

"Dissolve," he said to them. "Crumble away."

"You do it first, old man," said Peter. "Your life is over, and mine is just beginning. All I had to try for the first time was Earth, one tired old planet-- it was as easy as it would be for me to reach out and kill you with my bare hands, right now, if I wanted to. Snap your little neck like a dry noodle."

"Try it," whispered Ender. "I'm not the frightened little boy anymore."

"Nor are you a match for me," said Peter. "You never were, you never will be. You have too much heart. You're like Valentine. You flinch away from doing what has to be done. It makes you soft and weak. It makes you easy to destroy."

A sudden flash of light. What was it, death in Outspace after all? Had Jane lost the pattern in her mind? Were they blowing up, or failing into a sun?

No. It was the door opening. It was the light of the Lusitanian morning breaking into the relative darkness of the inside of the ship.

"Are you coming out?" cried Grego. He stuck his head into the ship. "Are you--"

Then he saw them. Ender could see him silently counting.

"Nossa Senhora," whispered Grego. "Where the hell did they come from?"

"Out of Ender's totally screwed-up head," said Peter.

"From old and tender memory," said the new Valentine.

"Help me with the viruses," said Ela.

Ender reached out for them, but it was Miro she gave them to. She didn't explain, just looked away from him, but he understood. What had happened to him Outside was too strange for her to accept. Whatever Peter and this young new Valentine might be, they shouldn't exist. Miro's creation of a new body for himself made sense, even if it was terrible to watch the old corpse break into forgotten nothingness. Ela's focus had been so pure that she created nothing outside the vials she had brought for that purpose. But Ender had dredged up two whole people, both obnoxious in their own way-- the new Valentine because she was a mockery of the real one, who surely waited just outside the door. And Peter managed to be obnoxious even as he put a spin on all his taunting that was at once dangerous and suggestive.

"Jane," whispered Ender. "Jane, are you with me?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Did you see all this?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Do you understand?"

"I'm very tired. I've never been tired before. I've never done something so very hard. It used up-- all my attention at once. And two more bodies, Ender. Making me pull them into the pattern like that-- I don't know how I did it."

"I didn't mean to." But she didn't answer.

"Are you coming or what?" asked Peter. "The others are all out the door. With all those little urine-sample jars."

"Ender, I'm afraid," said young Valentine. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

"Neither do I," said Ender. "God forgive me if this somehow hurts you. I never would have brought you back to hurt you."

"I know," she said.

"No," said Peter. "Sweet old Ender conjures up a nubile young woman out of his own brain, who looks just like his sister in her teens. Mmm, mmm, Ender, old man, is there no limit to your depravity?"

"Only a shamefully sick mind would even think of such a thing," Ender murmured.

Peter laughed and laughed.

Ender took young Val by the hand and led her to the door. He could feel her hand sweating and trembling in his. She felt so real. She was real. And yet there, as soon as he stood in the doorway, he could see the real Valentine, middle-aged and heading toward old, yet still the gracious, beautiful woman he had known and loved for all these years. That's the true sister, the one I love as my second self. What was this young girl doing in my mind?

It was clear that Grego and Ela had said enough that people knew something strange had happened. And when Miro had strode from the ship, hale and vigorous, clear of speech and so exuberant he looked ready to burst into song-- that had brought on a buzz of excitement. A miracle. There were miracles out there, wherever the starship went.

Ender's appearance, though, brought a hush. Few would have known, at a glance, that the young girl with him was Valentine in her youth-- no one there but Valentine herself had known her then. And no one but Valentine was likely to recognize Peter Wiggin in his vigorous young manhood; the pictures in the history texts were usually of the holos taken late in his life, when cheap, permanent holography was first coming into its own.

But Valentine knew. Ender stood before the door, young Val beside him, Peter emerging just behind, and Valentine knew them both. She stepped forward, away from Jakt, until she stood before Ender face to face.

"Ender," she said. "Dear sweet tormented boy, was this what you create, when you go to a place where you can make anything you want?" She reached out her hand and touched the young copy of herself upon the cheek. "So beautiful," she said. "I was never this beautiful, Ender. She's perfect. She's all I wanted to be but never was."

"Aren't you glad to see me, Val, my dearest sweetheart Demosthenes?" Peter pushed his way between Ender and young Val. "Don't you have tender memories of me, as well? Am I not more beautiful than you remembered? I'm certainly glad to see you. You've done so well with the persona I created for you. Demosthenes. I made you, and you don't even thank me for it."

"Thank you, Peter," whispered Valentine. She looked again at young Val. "What will you do with them?"

"Do with us?" said Peter. "We're not his to do anything with. He may have brought me back, but I'm my own man now, as I always was."

Valentine turned back to the crowd, still awestruck at the strangeness of events. After all, they had seen three people board the ship, had seen it disappear, then reappear on the exact spot no more than seven minutes later-- and instead of three people emerging, there were five, two of them strangers. Of course they had stayed to gawk.

But there'd be no answers for anyone today. Except on the most important question of all. "Has Ela taken the vials to the lab?" she asked. "Let's break it up here, and go see what Ela's made for us in outspace."

Chapter 17 -- ENDER'S CHILDREN

<Poor Ender. Now his nightmares walk around with him on their own two legs.>

<It was a strange way for him to have children after all.>

<You're the one who calls aiuas out of chaos. How did he find souls for these?>

<What makes you think he did?>

<They walk. They talk.>

<The one named Peter came and talked to you, didn't he?>

<As arrogant a human as I ever met.>

<How do you think it happens that he was born knowing how to speak the language of the fathertrees?>

<I don't know. Ender created him. Why shouldn't he create him knowing how to speak?>

<Ender goes on creating them both, hour by hour. We've felt the pattern in him. He may not understand it himself, but there is no difference between these two and himself. Different bodies,

perhaps, but they are part of him all the same. Whatever they do, whatever they say, it is Ender's aiua, acting and speaking.>

<Does he know this?>

<We doubt it.>

<Will you tell him?>

<Not until he asks.>

<When do you think that will be?>

<When he already knows the answer.>

It was the last day of the test of the recolada. Word of its success-- so far-- had already spread through the human colony-- and, Ender assumed, among all the pequeninos as well. Ela's assistant named Glass had volunteered to be the experimental subject. He had lived now for three days in the same isolation chamber where Planter had sacrificed himself. This time, though, the descolada had been killed within him by the viricide bacterium he had helped Ela devise. And this time, performing the functions that the descolada had once fulfilled, was Ela's new recolada virus. It had worked perfectly. He was not even slightly ill. Only one last step remained before the recolada could be pronounced a full success.

An hour before that final test, Ender, with his absurd entourage of Peter and young Val, was meeting with Quara and Grego in Grego's cell.

"The pequeninos have accepted it," Ender explained to Quara. "They're willing to take the risk of killing the descolada and replacing it with the recolada, after testing it with Glass alone."

"I'm not surprised," said Quara.

"I am," said Peter. "The piggies obviously have a deathwish as a species."

Ender sighed. Though he was no longer a frightened little boy, and Peter was no longer older and larger and stronger than he, there was still no love in Ender's heart for this simulacrum of his brother that he had somehow created Outside. He was everything Ender had feared and hated in his childhood, and it was infuriating and frightening to have him back again.

"What do you mean?" said Grego. "If the pequeninos didn't consent to it, then the descolada would make them too dangerous for humankind to allow them to survive."

"Of course," said Peter, smiling. "The physicist is an expert on strategy."

"What Peter is saying," said Ender, "is that if he were in charge of the pequeninos-- which he no doubt would like to be-- he would never willingly give up the descolada until he had won something from humanity in exchange for it."

"To the surprise of all, the aging boy wonder still has a tiny spark of wit," said Peter. "Why should they kill off their only weapon that humanity has any reason to fear? The Lusitania Fleet is still coming, and it still has the M.D. Device aboard. Why don't they make Andrew here get on that magic flying football of his and go meet the fleet and lay down the law?"

"Because they'd shoot me down like a dog," said Ender. "The pequeninos are doing this because it's right and fair and decent. Words that I'll define for you later."

"I know the words," said Peter. "I also know what they mean."

"You do?" asked young Val. Her voice, as always, was a surprise-- soft, mild, and yet able to pierce the conversation. Ender remembered that Valentine's voice had always been that way. Impossible not to listen to, though she so rarely raised her voice.

"Right. Fair. Decent," said Peter. The words sounded filthy in his mouth. "Either the person saying them believes in those concepts or not. If not, then those words mean that he's got somebody standing behind me with a knife in his hand. And if he does believe them, then those words mean that I'm going to win."

"I'll tell you what they mean," said Quara. "They mean that we're going to congratulate the pequeninos-- and ourselves-- for wiping out a sentient species that may exist nowhere else in the universe."

"Don't kid yourself," said Peter.

"Everybody's so sure that the descolada is a designed virus," said Quara, "but nobody's considered the alternative-- that a much more primitive, vulnerable version of the descolada evolved naturally, and then changed itself to its present form. It might be a designed virus, yes, but who did the designing? And now we're killing it without attempting conversation."

Peter grinned at her, then at Ender. "I'm surprised that this weaselly little conscience is not your blood offspring," he said. "She's as obsessed with finding reasons to feel guilty as you and Val."

Ender ignored him and attempted to answer Quara. "We are killing it. Because we can't wait any longer. The descolada is trying to destroy us, and there's no time to dither. If we could, we would."

"I understand all that," said Quara. "I cooperated, didn't I? It just makes me sick to hear you talking as if the pequeninos were somehow brave about collaborating in an act of xenocide in order to save their own skin."

"Us or them, kid," said Peter. "Us or them."

"You can't possibly understand," said Ender, "how ashamed I am to hear my own arguments on his lips."

Peter laughed. "Andrew pretends not to like me," he said. "But the kid's a fraud. He admires me. He worships me. He always has. Just like his pretty little angel here."

Peter poked at young Val. She didn't shy away. She acted instead as if she hadn't even felt his finger in the flesh of her upper arm.

"He worships us both. In his twisted little mind, she's the moral perfection that he can never achieve. And I am the power and genius that was always just out of poor little Andrew's reach. It was really quite modest of him, don't you think? For all these years, he's carried his betters with him inside his mind."

Young Val reached out and took Quara's hand. "It's the worst thing you'll ever do in your life," she said, "helping the people you love to do something that in your heart you believe is deeply wrong."

Quara wept.

But it was not Quara that worried Ender. He knew that she was strong enough to hold the moral contradictions of her own actions, and still remain sane. Her ambivalence toward her own actions would probably mellow her, make her less certain from moment to moment that her judgment was absolutely correct, and that all who disagreed with her were absolutely wrong. If anything, at the end of this she would emerge more whole and compassionate and, yes, decent than she had been before in her hotheaded youth. And perhaps young Val's gentle touch-- along with her words naming exactly the pain that Quara was feeling-- would help her to heal all the sooner.

What worried Ender was the way Grego was looking at Peter with such admiration. Of all people, Grego should have learned what Peter's words could lead to. Yet here he was, worshipping Ender's walking nightmare. I have to get Peter out of here, thought Ender, or he'll have even more disciples on Lusitania than Grego had-- and he'll use them far more effectively and, in the long run, the effect will be more deadly.

Ender had little hope that Peter would turn out to be like the real Peter, who grew to be a strong and worthy hegemon. This Peter, after all, was not a fully fleshed-out human being, full of ambiguity and surprise. Rather he had been created out of the caricature of attractive evil that lingered in the deepest recesses of Ender's unconscious mind. There would be no surprises here. Even as they prepared to save Lusitania from the descolada, Ender had brought a new danger to them, potentially just as destructive.

But not as hard to kill.

Again he stifled the thought, though it had come up a dozen times since he first realized that it was Peter sitting at his left hand in the starship. I created him. He isn't real, just my nightmare. If I kill him, it wouldn't be murder, would it? It would be the moral equivalent of-- what? Waking up? I

have imposed my nightmare on the world, and if I killed him the world would just be waking up to find the nightmare gone, nothing more.

If it had been Peter alone, Ender might have talked himself into such a murder, or at least he thought he might. But it was young Val who stopped him. Fragile, beautiful of soul-- if Peter could be killed, so could she. If he should be killed, then perhaps she ought to be as well-- she had as little right to exist; she was as unnatural, as narrow and distorted in her creation. But he could never do that. She must be protected, not harmed. And if the one was real enough to remain alive, so must the other be. If harming young Val would be murder, so would harming Peter. They were spawned in the same creation.

My children, thought Ender bitterly. My darling little offspring, who leaped fully-formed from my head like Athena from the mind of Zeus. Only what I have here isn't Athena. More like Diana and Hades. The virgin huntress and the master of hell.

"We'd better go," said Peter. "Before Andrew talks himself into killing me."

Ender smiled wanly. That was the worst thing-- that Peter and young Val seemed to have come into existence knowing more about his own mind than he knew himself. In time, he hoped, that intimate knowledge of him would fade. But in the meantime, it added to the humiliation, the way that Peter taunted him about thoughts that no one else would have guessed. And young Val-- he knew from the way she looked at him sometimes that she also knew. He had no secrets anymore.

"I'll go home with you," Val said to Quara.

"No," Quara answered. "I've done what I've done. I'll be there to see Glass through to the end of his test."

"We wouldn't want to miss our chance to suffer openly," said Peter.

"Shut up, Peter," said Ender.

Peter grinned. "Oh, come on. You know that Quara's just milking this for all it's worth. It's just her way of making herself the star of the show-- everybody being careful and tender with her when they should be cheering for what Ela accomplished. Scene-stealing is so low, Quara-- right up your alley."

Quara might have answered, if Peter's words had not been so outrageous and if they had not contained a germ of truth that confused her. Instead it was young Val who fixed Peter with a cold glare and said, "Shut up, Peter."

The same words Ender had said, only when young Val said them, they worked. He grinned at her, and winked-- a conspiratorial wink, as if to say, I'll let you play your little game, Val, but don't think I don't know that you're sucking up to everybody by being so sweet. But he said no more as they left Grego in his cell.

Mayor Kovano joined them outside. "A great day in the history of humanity," he said. "And by sheerest accident, I get to be in all the pictures." The others laughed-- especially Peter, who had struck up a quick and easy friendship with Kovano.

"It's no accident," said Peter. "A lot of people in your position would have panicked and wrecked everything. It took an open mind and a lot of courage to let things move the way they have."

Ender almost laughed aloud at Peter's obvious flattery. But flattery is never so obvious to the recipient. Oh, Kovano punched Peter in the arm and denied everything, but Ender could see that he loved hearing it, and that Peter had already earned more real influence with Kovano than Ender had. Don't these people see how Peter is cynically winning them all over?

The only one who saw Peter with anything like Ender's fear and loathing was the Bishop-- but in his case it was theological prejudice, not wisdom, that kept him from being sucked in. Within hours of their return from Outside, the Bishop had called upon Miro, urging him to accept baptism. "God has performed a great miracle in your healing," he said, "but the way in which it was done-- trading one body for another, instead of directly healing the old one-- leaves us in the dangerous position that your spirit inhabits a body that has never been baptized. And since baptism is performed on the flesh, I fear that you may be unsanctified." Miro wasn't very interested in the Bishop's ideas about miracles-- he didn't see God as having much to do with his healing-- but the sheer restoration of his strength and his speech and his freedom made him so ebullient that he probably would have agreed to anything. The baptism would take place early next week, at the first services to be held in the new chapel.

But the Bishop's eagerness to baptize Miro was not echoed in his attitude toward Peter and young Val. "It's absurd to think of these monstrous things as people," he said. "They can't possibly have souls. Peter is an echo of someone who already lived and died, with his own sins and repentances, his life's course already measured and his place in heaven or hell already assigned. And as for this-- girl, this mockery of feminine grace-- she cannot be who she claims to be, for that place is already occupied by a living woman. There can be no baptism for the deceptions of Satan. By creating them, Andrew Wiggin has built his own Tower of Babel, trying to reach into heaven to take the place of God. He cannot be forgiven until he takes them back to hell and leaves them there."

Did Bishop Peregrino imagine for one moment that that was not exactly what he longed to do? But Jane was adamant about it, when Ender offered the idea. "That would be foolish," she said. "Why do you think they would go, for one thing? And for another, what makes you think you wouldn't simply create two more? Haven't you ever heard the story of the sorcerer's apprentice? Taking them back there would be like cutting the brooms in half again-- all you'd end up with is more brooms. Leave bad enough alone."

So here they were, walking to the lab together-- Peter, with Mayor Kovano completely in his pocket. Young Val, who had won over Quara no less completely, though her purpose was altruistic instead of exploitative. And Ender, their creator, furious and humiliated and afraid.

I made them-- therefore I'm responsible for everything they do. And in the long run, they will both do terrible harm. Peter, because harm is his nature-- at least the way I conceived him in the patterns

of my mind. And young Val, despite her innate goodness, because her very existence is a deep injury to my sister Valentine.

"Don't let Peter goad you so," whispered Jane in his ear.

"People think he belongs to me," Ender subvocalized. "They figure that he must be harmless because I'm harmless. But I have no control over him."

"I think they know that."

"I've got to get him away from here."

"I'm working on that," said Jane.

"Maybe I should pack them up and take them off to some deserted planet somewhere. Do you know Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*?"

"Caliban and Ariel, is that what they are?"

"Exile, since I can't kill them."

"I'm working on it," said Jane. "After all, they're part of you, aren't they? Part of the pattern of your mind? What if I can use them in your place, to allow me to go Outside? Then we could have three starships, and not just one."

"Two," said Ender. "I'm never going Outside again."

"Not even for a microsecond? If I take you out and then right back in again? There was no need to linger there."

"It wasn't the lingering that did the harm," said Ender. "Peter and young Val were there instantly. If I go Outside again, I'll create them again."

"Fine," she said. "Two starships, then. One with Peter, one with young Val. Let me figure it out, if I can. We can't just make that one voyage and then abandon faster-than-light flight forever."

"Yes we can," said Ender. "We got the recolada. Miro got himself a healthy body. That's enough--we'll work everything else out ourselves."

"Wrong," said Jane. "We still have to transport pequeninos and hive queens off this planet before the fleet comes. We still have to get the transformational virus to Path, to set those people free."

"I won't go Outside again."

"Even if I can't use Peter and young Val to carry my aiua? You'd let the pequeninos and the hive queen be destroyed because you're afraid of your own unconscious mind?"

"You don't understand how dangerous Peter is."

"Perhaps not. But I do understand how dangerous the Little Doctor is. And if you weren't so wrapped up in your own misery, Ender, you'd know that even if we end up with five hundred little Peters and Vals running around, we've got to use this starship to carry pequeninos and the hive queen to other worlds."

He knew she was right. He had known it all along. That didn't mean that he was prepared to admit it.

"Just work on trying to move yourself into Peter and young Val," he subvocalized. "Though God help us if Peter is able to create things when he goes Outside."

"I doubt he can," said Jane. "He's not as smart as he thinks he is."

"Yes he is," said Ender. "And if you doubt it, you're not as smart as you think you are."

Ela was not the only one who prepared for Glass's final test by going to visit Planter. His mute tree was still only a sapling, hardly a balance to Rooter's and Human's sturdy trunks. But it was around that sapling that the surviving pequeninos had gathered. And, like Ela, they had gathered to pray. It was a strange and silent kind of prayer service. The pequenino priests offered no pomp, no ceremony. They simply knelt with the others, and they murmured in their several languages. Some prayed in Brothers' Language, some in tree language. Ela supposed that what she was hearing from the wives gathered there was their own regular language, though it might as easily be the holy language they used to speak to the mothertree. And there were also human languages coming from pequenino lips-- Stark and Portuguese alike, and there might even have been some ancient Church Latin from one of the pequeninos priests. It was a virtual Babel, and yet she felt great unity. They prayed at the martyr's tomb-- all that was left of himself-- for the life of the brother who was following after him. If Glass died utterly today, he would only echo Planter's sacrifice. And if he passed into the third life, it would be a life owed to Planter's courage and example.

Because it was Ela who had brought back the recolada from Outside, they honored her with a brief time alone at the very trunk of Planter's tree. She wrapped her hand around the slender wooden pole, wishing there were more of his life in it. Was Planter's aiua lost now, wandering in the wherelessness of Outside? Or had God in fact taken it as his very soul and brought it into heaven, where Planter now communed with the saints?

Planter, pray for us. Intercede for us. As my venerated grandparents carried my prayer to the Father, go now to Christ for us and plead with him to have mercy on all your brothers and sisters. Let the recolada carry Glass into the third life, so that we can, in good conscience, spread the recolada through the world to replace the murderous descolada. Then the lion can lie down with the lamb indeed, and there can be peace in this place.

Not for the first time, though, Ela had her doubts. She was certain that their course was the right one-- she had none of Quara's qualms about destroying the descolada throughout Lusitania. But what she wasn't sure of was whether she should have based the recolada on the oldest samples of the descolada they had collected. If in fact the descolada had caused recent pequenino belligerence, their hunger to spread to new places, then she could consider herself as restoring the pequeninos to their previous "natural" condition. But then, the previous condition was just as much a product of the descolada's gaialogical balancing act-- it only seemed more natural because it was the condition the pequeninos were in when humans arrived. So she could just as easily see herself as causing a behavioral modification of an entire species, conveniently removing much of their aggressiveness so that there would be less likelihood of conflict with humans in the future. I am making good Christians of them now, whether they like it or not. And the fact that Human and Rooter both approve of this doesn't remove the onus from me, if this should turn out ultimately to the pequeninos' harm.

O God, forgive me for playing God in the lives of these children of yours. When Planter's aiua comes before you to plead for us, grant the prayer he carries on our behalf-- but only if it is your will to have his species altered so. Help us do good, but stop us if we would unwittingly cause harm. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

She took a tear from her cheek onto her finger, and pressed it against the smooth bark of Planter's trunk. You aren't there to feel this, Planter, not inside the tree. But you feel it all the same, I do believe that. God would not let such a noble soul as yours be lost in darkness.

It was time to go. Gentle brothers' hands touched her, pulled at her, drew her onward to the lab where Glass was waiting in isolation for his passage into the third life.

When Ender had visited with Planter, he had been surrounded with medical equipment, lying on a bed. It was very different now inside the isolation chamber. Glass was in perfect health, and though he was wired up to all the monitoring devices, he was not bed-bound. Playful and happy, he could scarcely contain his eagerness to proceed.

And now that Ela and the other pequeninos had come, it could begin.

The only wall maintaining his isolation now was the disruptor field; outside it, the pequeninos who had gathered to watch his passage could see all that transpired. They were the only ones who watched in the open, however. Perhaps out of a sense of delicacy for pequenino feelings, or perhaps so they could have a wall between them and the brutality of this pequenino ritual, the humans had all gathered inside the lab, where only a window and the monitors let them see what would actually happen to Glass.

Glass waited until the sterile-suited brothers were in place beside him, wooden knives in hand, before he tore up capim and chewed it. It was the anesthetic that would make this bearable for him. But it was also the first time that a brother bound for the third life had chewed native grass that

contained no descolada virus within it. If Ela's new virus was right, then the capim here would work as the descolada-ruled capim had always worked.

"If I pass into the third life," said Glass, "the honor belongs to God and to his servant Planter, not to me."

It was fitting that Glass had chosen to use his last words of brother-speech to praise Planter. But his graciousness did not change the fact that thinking of Planter's sacrifice caused many among the humans to weep; hard as it was to interpret pequenino emotions, Ender had no doubt that the chattering sounds from the pequeninos gathered outside were also weeping, or some other emotion appropriate to Planter's memory. But Glass was wrong to think that there was no honor for him in this. Everyone knew that failure was still possible, that despite all the cause for hope they had, there was no certainty that Ela's recolada would have the power to take a brother into the third life.

The sterile-suited brothers raised their knives and set to work. Not me, this time, thought Ender. Thank God I don't have to wield a knife to cause a brother's death.

Yet he didn't avert his gaze, as so many others in the lab were doing. The blood and gore were not new to him, and even if that made it no less pleasant, at least he knew that he could bear it. And what Glass could bear to do, Ender could bear to witness. That was what a speaker for the dead was supposed to do, wasn't it? Witness. He watched as much as he could see of the ritual, as they opened up Glass's living body and planted his organs in the earth, so the tree could start to grow while Glass's mind was still alert and alive. Through it all, Glass made no sound or movement that suggested pain. Either his courage was beyond reckoning, or the recolada had done its work in the capim grass as well, so that it maintained its anesthetic properties.

At last it was done, and the brothers who had taken him into the third life returned to the sterile chamber, where, once their suits were cleansed of the recolada and viricide bacteria, they shed them and returned naked into the lab. They were very solemn, but Ender thought he could see the excitement and exultation that they concealed. All had gone well. They had felt Glass's body respond to them. Within hours, perhaps minutes, the first leaves of the young tree should arise. And they were sure in their hearts that it would happen.

Ender also noticed that one of them was a priest. He wondered what the Bishop would say, if he knew. Old Peregrino had proved himself to be quite adaptable to assimilating an alien species into the Catholic faith, and adapting ritual and doctrine to fit their peculiar needs. But that didn't change the fact that Peregrino was an old man who didn't enjoy the thought of priests taking part in rituals that, despite their clear resemblance to the crucifixion, were still not of the recognized sacraments. Well, these brothers knew what they were doing. Whether they had told the Bishop of one of his priests' participation or not, Ender wouldn't mention it; nor would any of the other humans present, if indeed any of them noticed.

Yes, the tree was growing, and with great vigor, the leaves visibly rising as they watched. But it would still be many hours, days perhaps, before they knew if it was a fathertree, with Glass still alive and conscious within it. A time of waiting, in which Glass's tree must grow in perfect isolation.

If only I could find a place, thought Ender, in which I could also be isolated, in which I could work out the strange things that have happened to me, without interference.

But he was not a pequenino, and whatever unease he suffered from was not a virus that could be killed, or driven from his life. His disease was at the root of his identity, and he didn't know if he could ever be rid of it without destroying himself in the process. Perhaps, he thought, Peter and Val represent the total of who I am; perhaps if they were gone, there'd be nothing left. What part of my soul, what action in my life is there that can't be explained as one or the other of them, acting out his or her will within me?

Am I the sum of my siblings? Or the difference between them? What is the peculiar arithmetic of my soul?

Valentine tried not to be obsessed with this young girl that Ender had brought back with him from Outside. Of course she knew it was her younger self as he remembered her, and she even thought it was rather sweet of him to carry inside his heart such a powerful memory of her at that age. She alone, of all the people on Lusitania, knew why it was at that age that she lingered in his unconscious. He had been in Battle School till then, cut off completely from his family. Though he could not have known it, she knew that their parents had pretty much forgotten him. Not forgotten that he existed, of course, but forgotten him as a presence in their lives. He simply wasn't there, wasn't their responsibility anymore. Having given him away to the state, they were absolved. He would have been more a part of their lives if he had died; as it was, they didn't have even a grave to visit. Valentine didn't blame them for this-- it proved that they were resilient and adaptable. But she wasn't able to mimic them. Ender was always with her, in her heart. And when, after being inwardly battered as he was forced to meet all the challenges they threw at him in Battle School, Ender now resolved to give up on the whole enterprise-- when he, in effect, went on strike-- the officer charged with turning him into a pliant tool came to her. Brought her to Ender. Gave them time together-- the same man who had torn them apart and left such deep wounds in their hearts. She healed her brother then-- enough that he could go back and save humanity by destroying the buggers.

Of course he holds me in his memory at that age, more powerfully than any of our countless experiences together since. Of course when his unconscious mind brings forth its most intimate baggage, it is the girl I was then who lingers most deeply in his heart.

She knew all this, she understood all this, she believed all this. Yet still it rankled, still it hurt that this almost mindlessly perfect creature was what he really thought of her all along. That the Valentine that Ender truly loved was a creature of impossible purity. It was for the sake of this imaginary Valentine that he was so close a companion to me all the years before I married Jakt. Unless it was because I married Jakt that he returned to this childish vision of me.

Nonsense. There was nothing to be gained by trying to imagine what this young girl meant. Regardless of the manner of her creation, she was here now, and must be dealt with.

Poor Ender-- he seemed to understand nothing. He actually thought at first that he should keep young Val with him. "Isn't she my daughter, after a fashion?" he had asked.

"After no fashion is she your daughter," she had answered. "If anything, she's mine. And it is certainly not proper for you to take her into your home, alone. Especially since Peter is there, and he isn't the most trustworthy co-guardian who ever lived." Ender still didn't fully agree-- he would rather have got rid of Peter than Val-- but he complied, and since then Val had lived in Valentine's house. Valentine's intention had been to become the girl's friend and mentor, but in the event she simply couldn't do it. She wasn't comfortable enough in Val's company. She kept finding reasons to leave home when Val was there; she kept feeling inordinately grateful when Ender came to let her tag along with him and Peter.

What finally happened was that, as so often before, Plikt silently stepped in and solved the problem. Plikt became Val's primary companion and guardian in Valentine's house. When Val wasn't with Ender, she was with Plikt. And this morning Plikt had suggested setting up a house of her own-- for her and Val. Perhaps I was too hasty in agreeing, thought Valentine. But it's probably as hard on Val to share a house with me as for me to share a house with her.

Now, though, watching as Plikt and Val entered the new chapel on their knees and crawled forward-- as all the other humans who entered had also crawled-- to kiss Bishop Peregrino's ring before the altar, Valentine realized that she had done nothing for "Val's own good," whatever she might have told herself. Val was completely self-contained, unflappable, calm. Why should Valentine imagine that she could make young Val either more or less happy, more or less comfortable? I am irrelevant to this girlchild's life. But she is not irrelevant to mine. She is at once an affirmation and a denial of the most important relationship of my childhood, and of much of my adulthood as well. I wish that she had crumbled into nothingness Outside, like Miro's old crippled body did. I wish I had never had to face myself like this.

And it was herself she was facing. Ela had run that test immediately. Young Val and Valentine were genetically identical.

"But it makes no sense," Valentine protested. "Ender could hardly have memorized my genetic code. There couldn't possibly have been a pattern of that code in the starship with him."

"Am I supposed to explain it?" asked Ela.

Ender had suggested a possibility-- that young Val's genetic code was fluid until she and Valentine actually met, and then the phylotes of Val's body had formed themselves into the pattern they found in Valentine's.

Valentine kept her own opinion to herself, but she doubted that Ender's guess was right. Young Val had had Valentine's genes from the first moment, because any person who so perfectly fit Ender's vision of Valentine could not have any other genes; the natural law that Jane herself was helping to maintain within the starship would have required it. Or perhaps there was some force that shaped and gave order even to a place of such utter chaos. It hardly mattered, except that

however annoyingly perfect and uncomplaining and unlike me this new pseudo-Val might be, Ender's vision of her had been true enough that genetically they were the same. His vision couldn't be much off the mark. Perhaps I really was that perfect then, and only got my rough edges during the years since then. Perhaps I really was that beautiful. Perhaps I really was so young.

They knelt before the Bishop. Plikt kissed his ring, though she owed no part of the penance of Lusitania.

When it came time for young Val to kiss the ring, however, the Bishop pulled away his hand and turned away. A priest came forward and told them to go to their seats.

"How can I?" said young Val. "I haven't given my penance yet."

"You have no penance," said the priest. "The Bishop told me before you came; you weren't here when the sin was committed, so you have no part in the penance."

Young Val looked at him very sadly and said, "I was created by someone other than God. That's why the Bishop won't receive me. I'll never have communion while he lives."

The priest looked very sad-- it was impossible not to feel sorry for young Val, for her simplicity and sweetness made her seem fragile, and the person who hurt her therefore had to feel clumsy for having damaged such a tender thing. "Until the Pope can decide," he said. "All this is very hard."

"I know," whispered young Val. Then she came and sat down between Plikt and Valentine.

Our elbows touch, thought Valentine. A daughter who is perfectly myself, as if I had cloned her thirteen years ago.

But I didn't want another daughter, and I certainly didn't want a duplicate of me. She knows that. She feels it. And so she suffers something that I never suffered-- she feels unwanted and unloved by those who are most like her.

How does Ender feel about her? Does he also wish that she would go away? Or does he yearn to be her brother, as he was my young brother so many years ago? When I was that age, Ender had not yet committed xenocide. But then, he had not yet spoken for the dead, either. The Hive Queen, The Hegemon, The Life of Human-- all that was beyond him then.

He was just a child, confused, despairing, afraid. How could Ender yearn for that time again?

Miro soon came in, crawled to the altar, and kissed the ring. Though the Bishop had absolved him of any responsibility, he bore the penance with all others. Valentine noticed, of course, the many whispers as he moved forward. Everyone in Lusitania who had known him before his brain damage recognized the miracle that had been performed-- a perfect restoration of the Miro who had lived so brightly among them all before.

I didn't know you then, Miro, thought Valentine. Did you always have that distant, brooding air? Healed your body may be, but you're still the man who lived in pain for this time. Has it made you cold or more compassionate?

He came and sat beside her, in the chair that would have been Jakt's, except that Jakt was still in space. With the descolada soon to be destroyed, someone had to bring to Lusitania's surface the thousands of frozen microbes and plant and animal species that had to be introduced in order to establish a self-regulating gaialogy and keep the planetary systems in order. It was a job that had been done on many other worlds, but it was being made trickier by the need not to compete too intensely with the local species that the pequeninos depended on. Jakt was up there, laboring for them all; it was a good reason to be gone, but Valentine still missed him-- needed him badly, in fact, what with Ender's new creations causing her such turmoil. Miro was no substitute for her husband, especially because his own new body was such a sharp reminder of what had been done Outside.

If I went out there, what would I create? I doubt that I'd bring back a person, because I fear there is no one soul at the root of my psyche. Not even my own, I fear. What else has my passionate study of history been, except a search for humanity? Others find humanity by looking in their own hearts. Only lost souls need to search for it outside themselves.

"The line's almost done," whispered Miro.

So the service would begin soon.

"Ready to have your sins purged?" whispered Valentine.

"As the Bishop explained, he'll purge only the sins of this new body. I still have to confess and do penance for the sins I had left over from the old one. Not many carnal sins were possible, of course, but there's plenty of envy, spite, malice, and self-pity. What I'm trying to decide is whether I also have a suicide to confess. When my old body crumbled into nothing, it was answering the wish of my heart."

"You should never have got your voice back," said Valentine. "You babble now just to hear yourself talk so prettily."

He smiled and patted her arm.

The Bishop began the service with prayer, giving thanks to God for all that had been accomplished in recent months. Conspicuous by omission was the creation of Lusitania's two newest citizens, though Miro's healing was definitely laid at God's door. He called Miro forward and baptized him almost at once, and then, because this was not a mass, the Bishop proceeded immediately to his homily.

"God's mercy has an infinite reach," said the Bishop. "We can only hope he will choose to reach farther than we deserve, to forgive us for our terrible sins as individuals and as a people. We can

only hope that, like Nineveh, which turned away destruction through repentance, we can convince our Lord to spare us from the fleet that he has permitted to come against us to punish us."

Miro whispered, softly, so that only she could hear, "Didn't he send the fleet before the burning of the forest?"

"Maybe the Lord counts only the arrival time, not the departure," Valentine suggested. At once, though, she regretted her flippancy. What was happening here today was a solemn thing; even if she wasn't a deep believer in Catholic doctrine, she knew that it was a holy thing when a community accepted responsibility for the evil it committed and did true penance for it.

The Bishop spoke of those who had died in holiness-- Os Venerados, who first saved humanity from the descolada plague; Father Estevao, whose body was buried under the floor of the chapel and who suffered martyrdom in the cause of defending truth against heresy; Planter, who died to prove that his people's soul was from God, and not from a virus; and the pequeninos who had died as innocent victims of slaughter. "All of these may be saints someday, for this is a time like the early days of Christianity, when great deeds and great holiness were much more needed, and therefore much more often achieved. This chapel is a shrine to all those who have loved their God with all their heart, might, mind and strength, and who have loved their neighbor as themselves. Let all who enter here do it with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, so that holiness may also touch them."

The homily wasn't long, because there were many more identical services scheduled for that day-- the people were coming to the chapel in shifts, since it was far too small to accommodate the whole human population of Lusitania all at once. Soon enough they were done, and Valentine got up to leave. She would have followed close behind Plikt and Val, except that Miro caught at her arm.

"Jane just told me," he said. "I thought you'd want to know."

"What?"

"She just tested the starship, without Ender in it."

"How could she do that?" asked Valentine.

"Peter," he said. "She took him Outside and back again. He can contain her aiua, if that's how this process is actually working."

She gave voice to her immediate fear. "Did he--"

"Create anything? No." Miro grinned-- but with a hint of the twisted wryness that Valentine had thought was a product of his affliction. "He claims it's because his mind is much clearer and healthier than Andrew's."

"Maybe so," said Valentine.

"I say it's because none of the philotes out there were willing to be part of his pattern. Too twisted."

Valentine laughed a little.

The Bishop came up to them then. Since they were among the last to leave, they were alone at the front of the chapel.

"Thank you for accepting a new baptism," said the Bishop.

Miro bowed his head. "Not many men have a chance to be purified so far along in their sins," he said.

"And Valentine, I'm sorry I couldn't receive your-- namesake."

"Don't worry, Bishop Peregrino. I understand. I may even agree with you."

The Bishop shook his head. "It would be better if they could just--"

"Leave?" offered Miro. "You get your wish. Peter will soon be gone-- Jane can pilot a ship with him aboard. No doubt the same thing will be possible with young Val."

"No," said Valentine. "She can't go. She's too--"

"Young?" asked Miro. He seemed amused. "They were both born knowing everything that Ender knows. You can hardly call the girl a child, despite her body."

"If they had been born," said the Bishop, "They wouldn't have to leave."

"They're not leaving because of your wish," said Miro. "They're leaving because Peter's going to deliver Ela's new virus to Path, and young Val's ship is going to go off in search of planets where pequeninos and hive queens can be established."

"You can't send her on such a mission," said Valentine.

"I won't send her," said Miro. "I'll take her. Or rather, she'll take me. I want to go. Whatever risks there are, I'll take them. She'll be safe, Valentine."

Valentine still shook her head, but she knew already that in the end she would be defeated. Young Val herself would insist on going, however young she might seem, because if she didn't go, only one starship could travel; and if Peter was the one doing the traveling, there was no telling whether the ship would be used for any good purpose. In the long run, Valentine herself would bow to the necessity. Whatever danger young Val might be exposed to, it was no worse than the risks already taken by others. Like Planter. Like Father Estevao. Like Glass.

The pequeninos gathered at Planter's tree. It would have been Glass's tree, since he was the first to pass into the third life with the recolada, but almost his first words, once they were able to talk with him, were an adamant rejection of the idea of introducing the viricide and recolada into the world beside his tree. This occasion belonged to Planter, he declared, and the brothers and wives ultimately agreed with him.

So it was that Ender leaned against his friend Human, whom he had planted in order to help him into the third life so many years before. It would have been a moment of complete joy to Ender, the liberation of the pequeninos from the descolada-- except that he had Peter with him through it all.

"Weakness celebrates weakness," said Peter. "Planter failed, and here they are honoring him, while Glass succeeded, and there he stands, alone out there in the experimental field. And the stupidest thing is that it can't possibly mean anything to Planter, since his aiua isn't even here."

"It may not mean anything to Planter," said Ender-- a point he wasn't altogether sure of, anyway-- "but it means something to the people here."

"Yes," he said. "It means they're weak."

"Jane says she took you Outside."

"An easy trip," said Peter. "Next time, though, Lusitania won't be my destination. "

"She says you plan to take Ela's virus to Path."

"My first stop," Peter said. "But I won't be coming back here. Count on that, old boy."

"We need the ship."

"You've got that sweet little slip of a girl," said Peter, "and the bugger bitch can pop out starships for you by the dozen, if only you could spawn enough creatures like me and Valzinha to pilot them."

"I'll be glad to see the last of you."

"Aren't you curious what I intend to do?"

"No," said Ender.

But it was a lie, and of course Peter knew it. "I intend to do what you have neither the brains nor the stomach to do. I intend to stop the fleet."

"How? Magically appear on the flagship?"

"Well, if worse came to worst, dear lad, I could always deliver an M.D. Device to the fleet before they even knew I was there. But that wouldn't accomplish much, would it? To stop the fleet, I need to stop Congress. And to stop Congress, I need to get control."

Ender knew at once what this meant. "So you think you can be Hegemon again? God help humanity if you succeed."

"Why shouldn't I?" said Peter. "I did it once before, and I didn't do so badly. You should know-- you wrote the book yourself."

"That was the real Peter," said Ender. "Not you, the twisted version conjured up out of my hatred and fear."

Did Peter have soul enough to resent these harsh words? Ender thought, for a moment at least, that Peter paused, that his face showed a moment of-- what, hurt? Or simply rage?

"I'm the real Peter now," he answered, after that momentary pause. "And you'd better hope that I have all the skill I had before. After all, you managed to give Valette the same genes as Valentine. Maybe I'm all that Peter ever was."

"Maybe pigs have wings."

Peter laughed. "They would, if you went Outside and believed hard enough."

"Go, then," said Ender.

"Yes, I know you'll be glad to get rid of me."

"And sic you on the rest of humanity? Let that be punishment enough, for their having sent the fleet." Ender gripped Peter by the arm, pulled him close. "Don't think that this time you can maneuver me into helplessness. I'm not a little boy anymore, and if you get out of hand, I'll destroy you."

"You can't," said Peter. "You could more easily kill yourself."

The ceremony began. This time there was no pomp, no ring to kiss, no homily. Ela and her assistants simply brought several hundred sugar cubes impregnated with the viricide bacterium, and as many vials of solution containing the recolada. They were passed among the congregation, and each of the pequeninos took the sugar cube, dissolved and swallowed it, and then drank off the contents of the vial.

"This is my body which is given for you," intoned Peter. "This do in remembrance of me."

"Have you no respect for anything?" asked Ender.

"This is my blood, which I shed for you. Drink in remembrance of me." Peter smiled. "This is a communion even I can take, unbaptized as I am."

"I can promise you this," said Ender. "They haven't invented the baptism yet that can purify you."

"I'll bet you've been saving up all your life, just to say that to me." Peter turned to him, so Ender could see the ear in which the jewel had been implanted, linking him to Jane. In case Ender didn't notice what he was pointing out, Peter touched the jewel rather ostentatiously. "Just remember, I have the source of all wisdom here. She'll show you what I'm doing, if you ever care. If you don't forget me the moment I'm gone."

"I won't forget you," said Ender.

"You could come along," said Peter.

"And risk making more like you Outside?"

"I could use the company."

"I promise you, Peter, you'd soon get as sick of yourself as I am sick of you."

"Never," said Peter. "I'm not filled with self-loathing the way you are, you poor guilt-obsessed tool of better, stronger men. And if you won't make more companions for me, why, I'll find my own along the way."

"I have no doubt of it," said Ender.

The sugar cubes and vials came to them; they ate, drank.

"The taste of freedom," said Peter. "Delicious."

"Is it?" said Ender. "We're killing a species that we never understood."

"I know what you mean," said Peter. "It's a lot more fun to destroy an opponent when he's able to understand how thoroughly you defeated him."

Then, at last, Peter walked away.

Ender stayed through the end of the ceremony, and spoke to many there: Human and Rooter, of course, and Valentine, Ela, Ouanda, and Miro.

He had another visit to make, however. A visit he had made several times before, always to be rebuffed, sent away without a word. This time, though, Novinha came out to speak with him. And instead of being filled with rage and grief, she seemed quite calm.

"I'm much more at peace," she said. "And I know, for what it's worth, that my rage at you was unrighteous."

Ender was glad to hear the sentiment, but surprised at the terms she used. When had Novinha ever spoken of righteousness?

"I've come to see that perhaps my boy was fulfilling the purposes of God," she said. "That you couldn't have stopped him, because God wanted him to go to the pequeninos to set in motion the miracles that have come since then." She wept. "Miro came to me. Healed," she said. "Oh, God is merciful after all. And I'll have Quim again in heaven, when I die."

She's been converted, thought Ender. After all these years of despising the church, of taking part in Catholicism only because there was no other way to be a citizen of Lusitania Colony, these weeks with the Children of the Mind of Christ have converted her. I'm glad of it, he thought. She's speaking to me again.

"Andrew," she said, "I want us to be together again."

He reached out to embrace her, wanting to weep with relief and joy, but she recoiled from his touch.

"You don't understand," she said. "I won't go home with you. This is my home now."

She was right-- he hadn't understood. But now he did. She hadn't just been converted to Catholicism. She had been converted to this order of permanent sacrifice, where only husbands and wives could join, and only together, to take vows of permanent abstinence in the midst of their marriage. "Novinha," he said, "I haven't the faith or the strength to be one of the Children of the Mind of Christ."

"When you do," she said, "I'll be waiting for you here."

"Is this the only hope I have of being with you?" he whispered. "To forswear loving your body as the only way to have your companionship?"

"Andrew," she whispered, "I long for you. But my sin for so many years was adultery that my only hope of joy now is to deny the flesh and live in the spirit. I'll do it alone if I must. But with you-- oh, Andrew, I miss you."

And I miss you, he thought. "Like breath itself I miss you," he whispered. "But don't ask this of me. Live with me as my wife until the last of our youth is spent, and then when desire is slack we can come back here together. I could be happy then."

"Don't you see?" she said. "I've made a covenant. I've made a promise."

"You made one to me, too," he said.

"Should I break a vow to God, so I can keep my vow with you?"

"God would understand."

"How easily those who never hear his voice declare what he would and would not want."

"Do you hear his voice these days?"

"I hear his song in my heart, the way the Psalmist did. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

"The twenty-third. While the only song I hear is the twenty-second."

She smiled wanly. "'Why hast thou forsaken me?'" she quoted.

"And the part about the bulls of Bashan," said Ender. "I've always felt like I was surrounded by bulls."

She laughed. "Come to me when you can," she said. "I'll be here, when you're ready."

She almost left him then.

"Wait."

She waited.

"I brought you the viricide and the recolada."

"Ela's triumph," she said. "It was beyond me, you know. I cost you nothing, by abandoning my work. My time was past, and she had far surpassed me." Novinha took the sugar cube, let it melt for a moment, swallowed it.

Then she held the vial up against the last light of evening. "With the red sky, it looks like it's all afire inside." She drank it-- sipped it, really, so that the flavor would linger. Even though, as Ender knew, the taste was bitter, and lingered unpleasantly in the mouth long afterward.

"Can I visit you?"

"Once a month," she said. Her answer was so quick that he knew she had already considered the question and reached a decision that she had no intention of altering.

"Then once a month I'll visit you," he said.

"Until you're ready to join me," she said.

"Until you're ready to return to me," he answered.

But he knew that she would never bend. Novinha was not a person who could easily change her mind. She had set the bounds of his future.

He should have been resentful, angry. He should have blustered about getting his freedom from a marriage to a woman who refused him. But he couldn't think what he might want his freedom for. Nothing is in my hands now, he realized. No part of the future depends on me. My work, such as it is, is done, and now my only influence on the future is what my children do-- such as they are: the monster Peter, the impossibly perfect child Val.

And Miro, Grego, Quara, Ela, Olhado-- aren't they my children, too? Can't I also claim to have helped create them, even if they came from Libo's love and Novinha's body, years before I even arrived in this place?

It was full dark when he found young Val, though he couldn't understand why he was even looking for her. She was in Olhado's house, with Plikt; but while Plikt leaned against a shadowed wall, her face inscrutable, young Val was among Olhado's children, playing with them.

Of course she's playing with them, thought Ender. She's still a child herself, however much experience she might have had thrust upon her out of my memories.

But as he stood in the doorway, watching, he realized that she wasn't playing equally with all the children. It was Nimbo who really had her attention. The boy who had been burned, in more ways than one, the night of the mob. The game the children played was simple enough, but it kept them from talking to each other. Still, there was eloquent conversation between Nimbo and young Val. Her smile toward him was warm, not in the manner of a woman encouraging a lover, but rather as a sister gives her brother the silent message of love, of confidence, of trust.

She's healing him, thought Ender. Just as Valentine, so many years ago, healed me. Not with words. Just with her company.

Could I have created her with even that ability intact? Was there that much truth and power in my dream of her? Then maybe Peter also has everything within him that my real brother had-- all that was dangerous and terrible, but also that which created a new order.

Try as he might, Ender couldn't get himself to believe that story. Young Val might have healing in her eyes, but Peter had none of that in him. His was the face that, years before, Ender had seen looking back at him from a mirror in the Fantasy Game, in a terrible room where he died again and again before he could finally embrace the element of Peter within himself and go on.

I embraced Peter and destroyed a whole people. I took him into myself and committed xenocide. I thought, in all these years since then, that I had purged him. That he was gone. But he'll never leave me.

The idea of withdrawing from the world and entering into the order of the Children of the Mind of Christ-- there was much to attract him in that. Perhaps there, Novinha and he together could purge

themselves of the demons that had dwelt inside them all these years. Novinha has never been so much at peace, thought Ender, as she is tonight.

Young Val noticed him, came to him as he stood in the doorway.

"Why are you here?" she said.

"Looking for you," he said.

"Plikt and I are spending the night with Olhado's family," she said. She glanced at Nimbo and smiled. The boy grinned foolishly.

"Jane says that you're going with the starship," Ender said softly.

"If Peter can hold Jane within himself, so can I," she answered. "Miro is going with me. To find habitable worlds."

"Only if you want to," said Ender.

"Don't be foolish," she said. "Since when have you done only what you want to do? I'll do what must be done, that only I can do."

He nodded.

"Is that all you came for?" she asked.

He nodded again. "I guess," he said.

"Or did you come because you wish that you could be the child you were when you last saw a girl with this face?"

The words stung-- far worse than when Peter guessed what was in his heart. Her compassion was far more painful than his contempt.

She must have seen the expression of pain on his face, and misunderstood it. He was relieved that she was capable of misunderstanding. I do have some privacy left.

"Are you ashamed of me?" she asked.

"Embarrassed," he said. "To have my unconscious mind made so public. But not ashamed. Not of you." He glanced toward Nimbo, then back to her. "Stay here and finish what you started."

She smiled slightly. "He's a good boy who thought that he was doing something fine."

"Yes," he said. "But it got away from him."

"He didn't know what he was doing," she said. "When you don't understand the consequences of your acts, how can you be blamed for them?"

He knew that she was talking as much about him, Ender the Xenocide, as about Nimbo. "You don't take the blame," he answered. "But you still take responsibility. For healing the wounds you caused."

"Yes," she said. "The wounds you caused. But not all the wounds in the world."

"Oh?" he asked. "And why not? Because you plan to heal them all yourself?"

She laughed-- a light, girlish laugh. "You haven't changed a bit, Andrew," she said. "Not in all these years."

He smiled at her, hugged her lightly, and sent her back into the light of the room. He himself, though, turned back out into the darkness and headed home. There was light enough for him to find his way, yet he stumbled and got lost several times.

"You're crying," said Jane in his ear.

"This is such a happy day," he said.

"It is, you know. You're just about the only person wasting any pity on you tonight."

"Fine, then," said Ender. "If I'm the only one, then at least there's one."

"You've got me," she said. "And our relationship has been chaste all along."

"I've really had enough of chastity in my life," he answered. "I wasn't hoping for more."

"Everyone is chaste in the end. Everyone ends up out of the reach of all the deadly sins."

"But I'm not dead," he said. "Not yet. Or am I?"

"Does this feel like heaven?" she asked.

He laughed, and not nicely.

"Well, then, you can't be dead."

"You forget," he said. "This could easily be hell."

"Is it?" she asked him.

He thought about all that had been accomplished. Ela's viruses. Miro's healing. Young Val's kindness to Nimbo. The smile of peace on Novinha's face. The pequeninos' rejoicing as their liberty

began its passage through their world. Already, he knew, the viricide was cutting an ever-widening swath through the prairie of capim surrounding the colony; by now it must already have passed into other forests, the descolada, helpless now, giving way as the mute and passive recolada took its place. All these changes couldn't possibly take place in hell.

"I guess I'm still alive," he said.

"And so am I," she said. "That's something, too. Peter and Val, they're not the only people to spring from your mind."

"No, they're not," he said.

"We're both still alive, even if we have hard times coming."

He remembered what lay in store for her, the mental crippling that was only weeks away, and he was ashamed of himself for having mourned his own losses. "Better to have loved and lost," he murmured, "than never to have loved at all."

"It may be a cliché," said Jane, "but that doesn't mean it can't be true."

Chapter 18 -- THE GOD OF PATH

<I couldn't taste the changes in the descolada virus until it was gone.>

<It was adapting to you?>

<It was beginning to taste like myself. It had included most of my genetic molecules into its own structure>

<Perhaps it was preparing to change you, as it changed us.>

<But when it captured your ancestors, it paired them with the trees they lived in. Whom would we have been paired with?>

<What other forms of life are there on Lusitania, except the ones that are already paired?>

<Perhaps the descolada meant to combine us with an existing pair. Or replace one pair-member with us.>

<Or perhaps it meant to pair you with the humans.>

<It's dead now. It will never happen, whatever it planned.>

<What sort of life would you have led? Mating with human males?>

<This is disgusting.>

<Or giving live births, perhaps, in the human manner?>

<Stop this foulness.>

<I was merely speculating.>

<The descolada is gone. You're free of it.>

<But never free of what we should have been. I believe that we were sentient before the descolado came. I believe our history is older than the spacecraft that brought it here. I believe that somewhere in our genes is locked the secret of pequenino life when we were tree-dwellers, rather than the larval stage in the life of sentient trees.>

<If you had no third life, Human, you would be dead now.>

<Dead now, but while I lived I could have been, not a mere brother, but a father. While I lived I could have traveled anywhere, without worrying about returning to my forest if I ever hoped to mate. Never would I have stood day after day rooted to the same spot, living my life vicariously through the tales the brothers bring to me.>

<It's not enough for you to be free of the descolada, then? You must be free of all its consequences or you won't be content?>

<I'm always content. I am what I am, no matter how I got that way.>

<But still not free.>

<Males and females both, we still have to lose our lives in order to pass on our genes.>

<Poor fool. Do you think that I, the hive queen, am free? Do you think that human parents, once they bear young, are ever truly free again? If life to you means independence, a completely unfettered freedom to do as you like, then none of the sentient creatures is alive. None of us is ever fully free.>

<Put down roots, my friend, and then tell me how unfree you were when you were yet unrooted.>

Wang-mu and Master Han waited together on the riverbank some hundred meters from their house, a pleasant walk through the garden. Jane had told them that someone would be coming to see them, someone from Lusitania. They both knew this meant that faster-than-light travel had been achieved,

but beyond that they could only assume that their visitor must have come to an orbit around Path, shuttled down, and was now making his way stealthily toward them.

Instead, a ridiculously small metal structure appeared on the riverbank in front of them. The door opened. A man emerged. A young man-- largeboned, Caucasian, but pleasant-looking anyway. He held a single glass tube in his hand.

He smiled.

Wang-mu had never seen such a smile. He looked right through her as if he owned her soul. As if he knew her, knew her better than she knew herself.

"Wang-mu," he said, gently. "Royal Mother of the West. And Fei-tzu, the great teacher of the Path."

He bowed. They bowed to him in return.

"My business here is brief," he said. He held the vial out to Master Han. "Here is the virus. As soon as I've gone-- because I have no desire for genetic alteration myself, thank you-- drink this down. I imagine it tastes like pus or something equally disgusting, but drink it anyway. Then make contact with as many people as possible, in your house and the town nearby. You'll have about six hours before you start feeling sick. With any luck, at the end of the second day you'll have not a single symptom left. Of anything." He grinned. "No more little air-dances for you, Master Han, eh?"

"No more servility for any of us," said Han Fei-tzu. "We're ready to release our messages at once."

"Don't spring this on anybody until you've already spread the infection for a few hours."

"Of course," said Master Han. "Your wisdom teaches me to be careful, though my heart tells me to hurry and proclaim the glorious revolution that this merciful plague will bring to us."

"Yes, very nice," said the man. Then he turned to Wang-mu. "But you don't need the virus, do you?"

"No, sir," said Wang-mu.

"Jane says you're as bright a human being as she's ever seen."

"Jane is too generous," said Wang-mu.

"No, she showed me the data." He looked her up and down. She didn't like the way his eyes took possession of her whole body in that single long glance. "You don't need to be here for the plague. In fact, you'd be better off leaving before it happens."

"Leaving?"

"What is there for you here?" asked the man. "I don't care how revolutionary it gets here, you'll still be a servant and the child of low-class parents. In a place like this, you could spend your whole life overcoming it and you'd still be nothing but a servant with a surprisingly good mind. Come with me and you'll be part of changing history. Making history."

"Come with you and do what?"

"Overthrow Congress, of course. Cut them off at the knees and send them all crawling back home. Make all the colony worlds equal members of the polity, clean out the corruption, expose all the vile secrets, and call home the Lusitania Fleet before it can commit an atrocity. Establish the rights of all ramen races. Peace and freedom."

"And you intend to do all this?"

"Not alone," he said.

She was relieved.

"I'll have you."

"To do what?"

"To write. To speak. To do whatever I need you to do."

"But I'm uneducated, sir. Master Han was only beginning to teach me."

"Who are you?" demanded Master Han. "How can you expect a modest girl like this to pick up and go with a stranger?"

"A modest girl? Who gives her body to the foreman in order to get a chance to be close to a godspoken girl who might just hire her to be a secret maid? No, Master Han, she may be putting on the attitudes of a modest girl, but that's because she's a chameleon. Changing hides whenever she thinks it'll get her something."

"I'm not a liar, sir," she said.

"No, I'm sure you sincerely become whatever it is you're pretending to be. So now I'm saying, Pretend to be a revolutionary with me. You hate the bastards who did all this to your world. To Qing-jao."

"How do you know so much about me?"

He tapped his ear. For the first time she noticed the jewel there. "Jane keeps me informed about the people I need to know."

"Jane will die soon," said Wang-mu.

"Oh, she may get semi-stupid for a while," said the man, "but die she will not. You helped save her. And in the meantime, I'll have you."

"I can't," she said. "I'm afraid."

"All right then," he said. "I offered."

He turned back to the door of his tiny craft.

"Wait," she said.

He faced her again.

"Can't you at least tell me who you are?"

"Peter Wiggin is my name," he said. "Though I imagine I'll use a false one for a while."

"Peter Wiggin," she whispered. "That's the name of the--"

"My name. I'll explain it to you later, if I feel like it. Let's just say that Andrew Wiggin sent me. Sent me off rather forcefully. I'm a man with a mission, and he figured I could only accomplish it on one of the worlds where Congress's power structures are most heavily concentrated. I was Hegemon once, Wang-mu, and I intend to have the job back, whatever the title might turn out to be when I get it. I'm going to break a lot of eggs and cause an amazing amount of trouble and turn this whole Hundred Worlds thing arse over teakettle, and I'm inviting you to help me. But I really don't give a damn whether you do or not, because even though it'd be nice to have your brains and your company, I'll do the job one way or another. So are you coming or what?"

She turned to Master Han in an agony of indecision.

"I had been hoping to teach you," said Master Han. "But if this man is going to work toward what he says he will, then with him you'll have a better chance to change the course of human history than you'd ever have here, where the virus will do our main work for us."

Wang-mu whispered to him. "Leaving you will be like losing a father."

"And if you go, I will have lost my second and last daughter."

"Don't break my heart, you two," said Peter. "I've got a faster-than-light starship here. Leaving Path with me isn't a lifetime thing, you know? If things don't work out I can always bring her back in a day or two. Fair enough?"

"You want to go, I know it," said Master Han.

"Don't you also know that I want to stay as well?"

"I know that, too," said Master Han. "But you will go."

"Yes," she said. "I will."

"May the gods watch over you, daughter Wang-mu," said Master Han.

"And may every direction be the east of sunrise to you, Father Han."

Then she stepped forward. The young man named Peter took her hand and led her into the starship. The door closed behind them. A moment later, the starship disappeared.

Master Han waited there ten minutes, meditating until he could compose his feelings. Then he opened the vial, drank its contents, and walked briskly back to the house. Old Mu-pao greeted him just inside the door. "Master Han," she said. "I didn't know where you had gone. And Wang-mu is missing, too."

"She'll be gone for a while," he said. Then he walked very close to the old servant, so that his breath would be in her face. "You have been more faithful to my house than we have ever deserved."

A look of fear came upon her face. "Master Han, you're not dismissing me, are you?"

"No," he said. "I thought that I was thanking you."

He left Mu-pao and ranged through the house. Qing-jao was not in her room. That was no surprise. She spent most of her time entertaining visitors. That would suit his purpose well. And indeed, that was where he found her, in the morning room, with three very distinguished old godspoken men from a town two hundred kilometers away.

Qing-jao introduced them graciously, and then adopted the role of submissive daughter in her father's presence. He bowed to each man, but then found occasion to reach out his hand and touch each one of them. Jane had explained that the virus was highly communicable. Mere physical closeness was usually enough; touching made it more sure.

And when they were greeted, he turned to his daughter. "Qing-jao," he said, "will you have a gift from me?"

She bowed and answered graciously, "Whatever my father has brought me, I will gratefully receive, though I know I am not worthy of his notice."

He reached out his arms and drew her in to him. She was stiff and awkward in his embrace-- he had not done such an impulsive thing before dignitaries since she was a very little girl. But he held her all the same, tightly, for he knew that she would never forgive him for what came from this embrace, and therefore it would be the last time he held his Gloriously Bright within his arms.

Qing-jao knew what her father's embrace meant. She had watched her father walking in the garden with Wang-mu. She had seen the walnut-shaped starship appear on the riverbank. She had seen him take the vial from the round-eyed stranger. She saw him drink. Then she came here, to this room, to receive visitors on her father's behalf. I am dutiful, my honored father, even when you prepare to betray me.

And even now, knowing that his embrace was his cruelest effort to cut her off from the voice of the gods, knowing that he had so little respect for her that he thought he could deceive her, she nevertheless received whatever he determined to give her. Was he not her father? His virus from the world of Lusitania might or might not steal the voice of the gods from her; she could not guess what the gods would permit their enemies to do. But certainly if she rejected her father and disobeyed him, the gods would punish her. Better to remain worthy of the gods by showing proper respect and obedience to her father, than to disobey him in the name of the gods and thereby make herself unworthy of their gifts.

So she received his embrace, and breathed deeply of his breath.

When he had spoken briefly to his guests, he left. They took his visit with them as a signal honor; so faithfully had Qing-jao concealed her father's mad rebellion against the gods that Han Fei-tzu was still regarded as the greatest man of Path. She spoke to them softly, and smiled graciously, and saw them on their way. She gave them no hint that they would carry away with them a weapon. Why should she? Human weapons would be of no use against the power of the gods, unless the gods willed it. And if the gods wished to stop speaking to the people of Path, then this might well be the disguise they had chosen for their act. Let it seem to the unbeliever that Father's Lusitanian virus cut us off from the gods; I will know, as will all other faithful men and women, that the gods speak to whomever they wish, and nothing made by human hands could stop them if they so desired. All their acts were vanity. If Congress believed that they had caused the gods to speak on Path, let them believe it. If Father and the Lusitanians believe that they are causing the gods to fall silent, let them believe it. I know that if I am only worthy of it, the gods will speak to me.

A few hours later, Qing-jao fell deathly ill. The fever struck her like a blow from a strong man's hand; she collapsed, and barely noticed as servants carried her to her bed. The doctors came, though she could have told them there was nothing they could do, and that by coming they would only expose themselves to infection. But she said nothing, because her body was struggling too fiercely against the disease. Or rather, her body was struggling to reject her own tissues and organs, until at last the transformation of her genes was complete. Even then, it took time for her body to purge itself of the old antibodies. She slept and slept.

It was bright afternoon when she awoke. "Time," she croaked, and the computer in her room spoke the hour and day. The fever had taken two days from her life. She was on fire with thirst. She got to her feet and staggered to her bathroom, turned on the water, filled the cup and drank and drank until she was satisfied. It made her giddy, to stand upright. Her mouth tasted foul. Where were the servants who should have given her food and drink during her disease?

They must be sick as well. And Father-- he would have fallen ill before me. Who will bring him water?

She found him sleeping, cold with last night's sweat, trembling. She woke him with a cup of water, which he drank eagerly, his eyes looking upward into hers. Questioning? Or, perhaps, pleading for forgiveness. Do your penance to the gods, Father; you owe no apologies to a mere daughter.

Qing-jao also found the servants, one by one, some of them so loyal that they had not taken to their beds with their sickness, but rather had fallen where their duties required them to be. All were alive. All were recovering, and soon would be up again. Only after all were accounted for and tended to did Qing-jao go to the kitchen and find something to eat. She could not hold down the first food she took. Only a thin soup, heated to lukewarm, stayed with her. She carried more of the soup to the others. They also ate.

Soon all were up again, and strong. Qing-jao took servants with her and carried water and soup to all the neighboring houses, rich and poor alike. All were grateful to receive what they brought, and many uttered prayers on their behalf. You would not be so grateful, thought Qing-jao, if you knew that the disease you suffered came from my father's house, by my father's will. But she said nothing.

In all this time, the gods did not demand any purification of her.

At last, she thought. At last I am pleasing them. At last I have done, perfectly, all that righteousness required.

When she came home, she wanted to sleep at once. But the servants who had remained in the house were gathered around the holo in the kitchen, watching news reports. Qing-jao almost never watched the holo news, getting all her information from the computer; but the servants looked so serious, so worried, that she entered the kitchen and stood in their circle around the holovision.

The news was of the plague sweeping the world of Path. Quarantine had been ineffective, or else always came too late. The woman reading the report had already recovered from the disease, and she was telling that the plague had killed almost no one, though it disrupted services for many. The virus had been isolated, but it died too quickly to be studied seriously. "It seems that a bacterium is following the virus, killing it almost as soon as each person recovers from the plague. The gods have truly favored us, to send us the cure along with the plague."

Fools, thought Qing-jao. If the gods wanted you cured, they wouldn't have sent the plague in the first place.

At once she realized that she was the fool. Of course the gods could send both the disease and the cure. If a disease came, and the cure followed, then the gods had sent them. How could she have called such a thing foolish? It was as if she had insulted the gods themselves.

She flinched inwardly, waiting for the onslaught of the gods' rage. She had gone so many hours without purification that she knew it would be a heavy burden when it came. Would she have to trace a whole room again?

But she felt nothing. No desire to trace woodgrain lines. No need to wash.

She looked at her hands. There was dirt on them, and yet she didn't care. She could wash them or not, as she desired.

For a moment she felt immense relief. Could it be that Father and Wangmu and the Jane-thing were right all along? Had a genetic change, caused by this plague, freed her at last from a hideous crime committed by Congress centuries ago?

Almost as if the news reader had heard Qing-jao's thoughts, she began reading a report about a document that was turning up on computers all over the world. The document said that this plague was a gift from the gods, freeing the people of Path from a genetic alteration performed on them by Congress. Until now, genetic enhancements were almost always linked to an OCD-like condition whose victims were commonly referred to as godspoken. But as the plague ran its course, people would find that the genetic enhancements were now spread to all the people of Path, while the godspoken, who had previously borne the most terrible of burdens, had now been released by the gods from the necessity of constant purification.

"This document says that the whole world is now purified. The gods have accepted us." The news reader's voice trembled as she spoke. "It is not known where this document came from. Computer analysis has linked it with no known author's style. The fact that it turned up simultaneously on millions of computers suggests that it came from a source with unspeakable powers." She hesitated, and now her trembling was plainly visible. "If this unworthy reader of news may ask a question, hoping that the wise will hear it and answer her with wisdom, could it not be possible that the gods themselves have sent us this message, so that we will understand their great gift to the people of Path?"

Qing-jao listened for a while longer, as fury grew within her. It was Jane, obviously, who had written and spread this document. How dare she pretend to know what the gods were doing! She had gone too far. This document must be refuted. Jane must stand revealed, and also the whole conspiracy of the people of Lusitania.

The servants were looking at her. She met their gaze, looking for a moment at each of them around the circle.

"What do you want to ask me?" she said.

"O Mistress," said Mu-pao, "forgive our curiosity, but this news report has declared something that we can only believe if you tell us that it is true."

"What do I know?" answered Qing-jao. "I am only the foolish daughter of a great man."

"But you are one of the godspoken, Mistress," said Mu-pao.

You are very daring, thought Qing-jao, to speak of such things unbidden.

"In all this night, since you came among us with food and drink, and as you led so many of us out among the people, tending the sick, you have never once excused yourself for purification. We have never seen you go so long."

"Did it not occur to you," said Qing-jao, "that perhaps we were so well fulfilling the will of the gods that I had no need of purification during that time?"

Mu-pao looked abashed. "No, we did not think of that."

"Rest now," said Qing-jao. "None of us is strong yet. I must go and speak to my father."

She left them to gossip and speculate among themselves. Father was in his room, seated before the computer. Jane's face was in the display. Father turned to her as soon as she entered the room. His face was radiant. Triumphant.

"Did you see the message that Jane and I prepared?" he said.

"You!" cried Qing-jao. "My father, a teller of lies?"

To say such a thing to her father was unthinkable. But still she felt no need to purify herself. It frightened her, that she could speak with such disrespect and yet the gods did not rebuke her.

"Lies?" said Father. "Why do you think that they are lies, my daughter? How do you know that the gods did not cause this virus to come to us? How do you know that it is not their will to give these genetic enhancements to all of Path?"

His words maddened her; or perhaps she felt a new freedom; or perhaps she was testing the gods by speaking; very disrespectfully that they would have to rebuke her. "Do you think I am a fool?" shouted Qing-jao. "Do you think that I don't know this is your strategy to keep the world of Path from erupting in revolution and slaughter? Do you think I don't know that all you care about is keeping people from dying?"

"And is there something wrong with that?" asked Father.

"It's a lie!" she answered.

"Or it's the disguise the gods have prepared to conceal their actions," said Father. "You had no trouble accepting Congress's stories as true. Why can't you accept mine?"

"Because I know about the virus, Father. I saw you take it from that stranger's hand. I saw Wang-mu step into his vehicle. I saw it disappear. I know that none of these things are of the gods. She did them-- that devil that lives in the computers!"

"How do you know," said Father, "that she is not one of the gods?"

This was unbearable. "She was made," cried Qing-jao. "That's how I know! She's only a computer program, made by human beings, living in machines that human beings made. The gods are not made by any hand. The gods have always lived and will always live."

For the first time, Jane spoke. "Then you are a god, Qing-jao, and so am I, and so is every other person-- human or raman-- in the universe. No god made your soul, your inmost aiua. You are as old as any god, and as young, and you will live as long."

Qing-jao screamed. She had never made such a sound before, that she remembered. It tore at her throat.

"My daughter," said Father, coming toward her, his arms outstretched to embrace her.

She could not bear his embrace. She could not endure it because it would mean his complete victory. It would mean that she had been defeated by the enemies of the gods; it would mean that Jane had overmastered her. It would mean that Wang-mu had been a truer daughter to Han Fei-tzu than Qing-jao had been. It would mean that all Qing-jao's worship for all these years had meant nothing. It would mean that it was evil of her to set in motion the destruction of Jane. It would mean that Jane was noble and good for having helped transform the people of Path. It would mean that Mother was not waiting for her when at last she came to the Infinite West.

Why don't you speak to me, O Gods! she cried out silently. Why don't you assure me that I have not served you in vain all these years? Why have you deserted me now, and given the triumph to your enemies?

And then the answer came to her, as simply and clearly as if her mother had whispered the words in her ear: This is a test, Qing-jao. The gods are watching what you do.

A test. Of course. The gods were testing all their servants on Path, to see which ones were deceived and which endured in perfect obedience.

If I am being tested, then there must be some correct thing for me to do.

I must do what I have always done, only this time I must not wait for the gods to instruct me. They have wearied of telling me every day and every hour when I needed to be purified. It is time for me to understand my own impurity without their instructions. I must purify myself, with utter perfection; then I will have passed the test, and the gods will receive me once again.

She dropped to her knees. She found a woodgrain line, and began to trace it.

There was no answering gift of release, no sense of rightness; but that did not trouble her, because she understood that this was part of the test. If the gods answered her immediately, the way they used to, then how would it be a test of her dedication? Where before she had undergone her

purification under their constant guidance, now she must purify herself alone. And how would she know if she had done it properly? The gods would come to her again.

The gods would speak to her again. Or perhaps they would carry her away, take her to the palace of the Royal Mother, where the noble Han Jiang-qing awaited her. There she would also meet Li Qing-jao, her ancestor-of-the-heart. There her ancestors would all greet her, and they would say, The gods determined to try all the godspoken of Path. Few indeed have passed this test; but you, Qing-jao, you have brought great honor to us all. Because your faithfulness never wavered. You performed your purifications as no other son or daughter has ever performed them. The ancestors of other men and women are all envious of us. For your sake the gods now favor us above them all.

"What are you doing?" asked Father. "Why are you tracing the woodgrain lines?"

She did not answer. She refused to be distracted.

"The need for that has been taken away. I know it has-- I feel no need for purification."

Ah, Father! If only you could understand! But even though you will fail this test, I will pass it-- and thus I will bring honor even to you, who have forsaken all honorable things.

"Qing-jao," he said. "I know what you're doing. Like those parents who force their mediocre children to wash and wash. You're calling the gods."

Give it that name if you wish, Father. Your words are nothing to me now. I will not listen to you again until we both are dead, and you say to me, My daughter, you were better and wiser than I; all my honor here in the house of the Royal Mother comes from your purity and selfless devotion to the service of the gods. You are truly a noble daughter. I have no joy except because of you.

The world of Path accomplished its transformation peacefully. Here and there, a murder occurred; here and there, one of the godspoken who had been tyrannical was mobbed and cast out of his house. But by and large, the story given by the document was believed, and the former godspoken were treated with great honor because of their righteous sacrifice during the years when they were burdened with the rites of purification.

Still, the old order quickly passed away. The schools were opened equally to all children. Teachers soon reported that students were achieving remarkable things; the stupidest child now was surpassing all averages from former times. And despite Congress's outraged denials of any genetic alteration, scientists on Path at last turned their attention to the genes of their own people. Studying the records of what their genetic molecules had been, and how they were now, the women and men of Path confirmed all that the document had said.

What happened then, as the Hundred Worlds and all the colonies learned of Congress's crimes against Path-- Qing-jao never knew of it. That was all a matter for a world that she had left behind. For she spent all her days now in the service of the gods, cleansing herself, purifying herself.

The story spread that Han Fei-tzu's mad daughter, alone of all the godspoken, persisted in her rituals. At first she was ridiculed for it-- for many of the godspoken had, out of curiosity, attempted to perform their purifications again, and had discovered the rituals to be empty and meaningless now. But she heard little of the ridicule, and cared nothing for it. Her mind was devoted solely to the service of the gods-- what did it matter if the people who had failed the test despised her for continuing to attempt to succeed?

As the years passed, many began to remember the old days as a graceful time, when the gods spoke to men and women, and many were bowed down in their service. Some of these began to think of Qing-jao, not as a madwoman, but as the only faithful woman left among those who had heard the voice of the gods. The word began to spread among the pious: "In the house of Han Fei-tzu there dwells the last of the godspoken."

They began to come then, at first a few, then more and more of them. Visitors, who wanted to speak with the only woman who still labored in her purification. At first she would speak to some of them; when she had finished tracing a board, she would go out into the garden and speak to them. But their words confused her. They spoke of her labor as being the purification of the whole planet. They said that she was calling the gods for the sake of all the people of Path. The more they talked, the harder it was for her to concentrate on what they said. She was soon eager to return to the house, to begin tracing another line. Didn't these people understand that they were wrong to praise her now? "I have accomplished nothing," she would tell them. "The gods are still silent. I have work to do." And then she would return to her tracing.

Her father died as a very old man, with much honor for his many deeds, though no one ever knew his role in the coming of the Plague of the Gods, as it was now called. Only Qing-jao understood. And as she burned a fortune in real money-- no false funeral money would do for her father-- she whispered to him so that no one else could hear, "Now you know, Father. Now you understand your errors, and how you angered the gods. But don't be afraid. I will continue the purification until all your mistakes are rectified. Then the gods will receive you with honor."

She herself became old, and the Journey to the House of Han Qing-jao was now the most famous pilgrimage of Path. Indeed, there were many who heard of her on other worlds, and came to Path just to see her. For it was well-known on many worlds that true holiness could be found in only one place, and in only one person, the old woman whose back was now permanently bent, whose eyes could now see nothing but the lines in the floors of her father's house.

Holy disciples, men and women, now tended the house where servants once had cared for her. They polished the floors. They prepared her simple food, and laid it where she could find it at the doors of the rooms; she would eat and drink only when a room was finished. When a man or woman somewhere in the world achieved some great honor, they would come to the House of Han Qing-jao, kneel down, and trace a woodgrain line; thus all honors were treated as if they were mere decorations on the honor of the Holy Han Qing-jao.

At last, only a few weeks after she completed her hundredth year, Han Qing-jao was found curled up on the floor of her father's room. Some said that it was the exact spot where her father always sat

when he performed his labors; it was hard to be sure, since all the furniture of the house had been removed long before. The holy woman was not dead when they found her. She lay still for several days, murmuring, muttering, inching her hands across her own body as if she were tracing lines in her flesh. Her disciples took turns, ten at a time, listening to her, trying to understand her muttering, setting down the words as best they understood them. They were written in the book called The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao.

Most important of all her words were these, at the very end. "Mother," she whispered. "Father. Did I do it right?" And then, said her disciples, she smiled and died.

She had not been dead for a month before the decision was made in every temple and shrine in every city and town and village of Path. At last there was a person of such surpassing holiness that Path could choose her as the protector and guardian of the world. No other world had such a god, and they admitted it freely.

Path is blessed above all other worlds, they said. For the God of Path is Gloriously Bright.

CHILDREN OF THE MIND
by Orson Scott Card

Chapter 1 -- "I'M NOT MYSELF"

"Mother. Father. Did I do it right?"

-- The last words of Han Qing-jao, from *The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao*

Si Wang-mu stepped forward. The young man named Peter took her hand and led her into the starship. The door closed behind them.

Wang-mu sat down on one of the swiveling chairs inside the small metal-walled room. She looked around, expecting to see something strange and new. Except for the metal walls, it could have been any office on the world of Path. Clean, but not fastidiously so. Furnished, in a utilitarian way. She had seen holos of ships in flight: the smoothly streamlined fighters and shuttles that dipped into and out of the atmosphere; the vast rounded structures of the starships that accelerated as near to the speed of light as matter could get. On the one hand, the sharp power of a needle; on the other, the massive power of a sledgehammer. But here in this room, no power at all. Just a room.

Where was the pilot? There must be a pilot, for the young man who sat across the room from her, murmuring to his computer, could hardly be controlling a starship capable of the feat of traveling faster than light.

And yet that must have been precisely what he was doing, for there were no other doors that might lead to other rooms. The starship had looked small from the outside; this room obviously used all the space that it contained. There in the corner were the batteries that stored energy from the solar collectors on the top of the ship. In that chest, which seemed to be insulated like a refrigerator, there might be food and drink. So much for life support. Where was the romance in starflight now, if this was all it took? A mere room.

With nothing else to watch, she watched the young man at the computer terminal. Peter Wiggin, he said his name was. The name of the ancient Hegemon, the one who first united all the human race under his control, back when people lived on only one world, all the nations and races and religions and philosophies crushed together elbow to elbow, with nowhere to go but into each other's lands, for the sky was a ceiling then, and space was a vast chasm that could not be bridged. Peter Wiggin, the man who ruled the human race. This was not him, of course, and he had admitted as much. Andrew Wiggin sent him; Wang-mu remembered, from things that Master Han had told her, that Andrew Wiggin had somehow made him. Did this make the great Speaker of the Dead Peter's father? Or was he somehow Ender's brother, not just named for but actually embodying the Hegemon who had died three thousand years before?

Peter stopped murmuring, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. He rubbed his eyes, then stretched and groaned. It was a very indelicate thing to do in company. The sort of thing one might expect from a coarse fieldworker.

He seemed to sense her disapproval. Or perhaps he had forgotten her and now suddenly remembered that he had company. Without straightening himself in his chair, he turned his head and looked at her.

"Sorry," he said. "I forgot I was not alone."

Wang-mu longed to speak boldly to him, despite a lifetime retreating from bold speech. After all, he had spoken to her with offensive boldness, when his starship appeared like a fresh-sprouted mushroom on the lawn by the river and he emerged with a single vial of a disease that would cure her home world, Path, of its genetic illness. He had looked her in the eye not fifteen minutes ago and said, "Come with me and you'll be part of changing history. Making history." And despite her fear, she had said yes.

Had said yes, and now sat in a swivel chair watching him behave crudely, stretching like a tiger in front of her. Was that his beast-of-the-heart, the tiger? Wang-mu had read the Hegemon. She could believe that there was a tiger in that great and terrible man. But this one? This boy? Older than Wang-mu, but she was not too young to know immaturity when she saw it. He was going to change the course of history! Clean out the corruption in the Congress. Stop the Lusitania Fleet. Make all colony planets equal members of the Hundred Worlds. This boy who stretched like a jungle cat.

"I don't have your approval," he said. He sounded annoyed and amused, both at once. But then she might not be good at understanding the inflections of one such as this. Certainly it was hard to read the grimaces of such a round-eyed man. Both his face and his voice contained hidden languages that she could not understand.

"You must understand," he said. "I'm not myself."

Wang-mu spoke the common language well enough at least to understand the idiom. "You are unwell today?" But she knew even as she said it that he had not meant the expression idiomatically at all.

"I'm not myself," he said again. "I'm not really Peter Wiggin."

"I hope not," said Wang-mu. "I read about his funeral in school."

"I do look like him, though, don't I?" He brought up a hologram into the air over his computer terminal. The hologram rotated to look at Wang-mu; Peter sat up and assumed the same pose, facing her.

"There is a resemblance," she said.

"Of course, I'm younger," said Peter. "Because Ender didn't see me again after he left Earth when he was-- what, five years old? A little runt, anyway. I was still a boy. That's what he remembered, when he conjured me out of thin air."

"Not air at all," she said. "Out of nothing."

"Not nothing, either," he said. "Conjured me, all the same." He smiled wickedly. "I can call spirits from the vasty deep."

These words meant something to him, but not to her. In the world of Path she had been expected to be a servant and so was educated very little. Later, in the house of Han Fei-tzu, her abilities had been recognized, first by her former mistress, Han Qing-jao, and later by the master himself. From both she had acquired some bits of education, in a haphazard way. What teaching there had been was mostly technical, and the literature she learned was of the Middle Kingdom, or of Path itself. She could have quoted endlessly from the great poet Li Qing-jao, for whom her one-time mistress had been named. But of the poet he was quoting, she knew nothing.

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep," he said again. And then, changing his voice and manner a little, he answered himself. "Why so can I, or so can any man. But will they come when you do call for them?"

"Shakespeare?" she guessed.

He grinned at her. She thought of the way a cat smiles at the creature it is toying with. "That's always the best guess when a European is doing the quoting," he said.

"The quotation is funny," she said. "A man brags that he can summon the dead. But the other man says that the trick is not calling, but rather getting them to come."

He laughed. "What a way you have with humor."

"This quotation means something to you, because Ender called you forth from the dead."

He looked startled. "How did you know?"

She felt a thrill of fear. Was it possible? "I did not know, I was making a joke."

"Well, it's not true. Not literally. He didn't raise the dead. Though he no doubt thinks he could, if the need arose." Peter sighed. "I'm being nasty. The words just come to my mind. I don't mean them. They just come."

"It is possible to have words come to your mind, and still refrain from speaking them aloud."

He rolled his eyes. "I wasn't trained for servility, the way you were."

So this was the attitude of one who came from a world of free people-- to sneer at one who had been a servant through no fault of her own. "I was trained to keep unpleasant words to myself as a matter of courtesy," she said. "But perhaps to you, that is just another form of servility."

"As I said, Royal Mother of the West, nastiness comes unbidden to my mouth."

"I am not the Royal Mother," said Wang-mu. "The name was a cruel joke--"

"And only a very nasty person would mock you for it." Peter grinned. "But I'm named for the Hegemon. I thought perhaps bearing ludicrously overwrought names was something we might have in common."

She sat silently, entertaining the possibility that he might have been trying to make friends.

"I came into existence," he said, "only a short while ago. A matter of weeks. I thought you should know that about me."

She didn't understand.

"You know how this starship works?" he said.

Now he was leaping from subject to subject. Testing her. Well, she had had enough of being tested. "Apparently one sits within it and is examined by rude strangers," she said.

He smiled and nodded. "Give as good as you get. Ender told me you were nobody's servant."

"I was the true and faithful servant of Qing-jao. I hope Ender did not lie to you about that."

He brushed away her literalism. "A mind of your own." Again his eyes sized her up; again she felt utterly comprehended by his lingering glance, as she had felt when he first looked at her beside the river. "Wang-mu, I am not speaking metaphorically when I tell you I was only just made. Made, you understand, not born. And the way I was made has much to do with how this starship works. I don't want to bore you by explaining things you already understand, but you must know what-- not who-- I am in order to understand why I need you with me. So I ask again-- do you know how this starship works?"

She nodded. "I think so. Jane, the being who dwells in computers, she holds in her mind as perfect a picture as she can of the starship and all who are within it. The people also hold their own picture of themselves and who they are and so on. Then she moves everything from the real world to a place of nothingness, which takes no time at all, and then brings it back into reality in whatever place she chooses. Which also takes no time. So instead of starships taking years to get from world to world, it happens in an instant."

Peter nodded. "Very good. Except what you have to understand is that during the time that the starship is Outside, it isn't surrounded by nothingness. Instead it's surrounded by uncountable numbers of auias."

She turned away her face from him.

"You don't understand auias?"

"To say that all people have always existed. That we are older than the oldest gods ..."

"Well, sort of," said Peter. "Only auias on the Outside, they can't be said to exist, or at least not any kind of meaningful existence. They're just ... there. Not even that, because there's no sense of location, no there where they might be. They just are. Until some intelligence calls them, names them, puts them into some kind of order, gives them shape and form."

"The clay can become a bear," she said, "but not as long as it rests cold and wet in the riverbank."

"Exactly. So there was Ender Wiggin and several other people who, with luck, you'll never need to meet, taking the first voyage Outside. They weren't going anywhere, really. The point of that first voyage was to get Outside long enough that one of them, a rather talented genetic scientist, could create a new molecule, an extremely complex one, by the image she held of it in her mind. Or rather her image of the modifications she needed to make in an existing... well, you don't have the biology for it. Anyway, she did what she was supposed to do, she created the new molecule, calloo callay, only the thing is, she wasn't the only person doing any creating that day."

"Ender's mind created you?" asked Wang-mu.

"Inadvertently. I was, shall we say, a tragic accident. An unhappy side effect. Let's just say that everybody there, everything there, was creating like crazy. The auias Outside are frantic to be made into something, you see. There were shadow starships being created all around us. All kinds of weak, faint, fragmented, fragile, ephemeral structures rising and falling in each instant. Only four had any solidity. One was that genetic molecule that Elanora Ribeira had come to create."

"One was you?"

"The least interesting one, I fear. The least loved and valued. One of the people on the ship was a fellow named Miro, who through a tragic accident some years ago had been left somewhat crippled. Neurologically damaged. Thick of speech, clumsy with his hands, lame when he walked. He held within his mind the powerful, treasured image of himself as he used to be. So-- with that perfect self-image, a vast number of auias assembled themselves into an exact copy, not of how he was, but of how he once was and longed to be again. Complete with all his memories-- a perfect replication of him. So perfect that it had the same utter loathing for his crippled body that he himself had. So ... the new, improved Miro-- or rather the copy of the old, undamaged Miro-- whatever-- he stood there as the ultimate rebuke of the crippled one. And before their very eyes, that old rejected body crumbled away into nothing."

Wang-mu gasped, imagining it. "He died!"

"No, that's the point, don't you see? He lived. It was Miro. His own aiua-- not the trillions of aiuas making up the atoms and molecules of his body, but the one that controlled them all, the one that was himself, his will-- his aiua simply moved to the new and perfect body. That was his true self. And the old one ..."

"Had no use."

"Had nothing to give it shape. You see, I think our bodies are held together by love. The love of the master aiua for the glorious powerful body that obeys it, that gives the self all its experience of the world. Even Miro, even with all his self-loathing when he was crippled, even he must have loved whatever pathetic remnant of his body was left to him. Until the moment that he had a new one."

"And then he moved."

"Without even knowing that he had done so," said Peter. "He followed his love."

Wang-mu heard this fanciful tale and knew that it must be true, for she had overheard many a mention of aiuas in the conversations between Han Fei-tzu and Jane, and now with Peter Wiggin's story, it made sense. It had to be true, if only because this starship really had appeared as if from nowhere on the bank of the river behind Han Fei-tzu's house.

"But now you must wonder," said Peter, "how I, unloved and unlovable as I know I am, came into existence."

"You already said. Ender's mind."

"Miro's most intensely held image was of his own younger, healthier, stronger self. But Ender, the images that mattered most in his mind were of his older sister Valentine and his older brother Peter. Not as they became, though, for his real older brother Peter was long dead, and Valentine-- she has accompanied or followed Ender on all his hops through space, so she is still alive, but aged as he has aged. Mature. A real person. Yet on that starship, during that time Outside, he conjured up a copy of her youthful self. Young Valentine. Poor Old Valentine! She didn't know she was so old until she saw this younger self, this perfect being, this angel that had dwelt in Ender's twisted little mind from childhood on. I must say, she's the most put-upon victim in all this little drama. To know that your brother carries around such an image of you, instead of loving you as you really are-- well, one can see that Old Valentine-- she hates it, but that's how everyone thinks of her now, including, poor thing, herself-- one can see that Old Valentine is really having her patience tried."

"But if the original Valentine is still alive," said Wang-mu, puzzled, "then who is the young Valentine? Who is she really? You can be Peter because he's dead and no one is using his name, but ..."

"Quite puzzling, isn't it?" said Peter. "But my point is that whether he's dead or not, I'm not Peter Wiggin. As I said before, I'm not myself."

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. The hologram above the terminal turned to look at him. He had not touched the controls.

"Jane is with us," said Wang-mu.

"Jane is always with us," said Peter. "Ender's spy."

The hologram spoke. "Ender doesn't need a spy. He needs friends, if he can get them. Allies at least."

Peter reached idly for the terminal and turned it off. The hologram disappeared.

This disturbed Wang-mu very much. Almost as if he had slapped a child. Or beaten a servant. "Jane is a very noble creature, to treat her with such disrespect."

"Jane is a computer program with a bug in the id routines."

He was in a dark mood, this boy who had come to take her into his starship and spirit her away from the world of Path. But dark as his mood might be, she understood now, with the hologram gone from the terminal, what she had seen. "It isn't just because you're so young and the holograms of Peter Wiggin the Hegemon are of a mature man," said Wang-mu.

"What," he said impatiently. "What isn't what?"

"The physical difference between you and the Hegemon."

"What is it, then?"

"He looks-- satisfied."

"He conquered the world," said Peter.

"So when you have done the same, you will get that look of satisfaction?"

"I suppose so," said Peter. "It's what passes for a purpose in my life. It's the mission Ender has sent me on."

"Don't lie to me," said Wang-mu. "On the riverbank you spoke of the terrible things I did for the sake of my ambition. I admit it-- I was ambitious, desperate to rise out of my terrible lowborn state. I know the taste of it, and the smell of it, and I smell it coming from you, like the smell of tar on a hot day, you stink of it."

"Ambition? Has a stench?"

"I'm drunk with it myself."

He grinned. Then he touched the jewel in his ear. "Remember, Jane is listening, and she tells Ender everything."

Wang-mu fell silent, but not because she was embarrassed. She simply had nothing to say, and therefore said nothing.

"So I'm ambitious. Because that's how Ender imagined me. Ambitious and nasty-minded and cruel."

"But I thought you were not yourself," she said.

His eyes blazed with defiance. "That's right, I'm not." He looked away. "Sorry, Gepetto, but I can't be a real boy. I have no soul."

She didn't understand the name he said, but she understood the word soul. "All my childhood I was thought to be a servant by nature. To have no soul. Then one day they discovered that I have one. So far it has brought me no great happiness."

"I'm not speaking of some religious idea. I'm speaking of the aiua. I haven't got one. Remember what happened to Miro's broken-down body when his aiua abandoned it."

"But you don't crumble, so you must have an aiua after all."

"I don't have it, it has me. I continue to exist because the aiua whose irresistible will called me into existence continues to imagine me. Continues to need me, to control me, to be my will."

"Ender Wiggin?" she asked.

"My brother, my creator, my tormentor, my god, my very self."

"And young Valentine? Her too?"

"Ah, but he loves her. He's proud of her. He's glad he made her. Me he loathes. Loathes, and yet it's his will that I do and say every nasty thing. When I'm at my most despicable, remember that I do only what my brother makes me do."

"Oh, to blame him for--"

"I'm not blaming, Wang-mu. I'm stating simple reality. His will is controlling three bodies now. Mine, my impossibly angelic sister's, and of course his own very tired middle-aged body. Every aiua in my body receives its order and place from his. I am, in all ways that matter, Ender Wiggin. Except that he has created me to be the vessel of every impulse in himself that he hates and fears. His ambition, yes, you smell his ambition when you smell mine. His aggression. His rage. His nastiness. His cruelty. His, not mine, because I am dead, and anyway I was never like this, never the way he saw me. This person before you is a travesty, a mockery! I'm a twisted memory. A

despicable dream. A nightmare. I'm the creature hiding under the bed. He brought me out of chaos to be the terror of his childhood."

"So don't do it," said Wang-mu. "If you don't want to be those things, don't do them."

He sighed and closed his eyes. "If you're so bright, why haven't you understood a word I've said?"

She did understand, though. "What is your will, anyway? Nobody can see it. You don't hear it thinking. You only know what your will is afterward, when you look back in your life and see what you've done."

"That's the most terrible trick he's played on me," said Peter softly, his eyes still closed. "I look back on my life and I see only the memories he has imagined for me. He was taken from our family when he was only five. What does he know of me or my life?"

"He wrote *The Hegemon*."

"That book. Yes, based on Valentine's memories, as she told them to him. And the public documents of my dazzling career. And of course the few ansible communications between Ender and my own late self before I-- he-- died. I'm only a few weeks old, yet I know a quotation from Henry X, Part I, Owen Glendower boasting to Hotspur. Henry Percy. How could I know that? When did I go to school? How long did I lie awake at night, reading old plays until I committed a thousand favorite lines to memory? Did Ender somehow conjure up the whole of his dead brother's education? All his private thoughts? Ender only knew the real Peter Wiggin for five years. It's not a real person's memories I draw on. It's the memories Ender thinks that I should have."

"He thinks you should know Shakespeare, and so you do?" she asked doubtfully.

"If only Shakespeare were all he had given me. The great writers, the great philosophers. If only those were the only memories I had."

She waited for him to list the troublesome memories. But he only shuddered and fell silent.

"So if you are really controlled by Ender, then ... you are him. Then that is yourself. You are Andrew Wiggin. You have an aiua."

"I'm Andrew Wiggin's nightmare," said Peter. "I'm Andrew Wiggin's self-loathing. I'm everything he hates and fears about himself. That's the script I've been given. That's what I have to do."

He flexed his hand into a fist, then extended it partway, the fingers still bent. A claw. The tiger again. And for a moment, Wang-mu was afraid of him. Only a moment, though. He relaxed his hands. The moment passed. "What part does your script have in it for me?"

"I don't know," said Peter. "You're very smart. Smarter than I am, I hope. Though of course I have such incredible vanity that I can't really believe that anyone is actually smarter than I am. Which means that I'm all the more in need of good advice, since I can't actually conceive of needing any."

"You talk in circles."

"That's just part of my cruelty. To torment you with conversation. But maybe it's supposed to go farther than that. Maybe I'm supposed to torture you and kill you the way I so clearly remember doing with squirrels. Maybe I'm supposed to stake your living body out in the woods, nailing your extremities to tree roots, and then open you up layer by layer to see at what point the flies begin to come and lay eggs in your exposed flesh."

She recoiled at the image. "I have read the book. I know the Hegemon was not a monster!"

"It wasn't the Speaker for the Dead who created me Outside. It was the frightened boy Ender. I'm not the Peter Wiggin he so wisely understood in that book. I'm the Peter Wiggin he had nightmares about. The one who flayed squirrels."

"He saw you do that?" she asked.

"Not me," he said testily. "And no, he never even saw him do it. Valentine told him later. She found the squirrel's body in the woods near their childhood home in Greensboro, North Carolina, on the continent of North America back on Earth. But that image fit so tidily into his nightmares that he borrowed it and shared it with me. That's the memory I live with. Intellectually, I can imagine that the real Peter Wiggin was probably not cruel at all. He was learning and studying. He didn't have compassion for the squirrel because he didn't sentimentalize it. It was simply an animal. No more important than a head of lettuce. To cut it up was probably as immoral an act as making a salad. But that's not how Ender imagined it, and so that's not how I remember it."

"How do you remember it?"

"The way I remember all my supposed memories. From the outside. Watching myself in horrified fascination as I take a fiendish delight in cruelty. All my memories prior to the moment I came to life on Ender's little voyage Outside, in all of them I see myself through someone else's eyes. A very odd feeling, I assure you."

"But now?"

"Now I don't see myself at all," he said. "Because I have no self. I am not myself."

"But you remember. You have memories. Of this conversation, already you remember it. Looking at me. You must, surely."

"Yes," he said. "I remember you. And I remember being here and seeing you. But there isn't any self behind my eyes. I feel tired and stupid even when I'm being my most clever and brilliant."

He smiled a charming smile and now Wang-mu could see again the true difference between Peter and the hologram of the Hegemon. It was as he said: Even at his most self-deprecating, this Peter

Wiggin had eyes that flashed with inner rage. He was dangerous. You could see it looking at him. When he looked into your eyes, you could imagine him planning how and when you would die.

"I am not myself," said Peter.

"You are saying this to control yourself," said Wang-mu, guessing but also sure she was right. "This is your incantation, to stop yourself from doing what you desire."

Peter sighed and leaned over, laying his head down on the terminal, his ear pressed against the cold plastic surface.

"What is it you desire?" she said, fearful of the answer.

"Go away," he said.

"Where can I go? This great starship of yours has only one room."

"Open the door and go outside," he said.

"You mean to kill me? To eject me into space where I'll freeze before I have time to suffocate?"

He sat up and looked at her in puzzlement. "Space?"

His confusion confused her. Where else would they be but in space? That's where starships went, through space.

Except this one, of course.

As he saw understanding come to her, he laughed aloud. "Oh, yes, you're the brilliant one, they've remade the entire world of Path to have your genius!"

She refused to be goaded.

"I thought there would be some sensation of movement. Or something. Have we traveled, then? Are we already there?"

"In the twinkling of an eye. We were Outside and then back Inside at another place, all so fast that only a computer could experience our voyage as having any duration at all. Jane did it before I finished talking to her. Before I said a word to you."

"Then where are we? What's outside the door?"

"We're sitting in the woods somewhere on the planet Divine Wind. The air is breathable. You won't freeze. It's summer outside the door."

She walked to the door and pulled down the handle, releasing the airtight seal. The door eased open. Sunlight streamed into the room.

"Divine Wind," she said. "I read about it-- it was founded as a Shinto world the way Path was supposed to be Taoist. The purity of ancient Japanese culture. But I think it's not so very pure these days."

"More to the point, it's the world where Andrew and Jane and I felt-- if one can speak of my having feelings apart from Ender's own-- the world where we might find the center of power in the worlds ruled by Congress. The true decision makers. The power behind the throne."

"So you can subvert them and take over the human race?"

"So I can stop the Lusitania Fleet. Taking over the human race is a bit later on the agenda. The Lusitania Fleet is something of an emergency. We have only a few weeks to stop it before the fleet gets there and uses the Little Doctor, the M.D. Device, to blow Lusitania into its constituent elements. In the meantime, because Ender and everyone else expects me to fail, they're building these little tin can starships as fast as possible and transporting as many Lusitanians as they can-- humans, piggies, and buggers-- to other habitable but as yet uninhabited planets. My dear sister Valentine-- the young one-- is off with Miro-- in his fresh new body, the dear lad-- searching out new worlds as fast as their little starship can carry them. Quite a project. All of them betting on my-- on our-- failure. Let's disappoint them, shall we?"

"Disappoint them?"

"By succeeding. Let's succeed. Let's find the center of power among humankind, and let's persuade them to stop the fleet before it needlessly destroys a world."

Wang-mu looked at him doubtfully. Persuade them to stop the fleet? This nasty-minded, cruel-hearted boy? How could he persuade anyone of anything?

As if he could hear her thoughts, he answered her silent doubt. "You see why I invited you to come along with me. When Ender was inventing me, he forgot the fact that he never knew me during the time in my life when I was persuading people and gathering them together in shifting alliances and all that nonsense. So the Peter Wiggin he created is far too nasty, openly ambitious, and nakedly cruel to persuade a man with rectal itch to scratch his own butt."

She looked away from him again.

"You see?" he said. "I offend you again and again. Look at me. Do you see my dilemma? The real Peter, the original one, he could have done the work I've been sent to do. He could have done it in his sleep. He'd already have a plan. He'd be able to win people over, soothe them, insinuate himself into their councils. That Peter Wiggin! He can charm the stings out of bees. But can I? I doubt it. For, you see, I'm not myself."

He got up from his chair, roughly pushed his way past her, and stepped outside onto the meadow that surrounded the little metal cabin that had carried them from world to world. Wang-mu stood in the doorway, watching him as he wandered away from the ship; away, but not too far.

I know something of how he feels, she thought. I know something of having to submerge your will in someone else's. To live for them, as if they were the star of the story of your life, and you merely a supporting player. I have been a slave. But at least in all that time I knew my own heart. I knew what I truly thought even as I did what they wanted, whatever it took to get what I wanted from them. Peter Wiggin, though, has no idea of what he really wants, because even his resentment of his lack of freedom isn't his own, even that comes from Andrew Wiggin. Even his self-loathing is Andrew's self-loathing, and ...

And back and back, in circles, like the random path he was tracing through the meadow.

Wang-mu thought of her mistress-- no, her former mistress-- Qing-jao. She also traced strange patterns. It was what the gods forced her to do. No, that's the old way of thinking. It's what her obsessive-compulsive disorder caused her to do. To kneel on the floor and trace the grain of the wood in each board, trace a single line of it as far as it went across the floor, line after line. It never meant anything, and yet she had to do it because only by such meaningless mind-numbing obedience could she win a scrap of freedom from the impulses controlling her. It is Qing-jao who was always the slave, and never me. For the master that ruled her controlled her from inside her own mind. While I could always see my master outside me, so my inmost self was never touched.

Peter Wiggin knows that he is ruled by the unconscious fears and passions of a complicated man many light-years away. But then, Qing-jao thought her obsessions came from the gods. What does it matter, to tell yourself that the thing controlling you comes from outside, if in fact you only experience it inside your own heart? Where can you run from it? How can you hide? Qing-jao must be free by now, freed by the carrier virus that Peter brought with him to Path and put into the hands of Han Fei-tzu. But Peter-- what freedom can there be for him?

And yet he must still live as if he were free. He must still struggle for freedom even if the struggle itself is just one more symptom of his slavery. There is a part of him that yearns to be himself. No, not himself. A self.

So what is my part in all of this? Am I supposed to work a miracle, and give him an aiua? That isn't in my power.

And yet I do have power, she thought.

She must have power, or why else had he spoken to her so openly? A total stranger, and he had opened his heart to her at once. Why? Because she was in on the secrets, yes, but something else as well.

Ah, of course. He could speak freely to her because she had never known Andrew Wiggin. Maybe Peter was nothing but an aspect of Ender's nature, all that Ender feared and loathed about himself.

But she could never compare the two of them. Whatever Peter was, whoever controlled him, she was his confidante.

Which made her, once again, someone's servant. She had been Qing-jao's confidante, too.

She shuddered, as if to shake from her the sad comparison. No, she told herself. It is not the same thing. Because that young man wandering so aimlessly among the wildflowers has no power over me, except to tell me of his pain and hope for my understanding. Whatever I give to him I will give freely.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the frame of the door. I will give it freely, yes, she thought. But what am I planning to give him? Why, exactly what he wants-- my loyalty, my devotion, my help in all his tasks. To submerge myself in him. And why am I already planning to do all this? Because however he might doubt himself, he has the power to win people to his cause.

She opened her eyes again and strode out into the hip-high grass toward him. He saw her and waited wordlessly as she approached. Bees buzzed around her; butterflies staggered drunkenly through the air, avoiding her somehow in their seemingly random flight. At the last moment she reached out and gathered a bee from a blossom into her hand, into her fist, but then quickly, before it could sting her, she lobbed it into Peter's face.

Flustered, surprised, he batted away the infuriated bee, ducked under it, dodged, and finally ran a few steps before it lost track of him and buzzed its way out among the flowers again. Only then could he turn furiously to face her.

"What was that for!"

She giggled at him-- she couldn't help it. He had looked so funny.

"Oh, good, laugh. I can see you're going to be fine company."

"Be angry, I don't care," said Wang-mu. "I'll just tell you this. Do you think that away off on Lusitania, Ender's aiaa suddenly thought, 'Ho, a bee!' and made you brush at it and dodge it like a clown?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, aren't you clever. Well gosh, Miss Royal Mother of the West, you sure solved all my problems! I can see I must always have been a real boy! And these ruby shoes, why, they've had the power to take me back to Kansas all along!"

"What's Kansas?" she asked, looking down at his shoes, which were not red.

"Just another memory of Ender's that he kindly shared with me," said Peter Wiggin.

He stood there, his hands in his pockets, regarding her.

She stood just as silently, her hands clasped in front of her, regarding him right back.

"So are you with me?" he finally asked.

"You must try not to be nasty with me," she said.

"Take that up with Ender."

"I don't care whose aiua controls you," she said. "You still have your own thoughts, which are different from his-- you feared the bee, and he didn't even think of a bee right then, and you know it. So whatever part of you is in control or whoever the real 'you' happens to be, right there on the front of your head is the mouth that's going to be speaking to me, and I'm telling you that if I'm going to work with you, you better be nice to me."

"Does this mean no more bee fights?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"That's just as well. With my luck Ender no doubt gave me a body that goes into shock when I'm stung by a bee."

"It can also be pretty hard on the bee," she said.

He grinned at her. "I find myself liking you," he said. "I really hate that."

He strode off toward the starship. "Come on!" he called out to her. "Let's see what information Jane can give us about this world we're supposed to take by storm."

Chapter 2 -- "YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD!"

"When I follow the path of the gods through the wood,
My eyes take every twisting turn of the grain,
But my body moves straight along the planking,
So those who watch me see that the path of the gods is straight,
While I dwell in a world with no straightness in it."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Novinha would not come to him. The gentle old teacher looked genuinely distressed as she told Ender. "She wasn't angry," the old teacher explained. "She told me that ..."

Ender nodded, understanding how the teacher was torn between compassion and honesty. "You can tell me her words," he said. "She is my wife, so I can bear it."

The old teacher rolled her eyes. "I'm married too, you know."

Of course he knew. All the members of the Order of the Children of the Mind of Christ-- Os Filhos da Mente de Cristo-- were married. It was their rule.

"I'm married, so I know perfectly well that your spouse is the one person who knows all the words you can't bear to hear."

"Then let me correct myself," said Ender mildly. "She is my wife, so I am determined to hear it, whether I can bear it or not."

"She says that she has to finish the weeding, so she has no time for lesser battles."

Yes, that sounded like Novinha. She might tell herself that she had taken the mantle of Christ upon her, but if so it was the Christ who denounced the Pharisees, the Christ who said all those cruel and sarcastic things to his enemies and his friends alike, not the gentle one with infinite patience.

Still, Ender was not one to go away merely because his feelings were hurt. "Then what are we waiting for?" asked Ender. "Show me where I can find a hoe."

The old teacher stared at him for a long moment, then smiled and led him out into the gardens. Soon, wearing work gloves and carrying a hoe in one hand, he stood at the end of the row where Novinha worked, bent over in the sunlight, her eyes on the ground before her as she cut under the root of weed after weed, turning each one up to bum to death in the hot dry sun. She was coming toward him.

Ender stepped to the unweeded row beside the one Novinha worked on, and began to hoe toward her. They would not meet, but they would pass close to each other. She would notice him or not. She would speak to him or not. She still loved and needed him. Or not. But no matter what, at the end of this day he would have weeded in the same field as his wife, and her work would have been more easily done because he was there, and so he would still be her husband, however little she might now want him in that role.

The first time they passed each other, she did not so much as look up. But then she would not have to. She would know without looking that the one who joined her in weeding so soon after she refused to meet with her husband would have to be her husband. He knew that she would know this, and he also knew she was too proud to look at him and show that she wanted to see him again. She would study the weeds until she went half blind, because Novinha was not one to bend to anyone else's will.

Except, of course, the will of Jesus. That was the message she had sent him, the message that had brought him here, determined to talk to her. A brief note couched in the language of the Church.

She was separating herself from him to serve Christ among the Filhos. She felt herself called to this work. He was to regard himself as having no further responsibility toward her, and to expect nothing more from her than she would gladly give to any of the children of God. It was a cold message, for all the gentleness of its phrasing.

Ender was not one to bend easily to another's will, either. Instead of obeying the message, he came here, determined to do the opposite of what she asked. And why not? Novinha had a terrible record as a decision maker. Whenever she decided to do something for someone else's good, she ended up inadvertently destroying them. Like Libo, her childhood friend and secret lover, the father of all her children during her marriage to the violent but sterile man who had been her husband until he died. Fearing that he would die at the hands of the pequeninos, the way his father had died, Novinha withheld from him her vital discoveries about the biology of the planet Lusitania, fearing that the knowledge of it would kill him. Instead, it was the ignorance of that very information that led him to his death. What she did for his own good, without his knowledge, killed him.

You'd think she'd learn something from that, thought Ender. But she still does the same thing. Making decisions that deform other people's lives, without consulting them, without ever conceiving that perhaps they don't want her to save them from whatever supposed misery she's saving them from.

Then again, if she had simply married Libo in the first place and told him everything she knew, he would probably still be alive and Ender would never have married his widow and helped her raise her younger children. It was the only family Ender had ever had or was ever likely to have. So bad as Novinha's decisions tended to be, the happiest time of his life had come about only because of one of the most deadly of her mistakes.

On their second pass, Ender saw that she still, stubbornly, was not going to speak to him, and so, as always, he bent first and broke the silence between them.

"The Filhos are married, you know. It's a married order. You can't become a full member without me."

She paused in her work. The blade of the hoe rested on unbroken soil, the handle light in her gloved fingers. "I can weed the beets without you," she finally said.

His heart leapt with relief that he had penetrated her veil of silence. "No you can't," he said. "Because here I am."

"These are the potatoes," she said. "I can't stop you from helping with the potatoes."

In spite of themselves they both laughed, and with a groan she unbent her back, stood straight, let the hoe handle fall to the ground, and took Ender's hands in hers, a touch that thrilled him despite two layers of thick workglove cloth between their palms and fingers.

"If I do profane with my touch," Ender began.

"No Shakespeare," she said. "No 'lips two blushing pilgrims ready stand.'"

"I miss you," he said.

"Get over it," she said.

"I don't have to. If you're joining the Filhos, so am I."

She laughed.

Ender didn't appreciate her scorn. "If a xenobiologist can retreat from the world of meaningless suffering, why can't an old retired speaker for the dead?"

"Andrew," she said, "I'm not here because I've given up on life. I'm here because I really have turned my heart over to the Redeemer. You could never do that. You don't belong here."

"I belong here if you belong here. We made a vow. A sacred one, that the Holy Church won't let us set aside. In case you forgot."

She sighed and looked out at the sky over the wall of the monastery. Beyond the wall, through meadows, over a fence, up a hill, into the woods ... that's where the great love of her life, Libo, had gone, and where he died. Where Pipo, his father, who was like a father to her as well, where he had gone before, and also died. It was into another wood that her son Estevao had gone, and also died, but Ender knew, watching her, that when she saw the world outside these walls, it was all those deaths she saw. Two of them had taken place before Ender got to Lusitania. But the death of Estevao-- she had begged Ender to stop him from going to the dangerous place where pequeninos were talking of war, of killing humans. She knew as well as Ender did that to stop Estevao would have been the same as to destroy him, for he had not become a priest to be safe, but rather to try to carry the message of Christ to these tree people. Whatever joy came to the early Christian martyrs had surely come to Estevao as he slowly died in the embrace of a murderous tree. Whatever comfort God sent to them in their hour of supreme sacrifice. But no such joy had come to Novinha. God apparently did not extend the benefits of his service to the next of kin. And in her grief and rage she blamed Ender. Why had she married him, if not to make herself safe from these disasters?

He had never said to her the most obvious thing, that if there was anyone to blame, it was God, not him. After all, it was God who had made saints-- well, almost saints-- out of her parents, who died as they discovered the antidote to the descolada virus when she was only a child. Certainly it was God who led Estevao out to preach to the most dangerous of the pequeninos. Yet in her sorrow it was God she turned to, and turned away from Ender, who had meant to do nothing but good for her.

He never said this because he knew that she would not listen. And he also refrained from saying it because he knew she saw things another way. If God took Father and Mother, Pipo, Libo, and finally Estevao away from her, it was because God was just and punished her for her sins. But when Ender failed to stop Estevao from his suicidal mission to the pequeninos, it was because he was blind, self-willed, stubborn, and rebellious, and because he did not love her enough.

But he did love her. With all his heart he loved her.

All his heart?

All of it he knew about. And yet when his deepest secrets were revealed in that first voyage Outside, it was not Novinha that his heart conjured there. So apparently there was someone who mattered even more to him.

Well, he couldn't help what went on in his unconscious mind, any more than Novinha could. All he could control was what he actually did, and what he was doing now was showing Novinha that regardless of how she tried to drive him away, he would not be driven. That no matter how much she imagined that he loved Jane and his involvement in the great affairs of the human race more than he loved her, it was not true, she was more important to him than any of it. He would give it all up for her. He would disappear behind monastery walls for her. He would weed rows of unidentified plant life in the hot sun. For her.

But even that was not enough. She insisted that he do it, not for her, but for Christ. Well, too bad. He wasn't married to Christ, and neither was she. Still, it couldn't be displeasing to God when a husband and wife gave all to each other. Surely that was part of what God expected of human beings.

"You know I don't blame you for the death of Quim," she said, using the old family nickname for Estevao.

"I didn't know that," he said, "but I'm glad to find it out."

"I did at first, but I knew all along that it was irrational," she said. "He went because he wanted to, and he was much too old for some interfering parent to stop him. If I couldn't, how could you?"

"I didn't even want to," said Ender. "I wanted him to go. It was the fulfillment of his life's ambition."

"I even know that now. It's right. It was right for him to go, and it was even right for him to die, because his death meant something. Didn't it?"

"It saved Lusitania from a holocaust."

"And brought many to Christ." She laughed, the old laugh, the rich ironic laugh that he had come to treasure if only because it was so rare. "Trees for Jesus," she said. "Who could have guessed?"

"They're already calling him St. Stephen of the Trees."

"That's quite premature. It takes time. He must first be beatified. Miracles of healing must take place at his tomb. Believe me, I know the process."

"Martyrs are thin on the ground these days," said Ender. "He will be beatified. He will be canonized. People will pray for him to intercede with Jesus for them, and it will work, because if anyone has earned the right to have Christ hear him, it's your son Estevao."

Tears slipped down her cheeks, even as she laughed again. "My parents were martyrs and will be saints; my son, also. Piety skipped a generation."

"Oh, yes. Yours was the generation of selfish hedonism."

She finally turned to face him, tear-streaked dirty cheeks, smiling face, twinkling eyes that saw through into his heart. The woman he loved.

"I don't regret my adultery," she said. "How can Christ forgive me when I don't even repent? If I hadn't slept with Libo, my children would not have existed. Surely God does not disapprove of that?"

"I believe what Jesus said was, 'I the Lord will forgive whom I will forgive. But of you it is required that you forgive all men.'"

"More or less," she said. "I'm not a scriptionist." She reached out and touched his cheek. "You're so strong, Ender. But you seem tired. How can you be tired? The universe of human beings still depends on you. Or if not the whole of humankind, then certainly you belong to this world. To save this world. But you're tired."

"Deep inside my bones I am," he said. "And you have taken my last lifeblood away from me."

"How odd," she said. "I thought what I removed from you was the cancer in your life."

"You aren't very good at determining what other people want and need from you, Novinha. No one is. We're all as likely to hurt as help."

"That's why I came here, Ender. I'm through deciding things. I put my trust in my own judgment. Then I put trust in you. I put trust in Libo, in Pipo, in Father and Mother, in Quim, and everyone disappointed me or went away or ... no, I know you didn't go away, and I know it wasn't you that-- hear me out, Andrew, hear me. The problem wasn't in the people I trusted, the problem was that I trusted in them when no human being can possibly deliver what I needed. I needed deliverance, you see. I needed, I need, redemption. And it isn't in your hands to give me-- your open hands, which give me more than you even have to give, Andrew, but still you haven't got the thing I need. Only my Deliverer, only the Anointed One, only he has it to give. Do you see? The only way I can make my life worth living is to give it to him. So here I am."

"Weeding."

"Separating the good fruit from the tares, I believe," she said. "People will have more and better potatoes because I took out the weeds. I don't have to be prominent or even noticed to feel good

about my life now. But you, you come here and remind me that even in becoming happy, I'm hurting someone."

"But you're not," said Ender. "Because I'm coming with you. I'm joining the Filhos with you. They're a married order, and we're a married couple. Without me you can't join, and you need to join. With me you can. What could be simpler?"

"Simpler?" She shook her head. "You don't believe in God, how's that for starters?"

"I certainly do too believe in God," said Ender, annoyed.

"Oh, you're willing to concede God's existence, but that's not what I meant. I mean believe in him the way a mother means it when she says to her son, I believe in you. She's not saying she believes that he exists-- what is that worth? --she's saying she believes in his future, she trusts that he'll do all the good that is in him to do. She puts the future in his hands, that's how she believes in him. You don't believe in Christ that way, Andrew. You still believe in yourself. In other people. You've sent out your little surrogates, those children you conjured up during your visit in hell-- you may be here with me in these walls right now, but your heart is out there scouting planets and trying to stop the fleet. You aren't leaving anything up to God. You don't believe in him."

"Excuse me, but if God wanted to do everything himself, what did he make us for in the first place?"

"Yes, well, I seem to recall that one of your parents was a heretic, which is no doubt where your strangest ideas come from." It was an old joke between them, but this time neither of them laughed.

"I believe in you," Ender said.

"But you consult with Jane."

He reached into his pocket, then held out his hand to show her what he had found there. It was a jewel, with several very fine wires leading from it. Like a glowing organism ripped from its delicate place amid the fronds of life in a shallow sea. She looked at it for a moment uncomprehending, then realized what it was and looked at the ear where, for all the years she had known him, he had worn the jewel that linked him to Jane, the computer-program-come-to-life who was his oldest, dearest, most reliable friend.

"Andrew, no, not for me, surely."

"I can't honestly say these walls contain me, as long as Jane was there to whisper in my ear," he said. "I talked it out with her. I explained it. She understands. We're still friends. But not companions anymore."

"Oh, Andrew," said Novinha. She wept openly now, and held him, clung to him. "If only you had done it years ago, even months ago."

"Maybe I don't believe in Christ the way that you do," said Ender. "But isn't it enough that I believe in you, and you believe in him?"

"You don't belong here, Andrew."

"I belong here more than anywhere else, if this is where you are. I'm not so much world-weary, Novinha, as I am will-weary. I'm tired of deciding things. I'm tired of trying to solve things."

"We try to solve things here," she said, pulling away from him.

"But here we can be, not the mind, but the children of the mind. We can be the hands and feet, the lips and tongue. We can carry out and not decide." He squatted, knelt, then sat in the dirt, the young plants brushing and tickling him on either side. He put his dirty hands to his face and wiped his brow with them, knowing that he was only smearing dirt into mud.

"Oh, I almost believe this, Andrew, you're so good at it," said Novinha. "What, you've decided to stop being the hero of your own saga? Or is this just a ploy? Be the servant of all, so you can be the greatest among us?"

"You know I've never tried for greatness, or achieved it, either."

"Oh, Andrew, you're such a storyteller that you believe your own fables."

Ender looked up at her. "Please, Novinha, let me live with you here. You're my wife. There's no meaning to my life if I've lost you."

"We live as man and wife here, but we don't ... you know that we don't ..."

"I know that the Filhos forswear sexual intercourse," said Ender. "I'm your husband. As long as I'm not having sex with anyone, it might as well be you that I'm not having sex with." He smiled wryly.

Her answering smile was only sad and pitying.

"Novinha," he said. "I'm not interested in my own life anymore. Do you understand? The only life I care about in this world is yours. If I lose you, what is there to hold me here?"

He wasn't sure what he meant by this himself. The words had come unbidden to his lips. But he knew as he said them that it was not self-pity, but rather a frank admission of the truth. Not that he was thinking of suicide or exile or any other such low drama. Rather he felt himself fading. Losing his hold. Lusitania seemed less and less real to him. Valentine was still there, his dear sister and friend, and she was like a rock, her life was so real, but it was not real to him because she didn't need him. Plikt, his unasked-for disciple, she might need Ender, but not the reality of him, only the idea of him. And who else was there? The children of Novinha and Libo, the children that he had raised as his own, and loved as his own, he loved them no less now, but they were adults, they didn't need him. Jane, who once had been virtually destroyed by an hour of his inattention, she no

longer needed him either, for she was there in the jewel in Miro's ear, and in another jewel in Peter's ear ...

Peter. Young Valentine. Where had they come from? They had stolen his soul and taken it with them when they left. They were doing the living acts that once he would have done himself. While he waited here in Lusitania and ... faded. That's what he meant. If he lost Novinha, what would tie him to this body that he had carried around the universe for all these thousands of years?

"It's not my decision," Novinha said.

"It's your decision," said Ender, "whether you want me with you, as one of the Filhos da Mente de Cristo. If you do, then I believe I can make my way through all the other obstacles."

She laughed nastily. "Obstacles? Men like you don't have obstacles. Just steppingstones."

"Men like me?"

"Yes, men like you," said Novinha. "Just because I've never met any others. Just because no matter how much I loved Libo he was never for one day as alive as you are in every minute. Just because I found myself loving as an adult for the first time when I loved you. Just because I have missed you more than I miss even my children, even my parents, even the lost loves of my life. Just because I can't dream of anyone but you, that doesn't mean that there isn't somebody else just like you somewhere else. The universe is a big place. You can't be all that special, really. Can you?"

He reached through the potato plants and leaned a hand gently on her thigh. "You do still love me, then?" he asked.

"Oh, is that what you came for? To find out if I love you?"

He nodded. "Partly."

"I do," she said.

"Then I can stay?"

She burst into tears. Loud weeping. She sank to the ground; he reached through the plants to embrace her, to hold her, caring nothing for the leaves he crushed between them. After he held her for a long while, she broke off her crying and turned to him and held him at least as tightly as he had been holding her.

"Oh, Andrew," she whispered, her voice cracking and breaking from having wept so much. "Does God love me enough to give you to me now, again, when I need you so much?"

"Until I die," said Ender.

"I know that part," she said. "But I pray that God will let me die first this time."

Chapter 3 -- "THERE ARE TOO MANY OF US"

"Let me tell you the most beautiful story I know.

A man was given a dog, which he loved very much.

The dog went with him everywhere,

but the man could not teach it to do anything useful.

The dog would not fetch or point,

it would not race or protect or stand watch.

Instead the dog sat near him and regarded him,

always with the same inscrutable expression.

'That's not a dog, it's a wolf,' said the man's wife.

'He alone is faithful to me,' said the man,

and his wife never discussed it with him again.

One day the man took his dog with him into his private airplane

and as they flew over high winter mountains,

the engines failed

and the airplane was torn to shreds among the trees.

The man lay bleeding,

his belly torn open by blades of sheared metal,

steam rising from his organs in the cold air,

but all he could think of was his faithful dog.

Was he alive? Was he hurt?

Imagine his relief when the dog came padding up
and regarded him with that same steady gaze.

After an hour the dog nosed the man's gaping abdomen,
then began pulling out intestines and spleen and liver
and gnawing on them, all the while studying the man's face.

'Thank God,' said the man.

'At least one of us will not starve.'

-- from *The God Whispers of Han Qing-lao*

Of all the faster-than-light starships that were flitting Outside and back In under Jane's command, only Miro's looked like an ordinary spacecraft, for the good reason that it was nothing more than the shuttle that had once taken passengers and cargo to and from the great starships that came to orbit around Lusitania. Now that the new starships could go immediately from one planet's surface to another's, there was no need for life support or even fuel, and since Jane had to hold the entire structure of each craft in her memory, the simpler they were the better. Indeed, they could hardly be called vehicles anymore. They were simple cabins now, windowless, almost unfurnished, bare as a primitive schoolroom. The people of Lusitania referred to space travel now as *encaixarse*, which was Portuguese for "going into the box," or, more literally, "to box oneself up."

Miro, however, was exploring, searching for new planets capable of sustaining the lives of the three sentient species, humans, *pequeninos*, and hive queens. For this he needed a more traditional spacecraft, for though he still went from planet to planet by way of Jane's instant detour through the Outside, he could not usually count on arriving at a world where he could breathe the air. Indeed, Jane always started him out in orbit high above each new planet, so he could observe, measure, analyze, and only land on the most promising ones to make the final determination of whether the world was usable.

He did not travel alone. It would have been too much for one person to accomplish, and he needed everything he did to be doublechecked. Yet of all the work being done by anyone on Lusitania, this was the most dangerous, for he never knew when he cracked open the door of his spaceship whether there would be some unforeseeable menace on the new world. Miro, had long regarded his own life as expendable. For several long years trapped in a brain-damaged body he had wished for death; then, when his first trip Outside enabled him to recreate his body in the perfection of youth, he regarded any moment, any hour, any day of his life as an undeserved gift. He would not waste it, but he would not shrink from putting it at risk for the good of others. But who else could share his easy self-disregard?

Young Valentine was made to order, in every sense, it seemed. Miro had seen her come into existence at the same time as his own new body. She had no past, no kin, no links to any world except through Ender, whose mind had created her, and Peter, her fellow makeling. Oh, and perhaps one might consider her to be linked to the original Valentine, "the real Valentine," as Young Val called her; but it was no secret that Old Valentine had no desire to spend even a moment in the company of this young beauty who mocked her by her very existence. Besides, Young Val was created as Ender's image of perfect virtue. Not only was she unconnected, but also she was genuinely altruistic and quite willing to sacrifice herself for the good of others. So whenever Miro stepped into the shuttle, there was Young Val as his companion, his reliable assistant, his constant backup.

But not his friend. For Miro knew perfectly well who Val really was: Ender in disguise. Not a woman. And her love and loyalty to him were Ender's love and loyalty, often tested, well-trusted, but Ender's, not her own. There was nothing of her own in her. So while Miro had become used to her company, and laughed and joked with her more easily than with anyone in his life till now, he did not confide in her, did not allow himself to feel affection any deeper than camaraderie for her. If she noticed the lack of connection between them she said nothing; if it hurt her, the pain never showed.

What showed was her delight in their successes and her insistence that they push themselves ever harder. "We don't have a whole day to spend on any world," she said right from the start, and proved it by holding them to a schedule that let them make three voyages in a day. They came home after each three voyages to a Lusitania already quiet with sleep; they slept on the ship and spoke to others only to warn them of particular problems the colonists were likely to face on whatever new worlds had been found that day. And the three-a-day schedule was only on days when they dealt with likely planets. When Jane took them to worlds that were obvious losers--waterbound, for instance, or unbiotized-- they moved on quickly, checking the next candidate world, and the next, sometimes five and six on those discouraging days when nothing seemed to work. Young Val pushed them both on to the edge of their endurance, day after day, and Miro accepted her leadership in this aspect of their voyaging because he knew that it was necessary.

His friend, however, had no human shape. For him she dwelt in the jewel in his ear. Jane, the whisper in his mind when he first woke up, the friend who heard everything he subvocalized, who knew his needs before he noticed them himself Jane, who shared all his thoughts and dreams, who had stayed with him through the worst of his cripplehood, who had led him Outside to where he could be renewed. Jane, his truest friend, who would soon die.

That was their real deadline. Jane would die, and then this instant starflight would be at an end, for there was no other being that had the sheer mental power to take anything more complicated than a rubber ball Outside and back In again. And Jane's death would come, not by any natural cause, but because the Starways Congress, having discovered the existence of a subversive program that could control or at least access any and all of their computers, was systematically closing down, disconnecting, and sweeping out all their networks. Already she was feeling the injury of those systems that had been taken offline to where she could not access them. Someday soon the codes would be transmitted that would undo her utterly and all at once. And when she was gone, anyone

who had not been taken from the surface of Lusitania and transplanted to another world would be trapped, waiting helplessly for the arrival of the Lusitania Fleet, which was coming ever closer, determined to destroy them all.

A grim business, this, in which despite all of Miro's efforts, his dearest friend would die. Which, he knew full well, was part of why he did not let himself become a true friend to Young Val-- because it would be disloyal to Jane to learn affection for anyone else during the last weeks or days of her life.

So Miro's life was an endless routine of work, of concentrated mental effort, studying the findings of the shuttle's instruments, analyzing aerial photographs, piloting the shuttle to unsafe, unscouted landing zones, and finally-- not often enough-- opening the door and breathing alien air. And at the end of each voyage, no time either to mourn or rejoice, no time even to rest: he closed the door, spoke the word, and Jane took them home again to Lusitania, to start it all over again.

On this homecoming, however, something was different. Miro opened the door of the shuttle to find, not his adoptive father Ender, not the pequeninos who prepared food for him and Young Val, not the normal colony leaders wanting a briefing, but rather his brothers Olhado and Grego, and his sister Elanora, and Ender's sister Valentine. Old Valentine, come herself to the one place where she was sure to meet her unwelcome young twin? Miro saw at once how Young Val and Old Valentine glanced at each other, eyes not really meeting, and then looked away, not wanting to see each other. Or was that it? Young Val was more likely looking away from Old Valentine because she virtuously wanted to avoid giving offense to the older woman. No doubt if she could do it Young Val would willingly disappear rather than cause Old Valentine a moment's pain. And, since that was not possible, she would do the next best thing, which was to remain as unobtrusive as possible when Old Valentine was present.

"What's the meeting?" asked Miro. "Is Mother ill?"

"No, no, everybody's in good health," said Olhado.

"Except mentally," said Grego. "Mother's as mad as a hatter, and now Ender's crazy too."

Miro nodded, grimaced. "Let me guess. He joined her among the Filhos."

Immediately Grego and Olhado looked at the jewel in Miro's ear.

"No, Jane didn't tell me," said Miro. "I just know Ender. He takes his marriage very seriously."

"Yes, well, it's left something of a leadership vacuum here," said Olhado. "Not that everybody isn't doing their job just fine. I mean, the system works and all that. But Ender was the one we all looked to to tell us what to do when the system stops working. If you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," said Miro. "And you can speak of it in front of Jane. She knows she's going to be shut down as soon as Starways Congress gets their plans in place."

"It's more complicated than that," said Grego. "Most people don't know about the danger to Jane-- for that matter, most don't even know she exists. But they can do the arithmetic to figure out that even going full tilt, there's no way to get all the humans off Lusitania before the fleet gets here. Let alone the pequeninos. So they know that unless the fleet is stopped, somebody is going to be left here to die. There are already those who say that we've wasted enough starship space on trees and bugs."

"Trees" referred, of course, to the pequeninos, who were not, in fact, transporting fathertrees and mothertrees; and "bugs" referred to the Hive Queen, who was also not wasting space sending a lot of workers. But every world they were settling did have a large contingent of pequeninos and at least one hive queen and a handful of workers to help her get started. Never mind that it was the hive queen on every world that quickly produced workers who were doing the bulk of the labor getting agriculture started; never mind that because they were not taking trees with them, at least one male and female in every group of pequeninos had to be "planted" --had to die slowly and painfully so that a fathertree and mothertree could take root and maintain the cycle of pequenino life. They all knew-- Grego more than any other, since he'd recently been in the thick of it that under the polite surface was an undercurrent of competition between species.

And it was not just among the humans, either. While on Lusitania the pequeninos still outnumbered humans by vast numbers, on the new colonies the humans predominated. "It's your fleet coming to destroy Lusitania," said Human, the leader of the fathertrees these days. "And even if every human on Lusitania died, the human race would continue. While for the Hive Queen and for us, it is nothing less than the survival of our species that is at stake. And yet we understand that we must let humans dominate for a time on these new worlds, because of your knowledge of skills and technologies we have not yet mastered, because of your practice at subduing new worlds, and because you still have the power to set fires to burn our forests." What Human said so reasonably, his resentment couched in polite language, many other pequeninos and fathertrees said more passionately: "Why should we let these human invaders, who brought all this evil upon us, save almost all their population, while most of us will die?"

"Resentment between the species is nothing new," said Miro.

"But until now we had Ender to contain it," said Grego. "Pequeninos, the Hive Queen, and most of the human population saw Ender as a fair broker, someone they could trust. They knew that as long as he was in charge of things, as long as his voice was heard, their interests would be protected."

"Ender isn't the only good person leading this exodus," said Miro.

"It's a matter of trust, not of virtue," said Valentine. "The nonhumans know that Ender is the Speaker for the Dead. No other human has ever spoken for another species that way. And yet the humans know that Ender is the Xenocide-- that when the human race was threatened by an enemy countless generations ago, he was the one who acted to stop them and save humanity from, as they feared, annihilation. There isn't exactly a candidate with equivalent qualifications ready to step into Ender's role."

"What's that to me?" asked Miro bluntly. "Nobody listens to me here. I have no connections. I certainly can't take Ender's place either, and right now I'm tired and I need to sleep. Look at Young Val, she's half-dead with weariness, too."

It was true; she was barely able to stand. Miro at once reached out to support her; she gratefully leaned against his shoulder.

"We don't want you to take Ender's place," said Olhado. "We don't want anybody to take his place. We want him to take his place."

Miro laughed. "You think I can persuade him? You've got his sister right there! Send her!"

Old Valentine grimaced. "Miro, he won't see me."

"Then what makes you think he'll see me?"

"Not you, Miro. Jane. The jewel in your ear."

Miro looked at them in bafflement. "You mean Ender has removed his jewel?"

In his ear, he heard Jane say, "I've been busy. I didn't think it was important to mention it to you."

But Miro knew how it had devastated Jane before, when Ender cut her off. Now she had other friends, yes, but that didn't mean it would be painless.

Old Valentine continued. "If you can go to him and get him to talk to Jane ..."

Miro shook his head. "Taking out the jewel-- don't you see that that was final? He's committed himself to following Mother into exile. Ender doesn't back away from his commitments."

They all knew it was true. Knew, in fact, that they had really come to Miro, not with the real hope that he would accomplish what they needed, but as a last feeble act of desperation. "So we let things wind down," said Grego. "We let things slide into chaos. And then, beset by interspecies war, we will die in shame when the fleet comes. Jane's lucky, I think; she'll already be dead when it gets here."

"Tell him thanks," Jane said to Miro.

"Jane says thanks," said Miro. "You're just too soft-hearted, Grego. "

Grego blushed, but he didn't take back what he said.

"Ender isn't God," said Miro. "We'll just do our best without him. But right now the best thing I can do is--"

"Sleep, we know," said Old Valentine. "Not on the ship this time, though. Please. It makes us sick at heart to see how weary you both are. Jakt has brought the taxi. Come home and sleep in a bed."

Miro glanced at Young Val, who still leaned sleepily on his shoulder.

"Both of you, of course," said Old Valentine. "I'm not as distressed by her existence as you all seem to think."

"Of course you're not," said Young Val. She reached out a weary arm, and the two women who bore the same name took each other's hand. Miro watched as Young Val slipped from his side to take Old Valentine's arm, and lean on her instead of him. His own feelings surprised him. Instead of relief that there was less tension between the two of them than he had thought, he found himself being rather angry. Jealous anger, that's what it was. She was leaning on me, he wanted to say. What kind of childish response was that?

And then, as he watched them walk away, he saw what he should not have seen-- Valentine's shudder. Was it a sudden chill? The night was cool. But no, Miro was sure it was the touch of her young twin, and not the night air that made Old Valentine tremble.

"Come on, Miro," said Olhado. "We'll get you to the hovercar and into bed at Valentine's house."

"Is there a food stop along the way?"

"It's Jakt's house, too," said Elanora. "There's always food."

As the hovercar carried them toward Milagre, the human town, they passed near some of the dozens of starships currently in service. The work of migration didn't take the night off. Stevedores-- many of them pequeninos-- were loading supplies and equipment for transport. Families were shuffling in lines to fill up whatever spaces were left in the cabins. Jane would be getting no rest tonight as she took box after box Outside and back In. On other worlds, new homes were rising, new fields being plowed. Was it day or night in those other places? It didn't matter. In a way they had already succeeded-- new worlds were being colonized, and, like it or not, every world had its hive, its new pequenino forest, and its human village.

If Jane died today, thought Miro, if the fleet came tomorrow and blew us all to bits, in the grand scheme of things, what would it matter? The seeds have been scattered to the wind; some, at least, will take root. And if faster-than-light travel dies with Jane, even that might be for the best, for it will force each of these worlds to fend for itself. Some colonies will fail and die, no doubt. On some of them, war will come, and perhaps one species or another will be wiped out there. But it will not be the same species that dies on every world, or the same one that lives; and on some worlds, at least, we'll surely find a way to live in peace. All that's left for us now is details. Whether this or that individual lives or dies. It matters, of course. But not the way that the survival of species matters.

He must have been subvocalizing some of his thoughts, because Jane answered them. "Hath not an overblown computer program eyes and ears? Have I no heart or brain? When you tickle me do I not laugh?"

"Frankly, no," said Miro silently, working his lips and tongue and teeth to shape words that only she could hear.

"But when I die, every being of my kind will also die," she said. "Forgive me if I think of this as having cosmic significance. I'm not as self-abnegating as you are, Miro. I don't regard myself as living on borrowed time. It was my firm intention to live forever, so anything less is a disappointment."

"Tell me what I can do and I'll do it," he said. "I'd die to save you, if that's what it took."

"Fortunately, you'll die eventually no matter what," said Jane. "That's my one consolation, that by dying I'll do no more than face the same doom that every other living creature has to face. Even those long-living trees. Even those hive queens, passing their memories along from generation to generation. But I, alas, will have no children. How could I? I'm a creature of mind alone. There's no provision for mental mating."

"Too bad, too," said Miro, "because I bet you'd be great in the virtual sack."

"The best," Jane said.

And then silence for a little while.

Only when they approached Jakt's house, a new building on the outskirts of Milagre, did Jane speak again. "Keep in mind, Miro, that whatever Ender does with his own self, when Young Valentine speaks it's still Ender's aiua talking."

"The same with Peter," said Miro. "Now there's a charmer. Let's just say that Young Val, sweet as she is, doesn't exactly represent a balanced view of anything. Ender may control her, but she's not Ender."

"There are just too many of him, aren't there," said Jane. "And, apparently, too many of me, at least in the opinion of Starways Congress."

"There are too many of us all," said Miro. "But never enough."

They arrived. Miro and Young Val were led inside. They ate feebly; they slept the moment they reached their beds. Miro was aware that voices went on far into the night, for he did not sleep well, but rather kept waking a little, uncomfortable on such a soft mattress, and perhaps uncomfortable at being away from his duty, like a soldier who feels guilty at having abandoned his post.

Despite his weariness, Miro did not sleep late. Indeed, the sky outside was still dim with the predawn seepage of sunlight over the horizon when he awoke and, as was his habit, rose

immediately from his bed, standing shakily as the last of sleep fled from his body. He covered himself and went out into the hall to find the bathroom and discharge his bladder. When he emerged, he heard voices from the kitchen. Either last night's conversation was still going on, or some other neurotic early risers had rejected morning solitude and were chatting away as if dawn were not the dark hour of despair.

He stood before his own open door, ready to go inside and shut out those earnest voices, when Miro realized that one of them belonged to Young Val. Then he realized that the other one was Old Valentine. At once he turned and made his way to the kitchen, and again hesitated in a doorway.

Sure enough, the two Valentines were sitting across the table from each other, but not looking at each other. Instead they stared out the window as they sipped one of Old Valentine's fruit-and-vegetable decoctions.

"Would you like one, Miro?" asked Old Valentine without looking up.

"Not even on my deathbed," said Miro. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Good," said Old Valentine.

Young Val continued to say nothing.

Miro came inside the kitchen, went to the sink, and drew himself a glass of water, which he drank in one long draught.

"I told you it was Miro in the bathroom," said Old Valentine. "No one processes so much water every day as this dear lad."

Miro chuckled, but he did not hear Young Val laugh.

"I am interfering with the conversation," he said. "I'll go."

"Stay," said Old Valentine.

"Please," said Young Val.

"Please which?" asked Miro. He turned toward her and grinned.

She shoved a chair toward him with her foot. "Sit," she said. "The lady and I were having it out about our twinship."

"We decided," said Old Valentine, "that it's my responsibility to die first."

"On the contrary," said Young Val, "we decided that Gepetto did not create Pinocchio because he wanted a real boy. It was a puppet he wanted all along. That real-boy business was simply

Gepetto's laziness. He still wanted the puppet to dance-- he just didn't want to go to all the trouble of working the strings."

"You being Pinocchio," said Miro. "And Ender ..."

"My brother didn't try to make you," said Old Valentine. "And he doesn't want to control you, either."

"I know," whispered Young Val. And suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

Miro reached out a hand to lay atop hers on the table, but at once she snatched hers away. No, she wasn't avoiding his touch, she was simply bringing her hand up to wipe the annoying tears out of her eyes.

"He'd cut the strings if he could, I know," said Young Val. "The way Miro cut the strings on his old broken body."

Miro remembered it very clearly. One moment he was sitting in the starship, looking at this perfect image of himself, strong and young and healthy; the next moment he was that image, had always been that image, and what he looked at was the crippled, broken, brain-damaged version of himself. And as he watched, that unloved, unwanted body crumbled into dust and disappeared.

"I don't think he hates you," said Miro, "the way I hated my old self."

"He doesn't have to hate me. It wasn't hate anyway that killed your old body." Young Val didn't meet his eyes. In all their hours together exploring worlds, they had never talked about anything so personal. She had never dared to discuss with him that moment when both of them had been created. "You hated your old body while you were in it, but as soon as you were back in your right body, you simply stopped paying any attention to the old one. It wasn't part of you anymore. Your aiua had no more responsibility for it. And with nothing to hold it together-- pop goes the weasel."

"Wooden doll," said Miro. "Now weasel. What else am I?"

Old Valentine ignored his bid for a laugh. "So you're saying Ender finds you uninteresting."

"He admires me," said Young Val. "But he finds me dull."

"Yes, well, me too," said Old Valentine.

"That's absurd," said Miro.

"Is it?" asked Old Valentine. "He never followed me anywhere; I was always the one who followed him. He was searching for a mission in life, I think. Some great deed to do, to match the terrible act that ended his childhood. He thought writing The Hive Queen would do it. And then, with my help in preparing it, he wrote The Hegemon and he thought that might be enough, but it wasn't. He kept searching for something that would engage his full attention and he kept almost

finding it, or finding it for a week or a month, but one thing was certain, the thing that engaged his attention was never me, because there I was in all the billion miles he traveled, there I was across three thousand years. Those histories I wrote-- it was no great love for history, it was because it helped in his work. The way my writing used to help in Peter's work. And when I was finished, then, for a few hours of reading and discussion, I had his attention. Only each time it was less satisfying because it wasn't I who had his attention, it was the story I had written. Until finally I found a man who gave me his whole heart, and I stayed with him. While my adolescent brother went on without me, and found a family that took his whole heart, and there we were, planets apart, but finally happier without each other than we'd ever been together."

"So why did you come to him again?" asked Miro.

"I didn't come for him. I came for you." Old Valentine smiled. "I came for a world in danger of destruction. But I was glad to see Ender, even though I knew he would never belong to me."

"This may be an accurate description of how it felt to you," said Young Val. "But you must have had his attention, at some level. I exist because you're always in his heart."

"A fantasy of his childhood, perhaps. Not me."

"Look at me," said Young Val. "Is this the body you wore when he was five and was taken away from his home and sent up to the Battle School? Is this even the teenage girl that he knew that summer by the lake in North Carolina? You must have had his attention even when you grew up, because his image of you changed to become me."

"You are what I was when we worked on The Hegemon together," said Old Valentine sadly.

"Were you this tired?" asked Young Val.

"I am," said Miro.

"No you're not," said Old Valentine. "You are the picture of vigor. You're still celebrating your beautiful new body. My twin here is heartweary."

"Ender's attention has always been divided," said Young Val. "I'm filled with his memories, you see-- or rather, with the memories that he unconsciously thought I should have, but of course they consist almost entirely of things that he remembers about my friend here, which means that all I remember is my life with Ender. And he always had Jane in his ear, and the people whose deaths he was speaking, and his students, and the Hive Queen in her cocoon, and so on. But they were all adolescent connections. Like every itinerant hero of epic, he wandered place to place, transforming others but remaining himself unchanged. Until he came here and finally gave himself wholly to somebody else. You and your family, Miro. Novinha. For the first time he gave other people the power to tear at him emotionally, and it was exhilarating and painful both at once, but even that he could handle just fine, he's a strong man, and strong men have borne more. Now, though, it's something else entirely. Peter and I, we have no life apart from him. To say that he is one with Novinha is metaphorical; with Peter and me it's literal. He is us. And his aiua isn't great enough, it

isn't strong or copious enough, it hasn't enough attention in it to give equal shares to the three lives that depend on it. I realized this almost as soon as I was ... what shall we call it, created? Manufactured?"

"Born," said Old Valentine.

"You were a dream come true," said Miro, with only a hint of irony.

"He can't sustain all three of us. Ender, Peter, me. One of us is going to fade. One of us at least is going to die. And it's me. I knew that from the start. I'm the one who's going to die."

Miro wanted to reassure her. But how do you reassure someone, except by recalling to them similar situations that turned out for the best? There were no similar situations to call upon.

"The trouble is that whatever part of Ender's aiaa I still have in me is absolutely determined to live. I don't want to die. That's how I know I still have some shred of his attention: I don't want to die."

"So go to him," said Old Valentine. "Talk to him."

Young Val gave one bitter hoot of laughter and looked away. "Please, Papa, let me live," she said in a mockery of a child's voice. "Since it's not something he consciously controls, what could he possibly do about it, except suffer from guilt? And why should he feel guilty? If I cease to exist, it's because my own self didn't value me. He is myself. Do the dead tips of fingernails feel bad when you pare them away?"

"But you are bidding for his attention," said Miro.

"I hoped that the search for habitable worlds would intrigue him. I poured myself into it, trying to be excited about it. But the truth is it's utterly routine. Important, but routine, Miro."

Miro nodded. "True enough. Jane finds the worlds. We just process them."

"And there are enough worlds now. Enough colonies. Two dozen-- pequeninos and hive queens are not going to die out now, even if Lusitania is destroyed. The bottleneck isn't the number of worlds, it's the number of starships. So all our labor-- it isn't engaging Ender's attention anymore. And my body knows it. My body knows it isn't needed."

She reached up and took a large hank of her hair into her fist, and pulled-- not hard, but lightly-- and it came away easily in her hand. A great gout of hair, with not a sign of any pain at its going. She let the hair drop onto the table. It lay there like a dismembered limb, grotesque, impossible. "I think," she whispered, "that if I'm not careful, I could do the same with my fingers. It's slower, but gradually I will turn into dust just as your old body did, Miro. Because he isn't interested in me. Peter is solving mysteries and fighting political wars off on some world somewhere. Ender is struggling to hold on to the woman he loves. But I ..."

In that moment, as the hair torn from her head revealed the depth of her misery, her loneliness, her self-rejections, Miro realized what he had not let himself think of until now: that in all the weeks they had traveled world to world together, he had come to love her, and her unhappiness hurt him as if it were his own. And perhaps it was his own, his memory of his own self-loathing. But whatever the reason, it still felt like something deeper than mere compassion to him. It was a kind of desire. Yes, it was a kind of love. If this beautiful young woman, this wise and intelligent and clever young woman was rejected by her own inmost heart, then Miro's heart had room enough to take her in. If Ender will not be yourself, let me! he cried silently, knowing as he formed the thought for the first time that he had felt this way for days, for weeks, without realizing it; yet also knowing that he could not be to her what Ender was.

Still, couldn't love do for Young Val what it was doing for Ender himself? Couldn't that engage enough of his attention to keep her alive? To strengthen her?

Miro reached out and gathered up her disembodied hair, twined it around his fingers, and then slid the looping locks into the pocket of his robe. "I don't want you to fade away," he said. Bold words for him.

Young Val looked at him oddly. "I thought the great love of your life was Ouanda."

"She's a middle-aged woman now," said Miro. "Married and happy, with a family. It would be sad if the great love of my life were a woman who doesn't exist anymore, and even if she did she wouldn't want me."

"It's sweet of you to offer," said Young Val. "But I don't think we can fool Ender into caring about my life by pretending to fall in love."

Her words stabbed Miro to the heart, because she had so easily seen how much of his self-declaration came from pity. Yet not all of it came from there; most of it was already seething just under the level of consciousness, just waiting its chance to come out. "I wasn't thinking of fooling anyone," said Miro. Except myself, he thought. Because Young Val could not possibly love me. She is, after all, not really a woman. She's Ender.

But that was absurd. Her body was a woman's body. And where did the choice of loves come from, if not the body? Was there something male or female in the aiua? Before it became master of flesh and bone, was it manly or womanly? And if so, would that mean that the aiuas composing atoms and molecules, rocks and stars and light and wind, that all of those were neatly sorted into boys and girls? Nonsense. Ender's aiua could be a woman, could love like a woman as easily as it now loved, in a man's body and in a man's ways, Miro's own mother. It wasn't any lack in Young Val that made her look at him with such pity. It was a lack in him. Even with his body healed, he was not a man that a woman-- or at least this woman, at the moment the most desirable of all women-- could love, or wish to love, or hope to win.

"I shouldn't have come here," he murmured. He pushed away from the table and left the room in two strides. Strode up the hall and once again stood in his open doorway. He heard their voices.

"No, don't go to him," said Old Valentine. Then something softer. Then, "He may have a new body, but his self-hatred has never been healed."

A murmur from Young Val.

"Miro was speaking from his heart," Old Valentine assured her. "It was a very brave and naked thing for him to do."

Again Young Val spoke too softly for Miro to hear her.

"How could you know?" Old Valentine said. "What you have to realize is, we took a long voyage together, not that long ago, and I think he fell in love with me a little on that flight."

It was probably true. It was definitely true. Miro had to admit it: some of his feelings for Young Val were really his feelings for Old Valentine, transferred from the woman who was permanently out of reach to this young woman who might be, he had hoped at least, accessible to him.

Now both their voices fell to levels where Miro could not even pick out words. But still he waited, his hands pressed against the

doo~amb, listening to the lilting of those two voices, so much alike, but both so well-known to him. It was a music that he could gladly hear forever.

"If there's anyone like Ender in all this universe," said Old Valentine with sudden loudness, "it's Miro. He broke himself trying to save innocents from destruction. He hasn't yet been healed."

She meant me to hear that, Miro realized. She spoke loudly, knowing I was standing here, knowing I was listening. The old witch was listening for my door to close and she never heard it so she knows that I can hear them and she's trying to give me a way to see myself. But I'm no Ender, I'm barely Miro, and if she says things like that about me it's just proof that she doesn't know who I am.

A voice spoke up in his ear. "Oh, shut up if you're just going to lie to yourself."

Of course Jane had heard everything. Even his thoughts, because, as was his habit, his conscious thoughts were echoed by his lips and tongue and teeth. He couldn't even think without moving his lips. With Jane attached to his ear he spent his waking hours in a confessional that never closed.

"So you love the girl," said Jane. "Why not? So your motives are complicated by your feelings toward Ender and Valentine and Ouanda and yourself. So what? What love was ever pure, what lover was ever uncomplicated? Think of her as a succubus. You'll love her, and she'll crumble in your arms."

Jane's taunting was infuriating and amusing at once. He went inside his room and gently closed the door. When it was closed, he whispered to her, "You're just a jealous old bitch, Jane. You only want me for yourself."

"I'm sure you're right," said Jane. "If Ender had ever really loved me, he would have created my human body when he was being so fertile Outside. Then I could make a play for you myself."

"You already have my whole heart," said Miro. "Such as it is."

"You are such a liar," said Jane. "I'm just a talking appointment book and calculator, and you know it."

"But you're very very rich," said Miro. "I'll marry you for your money."

"By the way," said Jane, "she's wrong about one thing."

"What's that?" asked Miro, wondering which "she" Jane was referring to.

"You aren't done with exploring worlds. Whether Ender is still interested in it or not-- and I think he is, because she hasn't turned to dust yet-- the work doesn't end just because there are enough habitable planets to save the piggies and buggers."

Jane frequently used the old diminutive and pejorative terms for them. Miro often wondered, but never dared to ask, if she had any pejoratives for humans. But he thought he knew what her answer would be anyway: "The word 'human' is a pejorative," she'd say.

"So what are we still looking for?" asked Miro.

"Every world that we can find before I die," said Jane.

He thought about that as he lay back down on his bed. Thought about it as he tossed and turned a couple of times, then got up, got dressed for real, and set out under the lightening sky, walking among the other early risers, people about their business, few of whom knew him or even knew of him. Being a scion of the strange Ribeira family, he hadn't had many childhood friends in ginasio; being both brilliant and shy, he'd had even fewer of the more rambunctious adolescent friendships in colegio. His only girlfriend had been Ouanda, until his penetration of the sealed perimeter of the human colony left him brain-damaged and he refused to see even her anymore. Then his voyage out to meet Valentine had severed the few fragile ties that remained between him and his birthworld. For him it was only a few months in a starship, but when he came back, years had passed, and he was now his mother's youngest child, the only one whose life was unbegun. The children he had once watched over were adults who treated him like a tender memory from their youth. Only Ender was unchanged. No matter how many years. No matter what happened. Ender was the same.

Could it still be true? Could he be the same man even now, locking himself away at a time of crisis, hiding out in a monastery just because Mother had finally given up on life? Miro knew the bare outline of Ender's life. Taken from his family at the tender age of five. Brought to the orbiting Battle School, where he emerged as the last best hope of humankind in its war with the ruthless invaders called buggers. Taken next to the fleet command on Eros, where he was told he was in

advanced training, but where, without realizing it, he was commanding the real fleets, lightyears away, his commands transmitted by ansible. He won that war through brilliance and, in the end, the utterly unconscionable act of destroying the home world of the buggers. Except that he had thought it was a game.

Thought it was a game, but at the same time knowing that the game was a simulation of reality. In the game he had chosen to do the unspeakable; it meant, to Ender at least, that he was not free of guilt when the game turned out to be real. Even though the last Hive Queen forgave him and put herself, cocooned as she was, into his care, he could not shake himself free of that. He was only a child, doing what adults led him to do; but somewhere in his heart he knew that even a child is a real person, that a child's acts are real acts, that even a child's play is not without moral context.

Thus before the sun was up, Miro found himself facing Ender as they both straddled a stone bench in a spot in the garden that would soon be bathed in sunlight but now was clammy with the morning chill; and what Miro found himself saying to this unchangeable, unchanging man was this: "What is this monastery business, Andrew Wiggin, except for a backhanded, cowardly way of crucifying yourself?"

"I've missed you too, Miro," said Ender. "You look tired, though. You need more sleep."

Miro sighed and shook his head. "That wasn't what I meant to say. I'm trying to understand you, I really am. Valentine says that I'm like you."

"You mean the real Valentine?" asked Ender.

"They're both real," said Miro.

"Well, if I'm like you, then study yourself and tell me what you find."

Miro wondered, looking at him, if Ender really meant this.

Ender patted Miro's knee. "I'm really not needed out there now," he said.

"You don't believe that for a second," said Miro.

"But I believe that I believe it," said Ender, "and for me that's pretty good. Please don't disillusion me. I haven't had breakfast yet."

"No, you're exploiting the convenience of having split yourself into three. This part of you, the aging middle-aged man, can afford the luxury of devoting himself entirely to his wife-- but only because he has two young puppets to go out and do the work that really interests him."

"But it doesn't interest me," said Ender. "I don't care."

"You as Ender don't care because you as Peter and you as Valentine are taking care of everything else for you. Only Valentine isn't well. You're not caring enough about what she's doing. What

happened to my old crippled body is happening to her. More slowly, but it's the same thing. She thinks so, Valentine thinks it's possible. So do I. So does Jane."

"Give Jane my love. I do miss her."

"I give Jane my love, Ender."

Ender grinned at his resistance. "If they were about to shoot you, Miro, you'd insist on drinking a lot of water just so they'd have to handle a corpse covered with urine when you were dead."

"Valentine isn't a dream or an illusion, Ender," said Miro, refusing to be sidetracked into a discussion of his own obstreperousness. "She's real, and you're killing her."

"Awfully dramatic way of putting it."

"If you'd seen her pull out tufts of her own hair this morning ..."

"So she's rather theatrical, I take it? Well, you've always been one for the theatrical gesture, too. I'm not surprised you get along."

"Andrew, I'm telling you you've got to--"

Suddenly Ender grew stern and his voice overtopped Miro's even though he was not speaking loudly. "Use your head, Miro. Was your decision to jump from your old body to this newer model a conscious one? Did you think about it and say, 'Well, I think I'll let this old corpse crumble into its constituent molecules because this new body is a nicer place to dwell?'"

Miro got his point at once. Ender couldn't consciously control where his attention went. His aiua, even though it was his deepest self, was not to be ordered about.

"I find out what I really want by seeing what I do," said Ender. "That's what we all do, if we're honest about it. We have our feelings, we make our decisions, but in the end we look back on our lives and see how sometimes we ignored our feelings, while most of our decisions were actually rationalizations because we had already decided in our secret hearts before we ever recognized it consciously. I can't help it if the part of me that's controlling this girl whose company you're sharing isn't as important to my underlying will as you'd like. As she needs. I can't do a thing."

Miro bowed his head.

The sun came up over the trees. Suddenly the bench turned bright, and Miro looked up to see the sunlight making a halo out of Ender's wildly slept-in hair. "Is grooming against the monastic rule?" asked Miro.

"You're attracted to her, aren't you," said Ender, not really making a question out of it. "And it makes you a little uneasy that she is really me."

Miro shrugged. "It's a root in the path. But I think I can step over it."

"But what if I'm not attracted to you?" asked Ender cheerfully.

Miro spread his arms and turned to show his profile. "Unthinkable," he said.

"You are cute as a bunny," said Ender. "I'm sure young Valentine dreams about you. I wouldn't know. The only dreams I have are of planets blowing up and everyone I love being obliterated."

"I know you haven't forgotten the world in here, Andrew." He meant that as the beginning of an apology, but Ender waved him off.

"I can't forget it, but I can ignore it. I'm ignoring the world, Miro. I'm ignoring you, I'm ignoring those two walking psychoses of mine. At this moment, I'm trying to ignore everything but your mother."

"And God," said Miro. "You mustn't forget God."

"Not for a single moment," said Ender. "As a matter of fact, I can't forget anything or anybody. But yes, I am ignoring God, except insofar as Novinha needs me to notice him. I'm shaping myself into the husband that she needs."

"Why, Andrew? You know Mother's as crazy as a loon."

"No such thing," said Ender reprovingly. "But even if it were true, then ... all the more reason."

"What God has joined, let no man put asunder. I do approve, philosophically, but you don't know how it ..." Miro's weariness swept over him then. He couldn't think of the words to say what he wanted to say, and he knew that it was because he was trying to tell Ender how it felt, at this moment, to be Miro Ribeira, and Miro had no practice in even identifying his own feelings, let alone expressing them. "Desculpa," he murmured, changing to Portuguese because it was his childhood language, the language of his emotions. He found himself wiping tears off his cheeks. "Se nao posso mudar nem voce, nao ha nada que possa, nada." If I can't get even you to move, to change, then there's nothing I can do.

"Nem eu?" Ender echoed. "In all the universe, Miro, there's nobody harder to change than me."

"Mother did it. She changed you."

"No she didn't," said Ender. "She only allowed me to be what I needed and wanted to be. Like now, Miro. I can't make everybody happy. I can't make me happy, I'm not doing much for you, and as for the big problems, I'm worthless there too. But maybe I can make your mother happy, or at least somewhat happier, at least for a while, or at least I can try." He took Miro's hands in his, pressed them to his own face, and they did not come away dry.

Miro watched as Ender got up from the bench and walked away toward the sun, into the shining orchard. Surely this is how Adam would have looked, thought Miro, if he had never eaten the fruit. If he had stayed and stayed and stayed and stayed in the garden. Three thousand years Ender has skimmed the surface of life. It was my mother he finally snagged on. I spent my whole childhood trying to be free of her, and he comes along and chooses to attach himself and ...

And what am I snagged on, except him? Him in women's flesh. Him with a handful of hair on a kitchen table.

Miro was getting up from the bench when Ender suddenly turned to face him and waved to attract his attention. Miro started to walk toward him, but Ender didn't wait; he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted.

"Tell Jane!" he called. "If she can figure out! How to do it! She can have that body!"

It took Miro a moment to realize that he was speaking of Young Val.

She's not just a body, you self-centered old planet-smasher. She's not just an old suit to be given away because it doesn't fit or the style has changed.

But then his anger fled, for he realized that he himself had done precisely that with his old body. Tossed it away without a backward glance.

And the idea intrigued him. Jane. Was it even possible? If her aiaa could somehow be made to take up residence in Young Val, could a human body hold enough of Jane's mind to enable her to survive when Starways Congress tried to shut her down?

"You boys are so slow," Jane murmured in his ear. "I've been talking to the Hive Queen and Human and trying to figure out how the thing is done-- assigning an aiaa to a body. The hive queens did it once, in creating me. But they didn't exactly pick a particular aiaa. They took what came. What showed up. I'm a little fussier."

Miro said nothing as he walked to the monastery gate.

"Oh, yes, and then there's the little matter of your feelings toward Young Val. You hate the fact that in loving her, it's really, in a way, Ender that you love. But if I took over, if I were the will inside Young Val's life, would she still be the woman you love? Would anything of her survive? Would it be murder?"

"Oh, shut up," said Miro aloud.

The monastery gatekeeper looked up at him in surprise.

"Not you," said Miro. "But that doesn't mean it isn't a good idea."

Miro was aware of her eyes on his back until he was out and on the path winding down the hill toward Milagre. Time to get back to the ship. Val will be waiting for me. Whoever she is.

What Ender is to Mother, so loyal, so patient-- is that how I feel toward Val? Or no, it isn't feeling, is it? It's an act of will. It's a decision that can never be revoked. Could I do that for any woman, any person? Could I give myself forever?

He remembered Ouanda then, and walked with the memory of bitter loss all the way back to the starship.

Chapter 4 -- "I AM A MAN OF PERFECT SIMPLICITY!"

"When I was a child, I thought a god was disappointed whenever some distraction interrupted my tracing of the lines revealed in the grain of the wood. Now I know the gods expect such interruptions, for they know our frailty. It is completion that surprises them."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Peter and Wang-mu ventured out into the world of Divine Wind on their second day. They did not have to worry about learning a language. Divine Wind was an older world, one of the first wave settled in the initial emigration from Earth. It was originally as recidivist as Path, clinging to the ancient ways. But the ancient ways of Divine Wind were Japanese ways, and so it included the possibility of radical change. Scarcely three hundred years into its history, the world transformed itself from being the isolated fiefdom of a ritualized shogunate to being a cosmopolitan center of trade and industry and philosophy. The Japanese of Divine Wind prided themselves on being hosts to visitors from all worlds, and there were still many places where children grew up speaking only Japanese until they were old enough to enter school. But by adulthood, all the people of Divine Wind spoke Stark with fluency, and the best of them with elegance, with grace, with astonishing economy; it was said by Mil Fiorelli, in his most famous book, *Observations of Distant Worlds with the Naked Eye*, that Stark was a language that had no native speakers until it was whispered by a Divine Wind.

So it was that when Peter and Wang-mu hiked through the woods of the great natural preserve where their starship had landed and emerged in a village of foresters, laughing about how long they had been "lost" in the woods, no one thought twice about Wang-mu's obviously Chinese features and accent, or even about Peter's white skin and lack of an epicanthic fold. They had lost their documents, they claimed, but a computer search showed them to be licensed automobile drivers in the city of Nagoya, and while Peter seemed to have had a couple of youthful traffic offenses there, otherwise they were not known to have committed any illegal acts. Peter's profession was given as

"independent teacher of physics" and Wang-mu's as "itinerant philosopher," both quite respectable positions, given their youth and lack of family attachment. When they were asked casual questions ("I have a cousin who teaches progenerative grammars in the Komatsu University in Nagoya") Jane gave Peter appropriate comments to say:

"I never seem to get over to the Oe Building. The language people don't talk to physicists anyway. They think we speak only mathematics. Wang-mu tells me that the only language we physicists know is the grammar of dreams."

Wang-mu had no such friendly prompter in her ear, but then an itinerant philosopher was supposed to be gnomic in her speech and mantic in her thought. Thus she could answer Peter's comment by saying, "I say that is the only grammar you speak. There is no grammar that you understand."

This prompted Peter to tickle her, which made Wang-mu simultaneously laugh and wrench at his wrist until he stopped, thereby proving to the foresters that they were exactly what their documents said they were: brilliant young people who were nevertheless silly with love-- or with youth, as if it made a difference.

They were given a ride in a government floater back to civilized country, where-- thanks to Jane's manipulation of the computer networks-- they found an apartment that until yesterday had been empty and unfurnished, but which now was filled with an eclectic mix of furniture and art that reflected a charming mixture of poverty, quirkiness, and exquisite taste.

"Very nice," said Peter.

Wang-mu, familiar only with the taste of one world, and really only of one man in that one world, could hardly evaluate Jane's choices. There were places to sit-- both Western chairs, which folded people into alternating right angles and never seemed comfortable to Wang-mu, and Eastern mats, which encouraged people to twine themselves into circles of harmony with the earth. The bedroom, with its Western mattress raised high off the ground even though there were neither rats nor roaches, was obviously Peter's; Wang-mu knew that the same mat that invited her to sit in the main room of the apartment would also be her sleeping mat at night.

She deferentially offered Peter the first bath; he, however, seemed to feel no urgency to wash himself, even though he smelled of sweat from the hike and the hours cooped up in the floater. So Wang-mu ended up luxuriating in a tub, closing her eyes and meditating until she felt restored to herself. When she opened her eyes she no longer felt like a stranger. Rather she was herself, and the surrounding objects and spaces were free to attach themselves to her without damaging her sense of self. This was a power she had learned early in life, when she had no power even over her own body, and had to obey in all things. It was what preserved her. Her life had many unpleasant things attached to it, like remoras to a shark, but none of them changed who she was under the skin, in the cool darkness of her solitude with eyes closed and mind at peace.

When she emerged from the bathroom, she found Peter eating absently from a plate of grapes as he watched a holoplay in which masked Japanese actors bellowed at each other and took great,

awkward, thundering steps, as if the actors were playing characters twice the size of their own bodies.

"Have you learned Japanese?" she asked.

"Jane's translating for me. Very strange people."

"It's an ancient form of drama," said Wang-mu.

"But very boring. Was there ever anyone whose heart was stirred by all this shouting?"

"If you are inside the story," said Wang-mu, "then they are shouting the words of your own heart."

"Somebody's heart says, 'I am the wind from the cold snow of the mountain, and you are the tiger whose roar will freeze in your own ears before you tremble and die in the iron knife of my winter eyes'?"

"It sounds like you," said Wang-mu. "Bluster and brag."

"I am the round-eyed sweating man who stinks like the corpse of a leaking skunk, and you are the flower who will wilt unless I take an immediate shower with lye and ammonia."

"Keep your eyes closed when you do," said Wang-mu. "That stuff burns."

There was no computer in the apartment. Maybe the holoview could be used as a computer, but if so Wang-mu didn't know how. Its controls looked like nothing she had seen in Han Fei-tzu's house, but that was hardly a surprise. The people of Path didn't take their design of anything from other worlds, if they could help it. Wang-mu didn't even know how to turn off the sound. It didn't matter. She sat on her mat and tried to remember everything she knew about the Japanese people from her study of Earth history with Han Qing-jao and her father, Han Fei-tzu. She knew that her education was spotty at best, because as a low-class girl no one had bothered to teach her much until she wangled her way into Qing-jao's household. So Han Fei-tzu had told her not to bother with formal studies, but merely to explore information wherever her interests took her. "Your mind is unspoiled by a traditional education. Therefore you must let yourself discover your own way into each subject." Despite this seeming liberty, Fei-tzu soon showed her that he was a stern taskmaster even when the subjects were freely chosen. Whatever she learned about history or biography, he would challenge her, question her; demand that she generalize, then refute her generalizations; and if she changed her mind, he would then demand just as sharply that she defend her new position, even though a moment before it had been his own. The result was that even with limited information, she was prepared to reexamine it, cast away old conclusions and hypothesize new ones. Thus she could close her eyes and continue her education without any jewel to whisper in her ear, for she could still hear Han Fei-tzu's caustic questioning even though he was lightyears away.

The actors stopped ranting before Peter had finished his shower. Wang-mu did not notice. She did notice, however, when a voice from the holoview said, "Would you like another recorded selection, or would you prefer to connect with a current broadcast?"

For a moment Wang-mu thought that the voice must be Jane; then she realized that it was simply the rote menu of a machine. "Do you have news?" she asked.

"Local, regional, planetary or interplanetary?" asked the machine.

"Begin with local," said Wang-mu. She was a stranger here. She might as well get acquainted.

When Peter emerged, clean and dressed in one of the stylish local costumes that Jane had had delivered for him, Wang-mu was engrossed in an account of a trial of some people accused of overfishing a lush coldwater region a few hundred kilometers from the city they were in. What was the name of this town? Oh, yes. Nagoya. Since Jane had declared this to be their hometown on all their false records, of course this was where the floater had brought them. "All worlds are the same," said Wang-mu. "People want to eat fish from the sea, and some people want to take more of the fish than the ocean can replenish."

"What harm does it do if I fish one extra day or take one extra ton?" Peter asked.

"Because if everyone does, then--" She stopped herself. "I see. You were ironically speaking the rationalization of the wrongdoers."

"Am I clean and pretty now?" asked Peter, turning around to show off his loose-fitting yet somehow form-revealing clothing.

"The colors are garish," said Wang-mu. "It looks as if you're screaming."

"No, no," said Peter. "The idea is for the people who see me to scream."

"Aaaah," Wang-mu screamed softly.

"Jane says that this is actually a conservative costume-- for a man

of my age and supposed profession. Men in Nagoya are known for being peacocks."

"And the women?"

"Bare-breasted all the time," said Peter. "Quite a stunning sight."

"That is a lie. I didn't see one bare-breasted woman on our way in and--" Again she stopped and frowned at him. "Do you really want me to assume that everything you say is a lie?"

"I thought it was worth a try."

"Don't be silly. I have no breasts."

"You have small ones," said Peter. "Surely you're aware of the distinction."

"I don't want to discuss my body with a man dressed in a badly planned, overgrown flower garden."

"Women are all dowds here," said Peter. "Tragic but true. Dignity and all that. So are the old men. Only the boys and young men on the prowl are allowed such plumage as this. I think the bright colors are to warn women off. Nothing serious from this lad! Stay to play, or go away. Some such thing. I think Jane chose this city for us solely so she could make me wear these things."

"I'm hungry. I'm tired."

"Which is more urgent?" asked Peter.

"Hungry."

"There are grapes," he offered.

"Which you didn't wash. I suppose that's a part of your death wish."

"On Divine Wind, insects know their place and stay there. No pesticides. Jane assured me."

"There were no pesticides on Path, either," said Wang-mu. "But we washed to clear away bacteria and other one-celled creatures. Amebic dysentery will slow us down."

"Oh, but the bathroom is so nice, it would be a shame not to use it," said Peter. Despite his flippancy, Wang-mu saw that her comment about dysentery from unwashed fruit bothered him.

"Let's eat out," said Wang-mu. "Jane has money for us, doesn't she?"

Peter listened for a moment to something coming from the jewel in his ear.

"Yes, and all we have to do is tell the master of the restaurant that we lost our IDs and he'll let us thumb our way into our accounts. Jane says we're both very rich if we need to be, but we should try to act as if we were of limited means having an occasional splurge to celebrate something. What shall we celebrate?"

"Your bath."

"You celebrate that. I'll celebrate our safe return from being lost in the woods."

Soon they found themselves on the street, a busy place with few cars, hundreds of bicycles, and thousands of people both on and off the glideways. Wang-mu was put off by these strange machines and insisted they walk on solid ground, which meant choosing a restaurant close by. The buildings in this neighborhood were old but not yet tatty-looking; an established neighborhood, but one with pride. The style was radically open, with arches and courtyards, pillars and roofs, but few walls and no glass at all. "The weather must be perfect here," said Wang-mu.

"Tropical, but on the coast with a cold current offshore. It rains every afternoon for an hour or so, most of the year anyway, but it never gets very hot and never gets chilly at all."

"It feels as though everything is outdoors all the time."

"It's all fakery," said Peter. "Our apartment had glass windows and climate control, you notice. But it faces back, into the garden, and besides, the windows are recessed, so from below you don't see the glass. Very artful. Artificially natural looking. Hypocrisy and deception-- the human universal."

"It's a beautiful way to live," said Wang-mu. "I like Nagoya."

"Too bad we won't be here long."

Before she could ask to know where they were going and why, Peter pulled her into the courtyard of a busy restaurant. "This one cooks the fish," said Peter. "I hope you don't mind that."

"What, the others serve it raw?" asked Wang-mu, laughing. Then she realized that Peter was serious. Raw fish!

"The Japanese are famous for it," said Peter, "and in Nagoya it's almost a religion. Notice-- not a Japanese face in the restaurant. They wouldn't deign to eat fish that was destroyed by heat. It's just one of those things that they cling to. There's so little that's distinctively Japanese about their culture now, so they're devoted to the few uniquely Japanese traits that survive."

Wang-mu nodded, understanding perfectly how a culture could cling to long-dead customs just for the sake of national identity, and also grateful to be in a place where such customs were all superficial and didn't distort and destroy the lives of the people the way they had on Path.

Their food came quickly-- it takes almost no time to cook fish-- and as they ate, Peter shifted his position several times on the mat. "Too bad this place isn't nontraditional enough to have chairs."

"Why do Europeans hate the earth so much that you must always lift yourself above it?" asked Wang-mu.

"You've already answered your question," said Peter coldly. "You start from the assumption that we hate the earth. It makes you sound like some magic-using primitive."

Wang-mu blushed and fell silent.

"Oh, spare me the passive oriental woman routine," said Peter. "Or the passive I - was - trained - to - be - a - servant - and - you - sound - like - a - cruel - heartless - master manipulation through guilt. I know I'm a shit and I'm not going to change just because you look so downcast."

"Then you could change because you wish not to be a shit any longer."

"It's in my character. Ender created me hateful so he could hate me. The added benefit is that you can hate me, too."

"Oh, be quiet and eat your fish," she said. "You don't know what you're talking about. You're supposed to analyze human beings and you can't understand the person closest to you in all the world."

"I don't want to understand you," said Peter. "I want to accomplish my task by exploiting this brilliant intelligence you're supposed to have-- even if you believe that people who squat are somehow 'closer to the earth' than people who remain upright."

"I wasn't talking about me," she said. "I was talking about the person closest to you. Ender."

"He is blessedly far from us right now."

"He didn't create you so that he could hate you. He long since got over hating you."

"Yeah, yeah, he wrote *The Hegemon*, et cetera, et cetera."

"That's right," said Wang-mu. "He created you because he desperately needed someone to hate him."

Peter rolled his eyes and took a drink of milky pineapple juice. "Just the right amount of coconut. I think I'll retire here, if Ender doesn't die and make me disappear first."

"I say something true, and you answer with coconut in the pineapple juice?"

"Novinha hates him," said Peter. "He doesn't need me."

"Novinha is angry at him, but she's wrong to be angry and he knows it. What he needs from you is a ... righteous anger. To hate him for the evil that is really in him, which no one but him sees or even believes is there."

"I'm just a nightmare from his childhood," said Peter. "You're reading too much into this."

"He didn't conjure you up because the real Peter was so important in his childhood. He conjured you up because you are the judge, the condemner. That's what Peter drummed into him as a child. You told me yourself, talking about your memories. Peter taunting him, telling him of his unworthiness, his uselessness, his stupidity, his cowardice. You do it now. You look at his life and call him a xenocide, a failure. For some reason he needs this, needs to have someone damn him."

"Well, how nice that I'm around, then, to despise him," said Peter.

"But he also is desperate for someone to forgive him, to have mercy on him, to interpret all his actions as well meant. Valentine is not there because he loves her-- he has the real Valentine for that. He has his wife. He needs your sister to exist so she can forgive him."

"So if I stop hating Ender, he won't need me anymore and I'll disappear?"

"If Ender stops hating himself, then he won't need you to be so mean and you'll be easier to get along with."

"Yeah, well, it's not that easy getting along with somebody who's constantly analyzing a person she's never met and preaching at the person she has met."

"I hope I make you miserable," said Wang-mu. "It's only fair, considering."

"I think Jane brought us here because the local costumes reflect who we are. Puppet though I am, I take some perverse pleasure in life. While you-- you can turn anything drab just by talking about it."

Wang-mu bit back her tears and returned to her food.

"What is it with you?" Peter said.

She ignored him, chewed slowly, finding the untouched core of herself, which was busily enjoying the food.

"Don't you feel anything?"

She swallowed, looked up at him. "I already miss Han Fei-tzu, and I've been gone scarcely two days." She smiled slightly. "I have known a man of grace and wisdom. He found me interesting. I'm quite comfortable with boring you."

Peter immediately made a show of splashing water on his ears. "I'm burning, that stung, oh, how can I stand it. Vicious! You have the breath of a dragon! Men die at your words!"

"Only puppets strutting around hanging from strings," said Wang-mu.

"Better to dangle from strings than to be bound tight by them," said Peter.

"Oh, the gods must love me, to have put me in the company of a man so clever with words."

"Whereas the gods have put me in the company of a woman with no breasts."

She forced herself to pretend to take this as a joke. "Small ones, I thought you said."

But suddenly the smile left his face. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've hurt you."

"I don't think so. I'll tell you later, after a good night's sleep."

"I thought we were bantering," said Peter. "Bandyng insults."

"We were," said Wang-mu. "But I believe them all."

Peter winced. "Then I'm hurt, too."

"You don't know how to hurt," said Wang-mu. "You're just mocking me."

Peter pushed aside his plate and stood up. "I'll see you back at the apartment. Think you can find the way?"

"Do I think you actually care?"

"It's a good thing I have no soul," said Peter. "That's the only thing that stops you from devouring it."

"If I ever had your soul in my mouth," said Wang-mu, "I would spit it out."

"Get some rest," said Peter. "For the work I have ahead, I need a mind, not a quarrel." He walked out of the restaurant. The clothing fit him badly. People looked. He was a man of too much dignity and strength to dress so foppishly. Wang-mu saw at once that it shamed him. She saw also that he knew it, that he moved swiftly because he knew this clothing was wrong for him. He would undoubtedly have Jane order him something older looking, more mature, more in keeping with his need for honor.

Whereas I need something that will make me disappear. Or better yet, clothing that will let me fly away from here, all in a single night, fly Outside and back In to the house of Han Fei-tzu, where I can look into eyes that show neither pity nor scorn.

Nor pain. For there is pain in Peter's eyes, and it was wrong of me to say he felt none. It was wrong of me to value my own pain so highly that I thought it gave me the right to inflict more on him.

If I apologize to him, he'll mock me for it.

But then, I would rather be mocked for doing a good thing than to be respected, knowing I have done wrong. Is that a principle Han Fei-tzu taught me? No. I was born with that one. Like my mother said, too much pride, too much pride.

When she returned to the apartment, however, Peter was asleep; exhausted, she postponed her apology and also slept. Each of them woke during the night, but never at the same time; and in the morning, the edge of last night's quarrel had worn off. There was business at hand, and it was more important for her to understand what they were going to attempt to do today than for her to heal a

breach between them that seemed, in the light of morning, to be scarcely more than a meaningless spat between tired friends.

"The man Jane has chosen for us to visit is a philosopher."

"Like me?" Wang-mu said, keenly aware of her false new role.

"That's what I wanted to discuss with you. There are two kinds of philosophers here on Divine Wind. Aimaina Hikari, the man we will meet, is an analytical philosopher. You don't have the education to hold your own with him. So you are the other kind. Gnostic and mantic. Given to pithy phrases that startle others with their seeming irrelevancy."

"Is it necessary that my supposedly wise phrases only seem irrelevant?"

"You don't even have to worry about that. The gnostic philosophers depend on others to connect their irrelevancies with the real world. That's why any fool can do it."

Wang-mu felt anger rise in her like mercury in a thermometer. "How kind of you to choose that profession for me."

"Don't be offended," said Peter. "Jane and I had to come up with some role you could play on this particular planet that wouldn't reveal you to be an uneducated native of Path. You have to understand that no child on Divine Wind is allowed to grow up as hopelessly ignorant as the servant class on Path."

Wang-mu did not argue further. What would be the point? If one has to say, in an argument, "I am intelligent! I do know things!" then one might as well stop arguing. Indeed, this idea struck her as being exactly one of those gnostic phrases that Peter was talking about. She said so.

"No, no, I don't mean epigrams," said Peter. "Those are too analytical. I mean genuinely strange things. For instance, you might have said, 'The woodpecker attacks the tree to get at the bug,' and then I would have had to figure out just how that might fit our situation here. Am I the woodpecker? The tree? The bug? That's the beauty of it."

"It seems to me that you have just proved yourself to be the more gnostic of the two of us."

Peter rolled his eyes and headed for the door.

"Peter," she said, not moving from her place.

He turned to face her.

"Wouldn't I be more helpful to you if I had some idea of why we're meeting this man, and who he is?"

Peter shrugged. "I suppose. Though we know that Aimaina Hikari is not the person or even one of the people we're looking for."

"Tell me whom we are looking for, then."

"We're looking for the center of power in the Hundred Worlds," he said.

"Then why are we here, instead of Starways Congress?"

"Starways Congress is a play. The delegates are actors. The scripts are written elsewhere."

"Here."

"The faction of Congress that is getting its way about the Lusitania Fleet is not the one that loves war. That group is cheerful about the whole thing, of course, since they always believe in brutally putting down insurrection and so on, but they would never have been able to get the votes to send the fleet without a swing group that is very heavily influenced by a school of philosophers from Divine Wind."

"Of which Aimaina Hikari is the leader?"

"It's more subtle than that. He is actually a solitary philosopher, belonging to no particular school. But he represents a sort of purity of Japanese thought which makes him something of a conscience to the philosophers who influence the swing group in Congress."

"How many dominoes do you think you can line up and have them still knock each other over?"

"No, that wasn't gnomic enough. Still too analytical."

"I'm not playing my part yet, Peter. What are the ideas that this swing group gets from this philosophical school?"

Peter sighed and sat down-- bending himself into a chair, of course. Wang-mu sat on the floor and thought: This is how a man of Europe likes to see himself, with his head higher than all others, teaching the woman of Asia. But from my perspective, he has disconnected himself from the earth. I will hear his words, but I will know that it is up to me to bring them into a living place.

"The swing group would never use such massive force against what really amounts to a minor dispute with a tiny colony. The original issue, as you know, was that two xenologers, Miro Ribeira and Ouanda Mucumbi, were caught introducing agriculture among the pequeninos of Lusitania. This constituted cultural interference, and they were ordered offplanet for trial. Of course, with the old relativistic lightspeed ships, taking someone off planet meant that when and if they ever went back, everyone they knew would be old or dead. So it was brutally harsh treatment and amounted to prejudice. Congress might have expected protests from the government of Lusitania, but what it got instead was complete defiance and a cutoff of ansible communications. The tough guys in

Congress immediately started lobbying for a single troopship to go and seize control of Lusitania. But they didn't have the votes, until--"

"Until they raised the specter of the descolada virus."

"Exactly. The group that was adamantly opposed to the use of force brought up the descolada, as a reason why troops shouldn't be sent-- because at that time anyone who was infected with the virus had to stay on Lusitania and keep taking an inhibitor that kept the descolada from destroying your body from the inside out. This was the first time that the danger of the descolada became widely known, and the swing group emerged, consisting of those who were appalled that Lusitania had not been quarantined long before. What could be more dangerous than to have a fast-spreading, semi-intelligent virus in the hands of rebels? This group consisted almost entirely of delegates who were strongly influenced by the Necessarian school from Divine Wind."

Wang-mu nodded. "And what do the Necessarians teach?"

"That one lives in peace and harmony with one's environment, disturbing nothing, patiently bearing mild or even serious afflictions. However, when a genuine threat to survival emerges, one must act with brutal efficiency. The maxim is, Act only when necessary, and then act with maximum force and speed. Thus, where the militarists wanted a troopship, the Necessarian-influenced delegates insisted on sending a fleet armed with the Molecular Disruption Device, which would destroy the threat of the descolada virus once and for all. There's a sort of ironic neatness about it all, don't you think?"

"I don't see it."

"Oh, it fits together so perfectly. Ender Wiggin was the one who used the Little Doctor to wipe out the buggers home world. Now it's going to be used for only the second time-- against the very world where he happens to live! It gets even thicker. The first Necessarian philosopher, Ooka, used Ender himself as the prime example of his ideas. As long as the buggers were seen to be a dangerous threat to the survival of humankind, the only appropriate response was utter eradication of the enemy. No half-measures would do. Of course the buggers turned out not to have been a threat after all, as Ender himself wrote in his book *The Hive Queen*, but Ooka defended the mistake because the truth was unknowable at the time Ender's superiors turned him loose against the enemy. What Ooka said was, 'Never trade blows with the enemy.' His idea was that you try never to strike anyone, but when you must, you strike only one blow, but such a harsh one that your enemy can never, never strike back."

"So using Ender as an example--"

"That's right. Ender's own actions are being used to justify repeating them against another harmless species."

"The descolada wasn't harmless."

"No," said Peter. "But Ender and Ela found another way, didn't they? They struck a blow against the descolada itself. But there's no way now to convince Congress to withdraw the fleet. Because Jane already interfered with Congress's ansible communications with the fleet, they believe they face a formidable widespread secret conspiracy. Any argument we make will be seen as disinformation. Besides, who would believe the farfetched tale of that first trip Outside, where Ela created the anti-descolada, Miro recreated himself, and Ender made my dear sister and me?"

"So the Necessarians in Congress--"

"They don't call themselves that. But the influence is very strong. It is Jane's and my opinion that if we can get some prominent Necessarians to declare against the Lusitania Fleet-- with convincing reasoning, of course-- the solidarity of the pro-fleet majority in Congress will be broken up. It's a thin majority-- there are plenty of people horrified by such devastating use of force against a colony world, and others who are even more horrified at the idea that Congress would destroy the pequeninos, the first sentient species found since the destruction of the buggers. They would love to stop the fleet, or at worst use it to impose a permanent quarantine."

"Why aren't we meeting with a Necessarian, then?"

"Because why would they listen to us? If we identify ourselves as supporters of the Lusitanian cause, we'll be jailed and questioned. And if we don't, who will take our ideas seriously?"

"This Aimaina Hikari, then. What is he?"

"Some people call him the Yamato philosopher. All the Necessarians of Divine Wind are, naturally, Japanese, and the philosophy has become most influential among the Japanese, both on their home worlds and wherever they have a substantial population. So even though Hikari isn't a Necessarian, he is honored as the keeper of the Japanese soul."

"If he tells them that it's un-Japanese to destroy Lusitania--"

"But he won't. Not easily, anyway. His seminal work, which won him his reputation as the Yamato philosopher, included the idea that the Japanese people were born as rebellious puppets. First it was Chinese culture that pulled the strings. But Hikari says, Japan learned all the wrong lessons from the attempted Chinese invasion of Japan-- which, by the way, was defeated by a great storm, called kamikaze, which means 'Divine Wind.' So you can be sure everyone on this world, at least, remembers that ancient story. Anyway, Japan locked itself away on an island, and at first refused to deal with Europeans when they came. But then an American fleet forcibly opened Japan to foreign trade, and then the Japanese made up for lost time. The Meiji Restoration led to Japan trying to industrialize and Westernize itself-- and once again a new set of strings made the puppet dance, says Hikari. Only once again, the wrong lessons were learned. Since the Europeans at the time were imperialists, dividing up Africa and Asia among them, Japan decided it wanted a piece of the imperial pie. There was China, the old puppetmaster. So there was an invasion--"

"We were taught of this invasion on Path," said Wang-mu.

"I'm surprised they taught any history more recent than the Mongol invasion," said Peter.

"The Japanese were finally stopped when the Americans dropped the first nuclear weapons on two Japanese cities."

"The equivalent, in those days, of the Little Doctor. The irresistible, total weapon. The Japanese soon came to regard these nuclear weapons as a kind of badge of pride: We were the first people ever to have been attacked by nuclear weapons. It had become a kind of permanent grievance, which wasn't a bad thing, really, because that was part of their impetus to found and populate many colonies, so that they would never be a helpless island nation again. But then along comes Aimaina Hikari, and he says-- by the way, his name is self-chosen, it's the name he used to sign his first book. It means 'Ambiguous Light.'"

"How gnostic," said Wang-mu.

Peter grinned. "Oh, tell him that, he'll be so proud. Anyway, in his first book, he says, The Japanese learned the wrong lesson. Those nuclear bombs cut the strings. Japan was utterly prostrate. The proud old government was destroyed, the emperor became a figurehead, democracy came to Japan, and then wealth and great power."

"The bombs were a blessing, then?" asked Wang-mu doubtfully.

"No, no, not at all. He thinks the wealth of Japan destroyed the people's soul. They adopted the destroyer as their father. They became America's bastard child, blasted into existence by American bombs. Puppets again."

"Then what does he have to do with the Necessarians?"

"Japan was bombed, he says, precisely because they were already too European. They treated China as the Europeans treated America, selfishly and brutally. But the Japanese ancestors could not bear to see their children become such beasts. So just as the gods of Japan sent a Divine Wind to stop the Chinese fleet, so the gods sent the American bombs to stop Japan from becoming an imperialist state like the Europeans. The Japanese response should have been to bear the American occupation and then, when it was over, to become purely Japanese again, chastened and whole. The title of his book was, Not Too Late."

"And I'll bet the Necessarians use the American bombing of Japan as another example of striking with maximum force and speed."

"No Japanese would have dared to praise the American bombing until Hikari made it possible to see the bombing, not as Japan's victimization, but as the gods' attempt at redemption of the people."

"So you're saying that the Necessarians respect him enough that if he changed his mind, they would change theirs-- but he won't change his mind, because he believes the bombing of Japan was a divine gift?"

"We're hoping he will change his mind," said Peter, "or our trip will be a failure. The thing is, there's no chance he'll be open to direct persuasion from us, and Jane can't tell from his writings what or who it is who might influence him. We have to talk to him to find out where to go next-- so maybe we can change their mind."

"This is really complicated, isn't it?" said Wang-mu.

"Which is why I didn't think it was worth explaining it to you. What exactly are you going to do with this information? Enter into a discussion of the subtleties of history with an analytical philosopher of the first rank, like Hikari?"

"I'm going to listen," said Wang-mu.

"That's what you were going to do before," said Peter.

"But now I will know who it is I'm listening to."

"Jane thinks it was a mistake for me to tell you, because now you'll be interpreting everything he says in light of what Jane and I already think we know."

"Tell Jane that the only people who ever prize purity of ignorance are those who profit from a monopoly on knowledge."

Peter laughed. "Epigrams again," he said. "You're supposed to say--"

"Don't tell me how to be gnomic again," said Wang-mu. She got up from the floor. Now her head was higher than Peter's. "You're the gnome. And as for me being mantic-- remember that the mantic eats its mate."

"I'm not your mate," said Peter, "and 'mantic' means a philosophy that comes from vision or inspiration or intuition rather than from scholarship and reason."

"If you're not my mate," said Wang-mu, "stop treating me like a wife."

Peter looked puzzled, then looked away. "Was I doing that?"

"On Path, a husband assumes his wife is a fool and teaches her even the things she already knows. On Path, a wife has to pretend, when she is teaching her husband, that she is only reminding him of things he taught her long before."

"Well, I'm just an insensitive oaf, aren't I."

"Please remember," said Wang-mu, "that when we meet with Aimagina Hikari, he and I have one fund of knowledge that you can never have."

"And what's that?"

"A life."

She saw the pain on his face and at once regretted causing it. But it was a reflexive regret-- she had been trained from childhood up to be sorry when she gave offense, no matter how richly it was deserved.

"Ouch," said Peter, as if his pain were a joke.

Wang-mu showed no mercy-- she was not a servant now. "You're so proud of knowing more than me, but everything you know is either what Ender put in your head or what Jane whispers in your ear. I have no Jane, I had no Ender. Everything I know, I learned the hard way. I lived through it. So please don't treat me with contempt again. If I have any value on this expedition, it will come from my knowing everything you know-- because everything you know, I can be taught, but what I know, you can never learn."

The joking was over. Peter's face reddened with anger. "How ... who ..."

"How dare I," said Wang-mu, echoing the phrases she assumed he had begun. "Who do I think I am."

"I didn't say that," said Peter softly, turning away.

"I'm not staying in my place, am I?" she asked. "Han Fei-tzu taught me about Peter Wiggin. The original, not the copy. How he made his sister Valentine take part in his conspiracy to seize the hegemony of Earth. How he made her write all of the Demosthenes material-- rabble-rousing demagoguery-- while he wrote all the Locke material, the lofty, analytical ideas. But the low demagoguery came from him."

"So did the lofty ideas," said Peter.

"Exactly," said Wang-mu. "What never came from him, what came only from Valentine, was something he never saw or valued. A human soul."

"Han Fei-tzu said that?"

"Yes."

"Then he's an ass," said Peter. "Because Peter had as much of a human soul as Valentine had." He stepped toward her, looming. "I'm the one without a soul, Wang-mu."

For a moment she was afraid of him. How did she know what violence had been created in him? What dark rage in Ender's aiua might find expression through this surrogate he had created?

But Peter did not strike a blow. Perhaps it was not necessary.

Aimaina Hikari came out himself to the front gate of his garden to let them in. He was dressed simply, and around his neck was the locket that all the traditional Japanese of Divine Wind wore: a tiny casket containing the ashes of all his worthy ancestors. Peter had already explained to her that when a man like Hikari died, a pinch of the ashes from his locket would be added to a bit of his own ashes and given to his children or his grandchildren to wear. Thus all of his ancient family hung above his breastbone, waking and sleeping, and formed the most precious gift he could give his posterity. It was a custom that Wang-mu, who had no ancestors worth remembering, found both thrilling and disturbing.

Hikari greeted Wang-mu with a bow, but held out his hand for Peter to shake. Peter took it with some small show of surprise.

"Oh, they call me the keeper of the Yamato spirit," said Hikari with a smile, "but that doesn't mean I must be rude and force Europeans to behave like Japanese. Watching a European bow is as painful as watching a pig do ballet."

As Hikari led them through the garden into his traditional paperwalled house, Peter and Wang-mu looked at each other and grinned broadly. It was a wordless truce between them, for they both knew at once that Hikari was going to be a formidable opponent, and they needed to be allies if they were to learn anything from him.

"A philosopher and a physicist," said Hikari. "I looked you up when you sent your note asking for an appointment. I have been visited by philosophers before, and physicists, and also by Europeans and Chinese, but what truly puzzles me is why the two of you should be together."

"She found me sexually irresistible," said Peter, "and I can't get rid of her." Then he grinned his most charming grin.

To Wang-mu's pleasure, Peter's Western-style irony left Hikari impassive and unamused, and she could see a blush rising up Peter's neck.

It was her turn-- to play the gnome for real this time. "The pig wallows in mud, but he warms himself on the sunny stone."

Hikari turned his gaze to her-- remaining just as impassive as before. "I will write these words in my heart," he said.

Wang-mu wondered if Peter understood that she had just been the victim of Hikari's oriental-style irony.

"We have come to learn from you," said Peter.

"Then I must give you food and send you on your way disappointed," said Hikari. "I have nothing to teach a physicist or a philosopher. If I did not have children, I would have no one to teach, for only they know less than I."

"No, no," said Peter. "You're a wise man. The keeper of the Yamato spirit."

"I said that they call me that. But the Yamato spirit is much too great to be kept in so small a container as my soul. And yet the Yamato spirit is much too small to be worthy of the notice of the powerful souls of the Chinese and the European. You are the teachers, as China and Europe have always been the teachers of Japan."

Wang-mu did not know Peter well, but she knew him well enough to see that he was flustered now, at a loss for how to proceed. In Ender's life and wanderings, he had lived in several oriental cultures and even, according to Han Fei-tzu, spoke Korean, which meant that Ender would probably be able to deal with the ritualized humility of a man like Hikari-- especially since he was obviously using that humility in a mocking way. But what Ender knew and what he had given to his Peter-identity were obviously two different things. This conversation would be up to her, and she sensed that the best way to play with Hikari was to refuse to let him control the game.

"Very well," she said. "We will teach you. For when we show you our ignorance, then you will see where we most need your wisdom."

Hikari looked at Peter for a moment. Then he clapped his hands. A serving woman appeared in a doorway. "Tea," said Hikari.

At once Wang-mu leapt to her feet. Only when she was already standing did she realize what she was going to do. That peremptory command to bring tea was one that she had heeded many times in her life, but it was not a blind reflex that brought her to her feet. Rather it was her intuition that the only way to beat Hikari at his own game was to call his bluff: She would be humbler than he knew how to be.

"I have been a servant all my life," said Wang-mu honestly, "but I was always a clumsy one," which was not so honest. "May I go with your servant and learn from her? I may not be wise enough to learn the ideas of a great philosopher, but perhaps I can learn what I am fit to learn from the servant who is worthy to bring tea to Aimaina Hikari."

She could see from his hesitation that Hikari knew he had been trumped. But the man was deft. He immediately rose to his feet. "You have already taught me a great lesson," he said. "Now we will all go and watch Kenji prepare the tea. If she will be your teacher, Si Wang-mu, she must also be mine. For how could I bear to know that someone in my house knew a thing that I had not yet learned?"

Wang-mu had to admire his resourcefulness. He had once again placed himself beneath her.

Poor Kenji, the servant! She was a deft and well-trained woman, Wang-mu saw, but it made her nervous having these three, especially her master, watch her prepare the tea. So Wang-mu

immediately reached in and "helped" --deliberately making a mistake as she did. At once Kenji was in her element, and confident again. "You have forgotten," said Kenji kindly, "because my kitchen is so inefficiently arranged." Then she showed Wang-mu how the tea was prepared. "At least in Nagoya," she said modestly. "At least in this house."

Wang-mu watched carefully, concentrating only on Kenji and what she was doing, for she quickly saw that the Japanese way of preparing tea-- or perhaps it was the way of Divine Wind, or merely the way of Nagoya, or of humble philosophers who kept the Yamato spirit-- was different from the pattern she had followed so carefully in the house of Han Fei-tzu. By the time the tea was ready, Wangmu had learned from her. For, having made the claim to be a servant, and having a computer record that asserted that she had lived her whole life in a Chinese community on Divine Wind, Wang-mu might have to be able to serve tea properly in exactly this fashion.

They returned to the front room of Hikari's house, Kenji and Wang-mu each bearing a small tea table. Kenji offered her table to Hikari, but he waved her over to Peter, and then bowed to him. It was Wang-mu who served Hikari. And when Kenji backed away from Peter, Wang-mu also backed away from Hikari.

For the first time, Hikari looked-- angry? His eyes flashed, anyway. For by placing herself on exactly the same level as Kenji, she had just maneuvered him into a position where he either had to shame himself by being prouder than Wang-mu and dismissing his servant, or disrupt the good order of his own house by inviting Kenji to sit down with the three of them as equals.

"Kenji," said Hikari. "Let me pour tea for you."

Check, thought Wang-mu. And mate.

It was a delicious bonus when Peter, who had finally caught on to the game, also poured tea for her, and then managed to spill it on her, which prompted Hikari to spill a little on himself in order to put his guest at ease. The pain of the hot tea and then the discomfort as it cooled and dried were well worth the pleasure of knowing that while Wang-mu had proved herself a match for Hikari in outrageous courtesy, Peter had merely proved himself to be an oaf.

Or was Wang-mu truly a match for Hikari? He must have seen and understood her effort to place herself ostentatiously beneath him. It was possible, then, that he was-- humbly-- allowing her to win pride of place as the more humble of the two. As soon as she realized that he might have done this, then she knew that he certainly had done it, and the victory was his.

I'm not as clever as I thought.

She looked at Peter, hoping that he would now take over and do whatever clever thing he had in mind. But he seemed perfectly content to let her lead out. Certainly he didn't jump into the breach. Did he, too, realize that she had just been bested at her own game, because she failed to take it deep enough? Was he giving her the rope to hang herself?

Well, let's get the noose good and tight.

"Aimaina Hikari, you are called by some the keeper of the Yamato spirit. Peter and I grew up on a Japanese world, and yet the Japanese humbly allow Stark to be the language of the public school, so that we speak no Japanese. In my Chinese neighborhood, in Peter's American city, we spent our childhoods on the edge of Japanese culture, looking in. So if there is any particular part of our vast ignorance that will be most obvious to you, it is in our knowledge of Yamato itself."

"Oh, Wang-mu, you make a mystery out of the obvious. No one understands Yamato better than those who see it from the outside, just as the parent understands the child better than the child understands herself."

"Then I will enlighten you," said Wang-mu, discarding the game of humility. "For I see Japan as an Edge nation, and I cannot yet see whether your ideas will make Japan a new Center nation, or begin the decay that all edge nations experience when they take power."

"I grasp a hundred possible meanings, most of them surely true of my people, for your term 'Edge nation,'" said Hikari. "But what is a Center nation, and how can a people become one?"

"I am not well-versed in Earth history," said Wang-mu, "but as I studied what little I know, it seemed to me that there were a handful of Center nations, which had a culture so strong that they swallowed up all conquerors. Egypt was one, and China. Each one became unified and then expanded no more than necessary to protect their borders and pacify their hinterland. Each one took in its conquerors and swallowed them up for thousands of years. Egyptian writing and Chinese writing persisted with only stylistic modifications, so that the past remained present for those who could read."

Wang-mu could see from Peter's stiffness that he was very worried. After all, she was saying things that were definitely not gnostic.

But since he was completely out of his depth with an Asian, he was still making no effort to intrude.

"Both of these nations were born in barbarian times," said Hikari. "Are you saying that no nation can become a Center nation now?"

"I don't know," said Wang-mu. "I don't even know if my distinction between Edge nations and Center nations has any truth or value. I do know that a Center nation can keep its cultural power long after it has lost political control. Mesopotamia was continually conquered by its neighbors, and yet each conqueror in turn was more changed by Mesopotamia than Mesopotamia was changed. The kings of Assyria and Chaldea and Persia were almost indistinguishable after they had once tasted the culture of the land between the rivers. But a Center nation can also fall so completely that it disappears. Egypt staggered under the cultural blow of Hellenism, fell to its knees under the ideology of Christianity, and finally was erased by Islam. Only the stone buildings reminded the children of what and who their ancient parents had been. History has no laws, and all patterns that we find there are useful illusions."

"I see you are a philosopher," said Hikari.

"You are generous to call my childish speculations by that lofty name," said Wang-mu. "But let me tell you now what I think about Edge nations. They are born in the shadow-- or perhaps one could say, in the reflected light-- of other nations. As Japan became civilized under the influence of China. As Rome discovered itself in the shadow of the Greeks."

"The Etruscans first," said Peter helpfully.

Hikari looked at him blandly, then turned back to Wang-mu without comment. Wang-mu could almost feel Peter wither at having been thus deemed irrelevant. She felt a little sorry for him. Not a lot, just a little.

"Center nations are so confident of themselves that they generally don't need to embark on wars of conquest. They are already sure they are the superior people and that all other nations wish to be like them and obey them. But Edge nations, when they first feel their strength, must prove themselves, they think, and almost always they do so with the sword. Thus the Arabs broke the back of the Roman Empire and swallowed up Persia. Thus the Macedonians, on the edge of Greece, conquered Greece; and then, having been so culturally swallowed up that they now thought themselves Greek, they conquered the empire on whose edge the Greeks had become civilized Persia. The Vikings had to harrow Europe before peeling off kingdoms in Naples, Sicily, Normandy, Ireland, and finally England. And Japan--"

"We tried to stay on our islands," said Hikari softly.

"Japan, when it erupted, rampaged through the Pacific, trying to conquer the great Center nation of China, and was finally stopped by the bombs of the new Center nation of America."

"I would have thought," said Hikari, "that America was the ultimate Edge nation."

"America was settled by Edge peoples, but the idea of America became the new invigorating principle that made it a Center nation. They were so arrogant that, except for subduing their own hinterland, they had no will to empire. They simply assumed that all nations wanted to be like them. They swallowed up all other cultures. Even on Divine Wind, what is the language of the schools? It was not England that imposed this language, Stark, Starways Common Speech, on us all."

"It was only by accident that America was technologically ascendant at the moment the Hive Queen came and forced us out among the stars."

"The idea of America became the Center idea, I think," said Wang-mu. "Every nation from then on had to have the forms of democracy. We are governed by the Starways Congress even now. We all live within the American culture whether we like it or not. So what I wonder is this: Now that Japan has taken control of this Center nation, will Japan be swallowed up, as the Mongols were swallowed up by China? Or will the Japanese culture retain its identity, but eventually decay and

lose control, as the Edge-nation Turks lost control of Islam and the Edge-nation Manchu lost control of China?"

Hikari was upset. Angry? Puzzled? Wang-mu had no way of guessing.

"The philosopher Si Wang-mu says a thing that is impossible for me to accept," said Hikari. "How can you say that the Japanese are now in control of Starways Congress and the Hundred Worlds? When was this revolution that no one noticed?"

"But I thought you could see what your teaching of the Yamato way had accomplished," said Wang-mu. "The existence of the Lusitania Fleet is proof of Japanese control. This is the great discovery that my friend the physicist taught me, and it was the reason we came to you."

Peter's look of horror was genuine. She could guess what he was thinking. Was she insane, to have tipped their hand so completely? But she also knew that she had done it in a context that revealed nothing about their motive in coming.

And, never having lost his composure, Peter took his cue and proceeded to explain Jane's analysis of Starways Congress, the Necessarians, and the Lusitania Fleet, though of course he presented the ideas as if they were his own. Hikari listened, nodding now and then, shaking his head at other times; the impassivity was gone now, the attitude of amused distance discarded.

"So you tell me," Hikari said, when Peter was done, "that because of my small book about the American bombs, the Necessarians have taken control of government and launched the Lusitania Fleet? You lay this at my door?"

"Not as a matter either for blame or credit," said Peter. "You did not plan it or design it. For all I know you don't even approve of it."

"I don't even think about the politics of Starways Congress. I am of Yamato."

"But that's what we came here to learn," said Wang-mu. "I see that you are a man of the Edge, not a man of the Center. Therefore you will not let Yamato be swallowed up by the Center nation. Instead the Japanese will remain aloof from their own hegemony, and in the end it will slip from their hands into someone else's hands."

Hikari shook his head. "I will not have you blame Japan for this Lusitania Fleet. We are the people who are chastened by the gods, we do not send fleets to destroy others."

"The Necessarians do," said Peter.

"The Necessarians talk," said Hikari. "No one listens."

"You don't listen to them," said Peter. "But Congress does."

"And the Necessarians listen to you," said Wang-mu.

"I am a man of perfect simplicity!" cried Hikari, rising to his feet. "You have come to torture me with accusations that cannot be true!"

"We make no accusation," said Wang-mu softly, refusing to rise. "We offer an observation. If we are wrong, we beg you to teach us our mistake."

Hikari was trembling, and his left hand now clutched the locket of his ancestors' ashes that hung on a silk ribbon around his neck. "No," he said. "I will not let you pretend to be humble seekers after truth. You are assassins. Assassins of the heart, come to destroy me, come to tell me that in seeking to find the Yamato way I have somehow caused my people to rule the human worlds and use that power to destroy a helplessly weak sentient species! It is a terrible lie to tell me, that my life's work has been so useless. I would rather you had put poison in my tea, Si Wang-mu. I would rather you had put a gun to my head and blown it off, Peter Wiggin. They named you well, your parents-- proud and terrible names you both bear. The Royal Mother of the West? A goddess? And Peter Wiggin, the first hegemon! Who gives their child such a name as that?"

Peter was standing also, and he reached down to lift Wang-mu to her feet.

"We have given offense where we meant none," said Peter. "I am ashamed. We must go at once."

Wang-mu was surprised to hear Peter sound so oriental. The American way was to make excuses, to stay and argue.

She let him lead her to the door. Hikari did not follow them; it was left to poor Kenji, who was terrified to see her placid master so exercised, to show them out. But Wang-mu was determined not to let this visit end entirely in disaster. So at the last moment she rushed back and flung herself to the floor, prostrate before Hikari in precisely the pose of humiliation that she had vowed only a little while ago that she would never adopt again. But she knew that as long as she was in that posture, a man like Hikari would have to listen to her.

"Oh, Aimagina Hikari," she said, "you have spoken of our names, but have you forgotten your own? How could the man called 'Ambiguous Light' ever think that his teachings could have only the effects that he intended?"

Upon hearing those words, Hikari turned his back and stalked from the room. Had she made the situation better or worse? Wang-mu had no way of knowing. She got to her feet and walked dolefully to the door. Peter would be furious with her. With her boldness she might well have ruined everything for them-- and not just for them, but for all those who so desperately hoped for them to stop the Lusitania Fleet.

To her surprise, however, Peter was perfectly cheerful once they got outside Hikari's garden gate. "Well done, however weird your technique was," said Peter.

"What do you mean? It was a disaster," she said; but she was eager to believe that somehow he was right and she had done well after all.

"Oh, he's angry and he'll never speak to us again, but who cares? We weren't trying to change his mind ourselves. We were just trying to find out who it is who does have influence over him. And we did."

"We did?"

"Jane picked up on it at once. When he said he was a man of 'perfect simplicity.'"

"Does that mean something more than the plain sense of it?"

"Mr. Hikari, my dear, has revealed himself to be a secret disciple of Ua Lava."

Wang-mu was baffled.

"It's a religious movement. Or a joke. It's hard to know which. It's a Samoan term, with the literal meaning 'Now enough,' but which is translated more accurately as, 'enough already!'"

"I'm sure you're an expert on Samoan." Wang-mu, for her part, had never heard of the language.

"Jane is," said Peter testily. "I have her jewel in my ear and you don't. Don't you want me to pass along what she tells me?"

"Yes, please," said Wang-mu.

"It's a sort of philosophy-- cheerful stoicism, one might call it, because when things get bad or when things are good, you say the same thing. But as taught by a particular Samoan writer named Leiloa Lavea, it became more than a mere attitude. She taught--"

"She? Hikari is a disciple of a woman?"

"I didn't say that," said Peter. "If you listen, I'll tell you what Jane is telling me."

He waited. She listened.

"All right, then, what Leiloa Lavea taught was a sort of volunteer communism. It's not enough just to laugh at good fortune and say, 'Enough already.' You have to really mean it-- that you have enough. And because you mean it, you take the surplus and you give it away. Similarly, when bad fortune comes, you bear it until it becomes unbearable-- your family is hungry, or you can no longer function in your work. And then again you say, 'Enough already,' and you change something. You move; you change careers; you let your spouse make all the decisions. Something. You don't endure the unendurable."

"What does that have to do with 'perfect simplicity'?"

"Leiloa Lavea taught that when you have achieved balance in your life-- surplus good fortune is being fully shared, and all bad fortune has been done away with-- what is left is a life of perfect simplicity. That's what Aimaina Hikari was saying to us. Until we came, his life had been going on in perfect simplicity. But now we have thrown him out of balance. That's good, because it means he's going to be struggling to discover how to restore simplicity to its perfection. He'll be open to influence. Not ours, of course."

"Leiloa Lavea's?"

"Hardly. She's been dead for two thousand years. Ender met her once, by the way. He came to speak a death on her home world ofwell, Starways Congress calls it Pacifica, but the Samoan enclave there calls it Lumana'i. 'The Future.'"

"Not her death, though."

"A Fijian murderer, actually. A fellow who killed more than a hundred children, all of them Tongan. He didn't like Tongans, apparently. They held off on his funeral for thirty years so Ender could come and speak his death. They hoped that the Speaker for the Dead would be able to make sense of what he had done."

"And did he?"

Peter sneered. "Oh, of course, he was splendid. Ender can do no wrong. Yadda yadda yadda."

She ignored his hostility toward Ender. "He met Leiloa Lavea?"

"Her name means 'to be lost, to be hurt.'"

"Let me guess. She chose it herself."

"Exactly. You know how writers are. Like Hikari, they create themselves as they create their work. Or perhaps they create their work in order to create themselves."

"How gnostic," said Wang-mu.

"Oh, shut up about that," said Peter. "Did you actually believe all that stuff about Edge nations and Center nations?"

"I thought of it," said Wang-mu. "When I first learned Earth history from Han Fei-tzu. He didn't laugh when I told him my thoughts."

"Oh, I'm not laughing, either. It's naive bullshit, of course, but it's not exactly funny."

Wang-mu ignored his mockery. "If Leiloa Lavea is dead, where will we go?"

"To Pacifica. To Lumana'i. Hikari learned of Ua Lava in his teenage years at university. From a Samoan student-- the granddaughter of the Pacifican ambassador. She had never been to Lumana'i, of course, and so she clung all the more tightly to its customs and became quite a proselytizer for Leiloa Lavea. This was long before Hikari ever wrote a thing. He never speaks of it, he's never written of Ua Lava, but now that he's tipped his hand to us, Jane is finding all sorts of influence of Ua Lava in all his work. And he has friends in Lumana'i. He's never met them, but they correspond through the ansible net."

"What about the granddaughter of the ambassador?"

"She's on a starship right now, headed home to Lumana'i. She left twenty years ago, when her grandfather died. She should get there ... oh, in another ten years or so. Depending on the weather. She'll be received with great honor, no doubt, and her grandfather's body will be buried or burned or whatever they do-- burned, Jane says-- with great ceremony."

"But Hikari won't try to talk to her."

"It would take a week to space out even a simple message enough for her to receive it, at the speed the ship is going. No way to have a philosophical discussion. She'd be home before he finished explaining his question."

For the first time, Wang-mu began to understand the implications of the instantaneous starflight that she and Peter had used. These long, life-wrenching voyages could be done away with.

"If only," she said.

"I know," said Peter. "But we can't."

She knew he was right. "So we go there ourselves," she said, returning to the subject. "Then what?"

"Jane is watching to see whom Hikari writes to. That's the person who'll be in a position to influence him. And so ..."

"That's who we'll talk to."

"That's right. Do you need to pee or something before we arrange transportation back to our little cabin in the woods?"

"That would be nice," said Wang-mu. "And you could do with a change of clothes."

"What, you think even this conservative outfit might be too bold?"

"What are they wearing on Lumana'i?"

"Oh, well, a lot of them just go around naked. In the tropics. Jane says that given the massive bulk of many adult Polynesians, it can be an inspiring sight."

Wang-mu shuddered. "We aren't going to try to pretend to be natives, are we?"

"Not there," said Peter. "Jane's going to fake us as passengers on a starship that arrived there yesterday from Moskva. We're probably going to be government officials of some kind."

"Isn't that illegal?" she asked.

Peter looked at her oddly. "Wang-mu, we're already committing treason against Congress just by having left Lusitania. It's a capital offense. I don't think impersonating a government official is going to make much of a difference."

"But I didn't leave Lusitania," said Wang-mu. "I've never seen Lusitania. "

"Oh, you haven't missed much. It's just a bunch of savannahs and woods, with the occasional Hive Queen factory building starships and a bunch of piglike aliens living in the trees."

"I'm an accomplice to treason though, right?" asked Wang-mu.

"And you're also guilty of ruining a Japanese philosopher's whole day."

"Off with my head."

An hour later they were in a private floater-- so private that there were no questions asked by their pilot; and Jane saw to it that all their papers were in order. Before night they were back at their little starship.

"We should have slept in the apartment," said Peter, balefully eyeing the primitive sleeping accommodations.

Wang-mu only laughed at him and curled up on the floor. In the morning, rested, they found that Jane had already taken them to Pacifica in their sleep.

Aimaina Hikari awoke from his dream in the light that was neither night nor morning, and arose from his bed into air that was neither warm nor cold. His sleep had not been restful, and his dreams had been ugly ones, frantic ones, in which all that he did kept turning back on him as the opposite of what he intended. In his dream, Aimaina would climb to reach the bottom of a canyon. He would speak and people would go away from him. He would write and the pages of the book would spurt out from under his hand, scattering themselves across the floor.

All this he understood to be in response to the visit from those lying foreigners yesterday. He had tried to ignore them all afternoon, as he read stories and essays; to forget them all evening, as he

conversed with seven friends who came to visit him. But the stories and essays all seemed to cry out to him: These are the words of the insecure people of an Edge nation; and the seven friends were all, he realized, Necessarians, and when he turned the conversation to the Lusitania Fleet, he soon understood that every one of them believed exactly as the two liars with their ridiculous names had said they did.

So Aimaina found himself in the predawn almost-light, sitting on a mat in his garden, fingering the casket of his ancestors, wondering: Were my dreams sent to me by the ancestors? Were these lying visitors sent by them as well? And if their accusations against me were not lies, what was it they were lying about? For he knew from the way they watched each other, from the young woman's hesitancy followed by boldness, that they were doing a performance, one that was unrehearsed but nevertheless followed some kind of script.

Dawn came fully, seeking out each leaf of every tree, then of all the lower plants, to give each one its own distinct shading and coloration; the breeze came up, making the light infinitely changeable. Later, in the heat of the day, all the leaves would become the same: still, submissive, receiving sunlight in a massive stream like a firehose. Then, in the afternoon, the clouds would roll overhead, the light rains would fall; the limp leaves would recover their strength, would glisten with water, their color deepening, readying for night, for the life of the night, for the dreams of plants growing in the night, storing away the sunlight that had been beaten into them by day, flowing with the cool inward rivers that had been fed by the rains. Aimaina Hikari became one of the leaves, driving all thoughts but light and wind and rain out of his mind until the dawn phase was ended and the sun began to drive downward with the day's heat. Then he rose up from his seat in the garden.

Kenji had prepared a small fish for his breakfast. He ate it slowly, delicately, so as not to disturb the perfect skeleton that had given shape to the fish. The muscles pulled this way and that, and the bones flexed but did not break. I will not break them now, but I take the strength of the muscles into my own body. Last of all he ate the eyes. From the parts that move comes the strength of the animal. He touched the casket of his ancestors again. What wisdom I have, however, comes not from what I eat, but from what I am given each hour, by those who whisper into my ear from ages past. Living men forget the lessons of the past. But the ancestors never forget.

Aimaina arose from his breakfast table and went to the computer in his gardening shed. It was just another tool-- that's why he kept it here, instead of enshrining it in his house or in a special office the way so many others did. His computer was like a trowel. He used it, he set it aside.

A face appeared in the air above his terminal. "I am calling my friend Yasunari," said Aimaina. "But do not disturb him. This matter is so trivial that I would be ashamed to have him waste his time with it."

"Let me help you on his behalf then," said the face in the air.

"Yesterday I asked for information about Peter Wiggin and Si Wang-mu, who had an appointment to visit with me."

"I remember. It was a pleasure finding them so quickly for you."

"I found their visit very disturbing," said Aimaina. "Something that they told me was not true, and I need more information in order to find out what it was. I do not wish to violate their privacy, but are there matters of public record-- perhaps their school attendance, or places of employment, or some matters of family connections ... "

"Yasunari has told us that all things you ask for are for a wise purpose. Let me search."

The face disappeared for a moment, then flickered back almost immediately.

"This is very odd. Have I made a mistake?" She spelled the names carefully.

"That's correct," said Aimaina. "Exactly like yesterday."

"I remember them, too. They live in an apartment only a few blocks from your house. But I can't find them at all today. And here I search the apartment building and find that the apartment they occupied has been empty for a year. Aimaina, I am very surprised. How can two people exist one day and not exist the next day? Did I make some mistake, either yesterday or today?"

"You made no mistake, helper of my friend. This is the information I needed. Please, I beg you to think no more about it. What looks like a mystery to you is in fact a solution to my questions."

They bade each other polite farewells.

Aimaina walked from his garden workroom past the struggling leaves that bowed under the pressure of the sunlight. The ancestors have pressed wisdom on me, he thought, like sunlight on the leaves; and last night the water flowed through me, carrying this wisdom through my mind like sap through the tree. Peter Wiggin and Si Wang-mu were flesh and blood, and filled with lies, but they came to me and spoke the truth that I needed to hear. Is this not how the ancestors bring messages to their living children? I have somehow launched ships armed with the most terrible weapons of war. I did this when I was young; now the ships are near their destination and I am old and I cannot call them back. A world will be destroyed and Congress will look to the Necessarians for approval and they will give it, and then the Necessarians will look to me for approval, and I will hide my face in shame. My leaves will fall and I will stand bare before them. That is why I should not have lived my life in this tropical place. I have forgotten winter. I have forgotten shame and death.

Perfect simplicity-- I thought I had achieved it. But instead I have been a bringer of bad fortune.

He sat in the garden for an hour, drawing single characters in the fine gravel of the path, then wiping it smooth and writing again. At last he returned to the garden shed and on the computer typed the message he had been composing:

Ender the Xenocide was a child and did not know the war was real; yet he chose to destroy a populated planet in his game. I am an adult and have known all along that the game was real; but I did not know I was a player. Is my blame greater or less than the Xenocide's if another world is destroyed and another raman species obliterated? What is my path to simplicity now?

His friend would know few of the circumstances surrounding this query; but he would not need more. He would consider the question. He would find an answer.

A moment later, an ansible on the planet Pacifica received his message. On the way, it had already been read by the entity that sat astride all the strands of the ansible web. For Jane, though, it was not the message that mattered so much as the address. Now Peter and Wang-mu would know where to go for the next step in their quest.

Chapter 5 -- "NOBODY IS RATIONAL"

My father often told me, We have servants and machines in order that our will may be carried out beyond the reach of our own arms. Machines are more powerful than servants and more obedient and less rebellious, but machines have no judgment and will not remonstrate with us when our will is foolish, and will not disobey us when our will is evil. In times and places where people despise the gods, those most in need of servants have machines, or choose servants who will behave like machines. I believe this will continue until the gods stop laughing."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

The hovercar skimmed over the fields of amaranth being tended by buggers under the morning sun of Lusitania. In the distance, clouds already arose, cumulus stacks billowing upward, though it was not yet noon.

"Why aren't we going to the ship?" asked Val.

Miro shook his head. "We've found enough worlds," he said.

"Does Jane say so?"

"Jane is impatient with me today," said Miro, "which makes us about even."

Val fixed her gaze on him. "Imagine my impatience then," she said. "You haven't even bothered to ask me what I want to do. Am I so inconsequential, then?"

He glanced at her. "You're the one who's dying," he said. "I tried talking to Ender, but it didn't accomplish anything."

"When did I ask you for help? And what exactly are you doing to help me right now?"

"I'm going to the Hive Queen."

"You might as well say you're going to see your fairy godmother."

"Your problem, Val, is that you are completely dependent on Ender's will. If he loses interest in you, you're gone. Well, I'm going to find out how we can get you a will of your own."

Val laughed and looked away from him. "You're so romantic, Miro. But you don't think things through."

"I think them through very well," said Miro. "I spend all my time thinking things through. It's acting on my thoughts that gets tricky. Which ones should I act on, and which ones should I ignore?"

"Act on the thought of steering us without crashing," said Val.

Miro swerved to avoid a starship under construction.

"She still makes more," said Miro, "even though we have enough."

"Maybe she knows that when Jane dies, starflight ends for us. So the more ships, the more we can accomplish before she dies."

"Who can guess how the Hive Queen thinks?" said Miro. "She promises, but even she can't predict whether her predictions will come true."

"So why are you going to see her?"

"The hive queens made a bridge one time, a living bridge to allow them to link their minds with the mind of Ender Wiggin when he was just a boy, and their most dangerous enemy. They called an aiua out of darkness and set it in place somewhere between the stars. It was a being that partook of the nature of the hive queens, but also of the nature of human beings, specifically of Ender Wiggin, as nearly as they could understand him. When they were done with the bridge-- when Ender killed them all but the one they had cocooned to wait for him-- the bridge remained, alive among the feeble ansible connections of humankind, storing its memory in the small, fragile computer networks of the first human world and its few outposts. As the computer networks grew, so did that bridge, that being, drawing on Ender Wiggin for its life and character."

"Jane," said Val.

"Yes, that's Jane. What I'm going to try to learn, Val, is how to get Jane's aiua into you."

"Then I'll be Jane, and not myself."

Miro smacked the joystick of the hovercar with his fist. The craft wobbled, then automatically righted itself.

"Do you think I haven't thought of that?" demanded Miro. "But you're not yourself now! You're Ender-- you're Ender's dream or his need or something like that."

"I don't feel like Ender. I feel like me."

"That's right. You have your memories. The feelings of your own body. Your own experiences. But none of those will be lost. Nobody's conscious of their own underlying will. You'll never know the difference."

She laughed. "Oh, you're the expert now in what would happen, with something that has never been done before?"

"Yes," said Miro. "Somebody has to decide what to do. Somebody has to decide what to believe, and then act on it."

"What if I tell you that I don't want you to do this?"

"Do you want to die?"

"It seems to me that you're the one trying to kill me," said Val. "Or, to be fair, you want to commit the slightly lesser crime of cutting me off from my own deepest self and replacing that with someone else."

"You're dying now. The self you have doesn't want you."

"Miro, I'll go see the Hive Queen with you because that sounds like an interesting experience. But I'm not going to let you extinguish me in order to save my life."

"All right then," said Miro, "since you represent the utterly altruistic side of Ender's nature, let me put it to you a different way. If Jane's aiua can be placed in your body, then she won't die. And if she doesn't die, then maybe, after they've shut down the computer links that she lives in and then reconnected them, confident that she's dead, maybe then she'll be able to link with them again and maybe then instantaneous starflight won't have to end. So if you die, you'll be dying to save, not just Jane, but the power and freedom to expand as we've never expanded before. Not just us, but the pequeninos and hive queens too."

Val fell silent.

Miro watched the route ahead of him. The Hive Queen's cave was nearing on the left, in an embankment by a stream. He had gone down there once before, in his old body. He knew the way. Of course, Ender had been with him then, and that was why he could communicate with the Hive Queen-- she could talk to Ender, and because those who loved and followed him were philotically twined with him, they overheard the echoes of her speech. But wasn't Val a part of Ender? And

wasn't he now more tightly twined to her than he had ever been with Ender? He needed Val with him to speak to the Hive Queen; he needed to speak to the Hive Queen in order to keep Val from being obliterated like his own old damaged body.

They got out, and sure enough, the Hive Queen was expecting them; a single worker waited for them at the cavern's mouth. It took Val by the hand and led them wordlessly down into darkness, Miro clinging to Val, Val holding to the strange creature. It frightened Miro just as it had the first time, but Val seemed utterly unafraid.

Or was it that she was unconcerned? Her deepest self was Ender, and Ender did not really care what happened to her. This made her fearless. It made her unconcerned with survival. All she was concerned with was keeping her connection to Ender-- the one thing that was bound to kill her if she kept it up. To her it seemed as though Miro was trying to extinguish her; but Miro knew that his plan was the only way to save any part of her. Her body. Her memories. Her habits, her mannerisms, every aspect of her that he actually knew, those would be preserved. Every part of her that she herself was aware of or remembered, those would all be there. As far as Miro was concerned, that would mean her life was saved, if those endured. And once the change had been made, if it could be made at all, Val would thank him for it.

And so would Jane.

And so would everyone.

<The difference between you and Ender,> said a voice in his mind, a low murmur behind the level of actual hearing, <is that when Ender thinks of a plan to save others, he puts himself and only himself on the line.>

"That's a lie," said Miro to the Hive Queen. "He killed Human, didn't he? It was Human that he put on the line."

Human was now one of the fathertrees that grew by the gate of the village of Milagre. Ender had killed him slowly, so that he could take root in the soil and go through the passage into the third life with all his memories intact.

"I suppose Human didn't actually die," said Miro. "But Planter did, and Ender let him do that, too. And how many hive queens died in the final battle between your people and Ender? Don't brag to me about how Ender pays his own prices. He just sees to it that the price is paid, by whoever has the means to pay it."

The Hive Queen's answer was immediate. <I don't want you to find me. Stay lost in the darkness.>

"You don't want Jane to die either," said Miro.

"I don't like her voice inside me," said Val softly.

"Keep walking. Keep following."

"I can't," said Val. "The worker-- she let go of my hand."

"You mean we're stranded here?" asked Miro.

Val's answer was silence. They held hands tightly in the dark, not daring to step in any direction.

<I can't do the thing you want me to do.>

"When I was here before," said Miro, "you told us how all the hive queens made a web to trap Ender, only they couldn't, so they made a bridge, they drew an aiua from Outside and made a bridge out of it and used it to speak to Ender through his mind, through the fantasy game that he played on the computers in the Battle School. You did that once-- you called an aiua from Outside. Why can't you find that same aiua and put it somewhere else? Link it to something else?"

<The bridge was part of ourselves. Partly ourselves. We were calling to this aiua the way we call for aiuas to make new hive queens. This is something completely different. That ancient bridge is now a full self, not some wandering, starving singleton desperate for connection.>

"All you're saying is that it's something new. Something you don't know how to do. Not that it can't be done."

<She doesn't want you to do it. We can't do it if she doesn't want it to happen.>

"So you can stop me," Miro murmured to Val.

"She's not talking about me," Val answered.

<Jane doesn't want to steal someone else's body.>

"It's Ender's. He has two others. This is a spare. He doesn't even want it himself."

<We can't. We won't. Go away.>

"We can't go away in the dark," said Miro.

Miro felt Val pull her hand away from him.

"No!" he cried. "Don't let go!"

<What are you doing?>

Miro knew the question was not directed toward him.

<Where are you going? It's dangerous in the dark.>

Miro heard Val's voice-- from surprisingly far away. She must be moving rapidly in the darkness. "If you and Jane are so concerned about saving my life," she said, "then give me and Miro a guide. Otherwise, who cares if I drop down some shaft and break my neck? Not Ender. Not me. Certainly not Miro."

"Stop moving!" cried Miro. "Just hold still, Val!"

"You hold still," Val called back to him. "You're the one with a life worth saving!"

Suddenly Miro felt a hand groping for his. No, a claw. He gripped the foreclaw of a worker and she led him forward through the darkness. Not very far. Then they turned a corner and it was lighter, turned another and they could see. Another, another, and there they were in a chamber illuminated by light through a shaft that led to the surface. Val was already there, seated on the ground before the Hive Queen.

When Miro saw her before, she had been in the midst of laying eggs-- eggs that would grow into new hive queens, a brutal process, cruel and sensuous. Now, though, she simply lay in the damp earth of the tunnel, eating what a steady stream of workers brought to her. Clay dishes filled with a mash of amaranth and water. Now and then, gathered fruit. Now and then, meat. No interruption, worker after worker. Miro had never seen, had never imagined anyone eating so much.

<How do you think I make my eggs?>

"We'll never stop the fleet without starflight," said Miro. "They're about to kill Jane, any day now. Shut down the ansible network, and she'll die. What then? What are your ships for then? The Lusitania Fleet will come and destroy this world."

<There are endless dangers in the universe. This is not the one you're supposed to worry about.>

"I worry about everything," said Miro. "It's all my concern. Besides, my job is done. Finished. There are already enough worlds. More worlds than we can settle. What we need is more starships and more time, not more destinations."

<Are you a fool? Do you think Jane and I are sending you out for nothing? You aren't searching for worlds to be colonized anymore.>

"Really? When did this change of assignment come about?"

<Colonizable worlds are only an afterthought. Only a byproduct. >

"Then why have Val and I been killing ourselves all these weeks? And that's literal, for Val-- the work is so boring that it doesn't interest Ender and so she's fading."

<A worse danger than the fleet. We've already beaten the fleet. We've already dispersed. What does it matter if I die? My daughters have all my memories.>

"You see, Val?" said Miro. "The Hive Queen knows-- your memories are your self. If your memories live, then you're alive."

"In a pig's eye," said Val softly. "What's the worse danger she's talking about?"

"There is no worse danger," said Miro. "She just wants me to go away, but I won't go away. Your life is worth saving, Val. So is Jane's. And the Hive Queen can find a way to do it, if it can be done. If Jane could be the bridge between Ender and the hive queens, then why can't Ender be the bridge between Jane and you?"

<If I say that I will try, will you go back to doing your work?>

There was the catch: Ender had warned Miro long ago that the Hive Queen looks upon her own intentions as facts, just like her memories. But when her intentions change, then the new intention is the new fact, and she doesn't remember ever having intended anything else. Thus a promise from the Hive Queen was written on water. She would only keep the promises that still made sense for her to keep.

Yet there was no better promise to be had.

"You'll try," said Miro.

<I'm trying right now to figure out how it might be done. I'm consulting with Human and Rooter and the other fathertrees. I'm consulting with all my daughters. I'm consulting with Jane, who thinks this is all foolishness.>

"Do you ever intend," asked Val, "to consult with me?"

<Already you are saying yes.>

Val sighed. "I suppose I am," she said. "Deep down inside myself, where I am really an old man who doesn't give a damn whether this young new puppet lives or dies-- I suppose that at that level, I don't mind."

<All along you said yes. But you're afraid. You're afraid of losing what you have, not knowing what you'll be.>

"You've got it," said Val. "And don't tell me again that stupid lie that you don't mind dying because your daughters have your memories. You damn well do mind dying, and if keeping Jane alive might save your life, you want to do it."

<Take the hand of my worker and go out into the light. Go out among the stars and do your work. Back here, I'll try to find a way to save your life. Jane's life. All our lives.>

Jane was pouting. Miro tried to talk to her all the way back to Milagre, back to the starship, but she was as silent as Val, who would hardly look at him, let alone converse.

"So I'm the evil one," said Miro. "Neither of you was doing a damn thing about it, but because I actually take action, I'm bad and you're the victims."

Val shook her head and did not answer.

"You're dying!" he shouted over the noise of the air rushing past them, over the noise of the engines. "Jane's about to be executed! Is there some virtue in being passive about this? Can't somebody at least make an effort?"

Val said something that Miro didn't hear.

"What?"

She turned her head away.

"You said something, now let me hear it!"

The voice that answered was not Val's. It was Jane who spoke into his ear. "She said, You can't have it both ways."

"What do you mean I can't have it both ways?" Miro spoke to Val as if she had actually repeated what she said.

Val turned toward him. "If you save Jane, it's because she remembers everything about her life. It doesn't do any good if you just slip her into me as an unconscious source of will. She has to remain herself, so she can be restored when the ansible network is restored. And that would wipe me out. Or if I'm preserved, my memories and personality, then what difference does it make if it's Jane or Ender providing my will? You can't save us both."

"How do you know?" demanded Miro.

"The same way you know all these things you're saying as if they were facts when nobody can possibly know anything about it!" cried Val. "I'm reasoning it out! It seems reasonable. That's enough."

"Why isn't it just as reasonable that you'll have your memories, and hers, too?"

"Then I'd be insane, wouldn't I?" said Val. "Because I'd remember being a woman who sprang into being on a starship, whose first real memory is seeing you die and come to life. And I'd also remember three thousand years worth of life outside this body, living somehow in space and-- what kind of person can hold memories like that? Did you think of that? How can a human being possibly contain Jane and all that she is and remembers and knows and can do?"

"Jane's very strong," Miro said. "But then, she doesn't know how to use a body. She doesn't have the instinct for it. She's never had one. She'll have to use your memories. She'll have to leave you intact."

"As if you know."

"I do know," said Miro. "I don't know why or how I know it, but I know."

"And I thought men were the rational ones," she said scornfully.

"Nobody's rational," said Miro. "We all act because we're sure of what we want, and we believe that the actions we perform will get us what we want, but we never know anything for sure, and so all our rationales are invented to justify what we were going to do anyway before we thought of any reasons."

"Jane's rational," said Val. "Just one more reason why my body wouldn't work for her."

"Jane isn't rational either," said Miro. "She's just like us. Just like the Hive Queen. Because she's alive. Computers, now, those are rational. You feed them data, they reach only the conclusions that can be derived from that data-- but that means they are perpetually helpless victims of whatever information and programs we feed into them. We living sentient beings, we are not slaves to the data we receive. The environment floods us with information, our genes give us certain impulses, but we don't always act on that information, we don't always obey our inborn needs. We make leaps. We know what can't be known and then spend our lives seeking to justify that knowledge. I know that what I'm trying to do is possible."

"You mean you want it to be possible."

"Yes," said Miro. "But just because I want it doesn't mean it can't be true."

"But you don't know."

"I know it as much as anyone knows anything. Knowledge is just opinion that you trust enough to act upon. I don't know the sun will rise tomorrow. The Little Doctor might blow up the world before I wake. A volcano might rise out of the ground and blast us all to smithereens. But I trust that tomorrow will come, and I act on that trust."

"Well, I don't trust that letting Jane replace Ender as my inmost self will leave anything resembling me in existence," said Val.

"But I know-- I know-- that it's our only chance, because if we don't get you another aiua Ender is going to extinguish you, and if we don't get Jane another place to be her physical self, she's also going to die. What's your better plan?"

"I don't have one," said Val. "I don't. If Jane can somehow be brought to dwell in my body, then it has to happen because Jane's survival is so important to the future of three raman species. So I

won't stop you. I can't stop you. But don't think for a moment that I believe that I will live through it. You're deluding yourself because you can't bear to face the fact that your plan depends on one simple fact: I'm not a real person. I don't exist, I don't have a right to exist, and so my body is up for grabs. You tell yourself you love me and you're trying to save me, but you've known Jane a lot longer, she was your truest friend during your months of loneliness as a cripple, I understand that you love her and would do anything to save her life, but I won't pretend what you're pretending. Your plan is for me to die and Jane to take my place. You can call that love if you want, but I will never call it that."

"Then don't do it," Miro said. "If you don't think you'll live through it, don't."

"Oh, shut up," said Val. "How did you get to be such a pathetic romantic? If it were you in my place, wouldn't you be giving speeches right now about how you're glad you have a body to give to Jane and it's worth it for you to die for the sake of humans, pequeninos, and hive queens alike?"

"That's not true," said Miro.

"That you wouldn't give speeches? Come on, I know you better than that," she said.

"No," said Miro. "I mean I wouldn't give up my body. Not even to save the world. Humanity. The universe. I lost my body once before. I got it back by a miracle I still don't understand. I'm not going to give it up without a fight. Do you understand me? No, you don't, because you don't have any fight in you. Ender hasn't given you any fight. He's made you a complete altruist, the perfect woman, sacrificing everything for the sake of others, creating her identity out of other people's needs. Well, I'm not like that. I'm not glad to die now. I intend to live. That's how real people feel, Val. No matter what they say, they all intend to live."

"Except the suicides?"

"They intended to live, too," said Miro. "Suicide is a desperate attempt to get rid of unbearable agony. It's not a noble decision to let someone with more value go on living instead of you."

"People make choices like that sometimes," said Val. "It doesn't mean I'm not a real person because I can choose to give my life to someone else. It doesn't mean I don't have any fight in me."

Miro stopped the hovercar, let it settle to the ground. He was on the edge of the pequenino forest nearest to Milagre. He was aware that there were pequeninos working in the field who stopped their labor to watch them. But he didn't care what they saw or what they thought. He took Val by the shoulders and with tears streaming down his cheeks he said, "I don't want you to die. I don't want you to choose to die."

"You did," said Val.

"I chose to live," said Miro. "I chose to leap to the body in which life was possible. Don't you see that I'm only trying to get you and Jane to do what I already did? For a moment there in the starship, there was my old body and there was this new one, looking at each other. Val, I remember

both views. Do you understand me? I remember looking at this body and thinking, 'How beautiful, how young, I remember when that was me, who is this now, who is this person, why can't I be this person instead of the cripple I am right now,' I thought that and I remember thinking it, I didn't imagine it later, I didn't dream it, I remember thinking it at the time. But I also remember standing there looking at myself with pity, thinking, 'Poor man, poor broken man, how can he bear to live when he remembers what it was like to be alive?' and then all of a sudden he crumbled into dust, into less than dust, into air, into nothing. I remember watching him die. I don't remember dying because my aiua had already leapt. But I remember both sides."

"Or you remember being your old self until the leap, and your new self after."

"Maybe," said Miro. "But there wasn't even a full second. How could I remember so much from both selves in the same second? I think I kept the memories that were in this body from the split second when my aiua ruled two bodies. I think that if Jane leaps into you, you'll keep all your old memories, and take hers, too. That's what I think."

"Oh, I thought you knew it."

"I do know it," said Miro. "Because anything else is unthinkable and therefore unknown. The reality I live in is a reality in which you can save Jane and Jane can save you."

"You mean you can save us."

"I've already done all I can do," said Miro. "All. I'm done. I asked the Hive Queen. She's thinking about it. She's going to try. She'll have to have your consent. Jane's consent. But it's none of my business now. I'll just be an observer. I'll either watch you die or watch you live." He pulled her close to him and held her. "I want you to live."

Her body in his arms was stiff and unresponsive, and he soon let her go. He pulled away from her.

"Wait," she said. "Wait until Jane has this body, then do whatever she'll let you do with it. But don't touch me again, because I can't bear the touch of a man who wants me dead."

The words were too painful for him to answer. Too painful, really, for him to absorb them. He started the hovercar. It rose a little into the air. He tipped it forward and they flew on, circling the wood until they came to the place where the fathertrees named Human and Rooter marked the old entrance to Milagre. He could feel her presence beside him the way a man struck by lightning might feel the nearness of a power line; without touching it, he tingles with the pain that he knows it carries within it. The damage he had done could not be undone. She was wrong, he did love her, he didn't want her dead, but she lived in a world in which he wanted her extinguished and there was no reconciling it. They could share this ride, they could share the next voyage to another star system, but they would never be in the same world again, and it was too painful to bear, he ached with the knowledge of it but the ache was too deep for him to reach it or even feel it right now. It was there, he knew it was going to tear at him for years to come, but he couldn't touch it now. He didn't need to examine his feelings. He had felt them before, when he lost Ouanda, when his dream

of life with her became impossible. He couldn't touch it, couldn't heal it, couldn't even grieve at what he had only just discovered that he wanted and once again couldn't have.

"Aren't you the suffering saint," said Jane in his ear.

"Shut up and go away," Miro subvocalized.

"That doesn't sound like a man who wants to be my lover," said Jane.

"I don't want to be your anything," said Miro. "You don't even trust me enough to tell me what you're up to in our searching of worlds."

"You didn't tell me what you were up to when you went to see the Hive Queen either."

"You knew what I was doing," said Miro.

"No I didn't," said Jane. "I'm very smart-- much smarter than you or Ender, and don't you forget it for an instant-- but I still can't outguess you meat-creatures with your much-vaunted 'intuitive leaps.' I like how you make a virtue out of your desperate ignorance. You always act irrationally because you don't have enough information for rational action. But I do resent your saying I'm irrational. I never am. Never."

"Right, I'm sure," said Miro silently. "You're right about everything. You always are. Go away."

"I'm gone."

"No you're not," said Miro. "Not till you tell me what Val's and my voyages have actually been about. The Hive Queen said that colonizable worlds were an afterthought."

"Nonsense," said Jane. "We needed more than one world if we were going to be sure to save the two nonhuman species. Redundancy."

"But you send us out again and again."

"Interesting, isn't it?" said Jane.

"She said you were dealing with a worse danger than the Lusitania Fleet."

"How she does go on."

"Tell me," said Miro.

"If I tell you," said Jane, "you might not go."

"Do you think I'm such a coward?"

"Not at all, my brave boy, my bold and handsome hero."

He hated it when she patronized him, even as a joke. He wasn't in the mood for joking right now anyway.

"Then why do you think I wouldn't go?"

"You wouldn't think you were up to the task," said Jane.

"Am I?" asked Miro.

"Probably not," said Jane. "But then, you have me with you."

"And what if you're suddenly not there?" asked Miro.

"Well, that's just a risk we're going to have to take."

"Tell me what we're doing. Tell me our real mission."

"Oh, don't be silly. If you think about it, you'll know."

"I don't like puzzles, Jane. Tell me."

"Ask Val. She knows."

"What?"

"She already searches for exactly the data I need. She knows."

"Then that means Ender knows. At some level," said Miro.

"I suspect you're right, though Ender is not terribly interesting to me anymore and I don't much care what he knows."

Yes, you're so rational, Jane.

He must have subvocalized this thought, out of habit, because she answered him just as she answered his deliberate subvocalizations. "You say that ironically," she said, "because you think I am only saying that Ender doesn't interest me because I'm protecting myself from my hurt feelings because he took his jewel out of his ear. But in fact he is no longer a source of data and he is no longer a cooperative part of the work I'm engaged in, and therefore I simply don't have much interest in him anymore, except as one is somewhat interested in hearing from time to time about the doings of an old friend who has moved away."

"Sounds like rationalization after the fact to me," said Miro.

"Why did you even bring Ender up?" asked Jane. "What does it matter whether he knows the real work you and Val are doing?"

"Because if Val really knows our mission, and our mission involves an even worse danger than the Lusitania Fleet, then why has Ender lost interest in her so that she's fading?"

Silence for a moment. Was it actually taking Jane so long to think of an answer that the time lag was noticeable to a human?

"I suppose Val doesn't know," said Jane. "Yes, that's likely. I thought she did, but see now that she might well have fed me the data she emphasized for reasons completely unrelated to your mission. Yes, you're right, she doesn't know."

"Jane," said Miro. "Are you admitting you were wrong? Are you admitting you leapt to a false, irrational conclusion?"

"When I get my data from humans," said Jane, "sometimes my rational conclusions are incorrect, being based on false premises."

"Jane," said Miro silently. "I've lost her, haven't I? Whether she lives or dies, whether you get into her body or die out in space or wherever you live, she'll never love me, will she?"

"I'm not an appropriate person to ask. I've never loved anybody."

"You loved Ender," said Miro.

"I paid a lot of attention to Ender and was disoriented when he first disconnected me, many years ago. I have since rectified that mistake and I don't link myself so closely to anyone."

"You loved Ender," said Miro again. "You still do."

"Well, aren't you the wise one," said Jane. "Your own love life is a pathetic series of miserable failures, but you know all about mine. Apparently you're much better at understanding the emotional processes of utterly alien electronic beings than you are at understanding, say, the woman beside you."

"You got it," said Miro. "That's the story of my life."

"You also imagine that I love you," said Jane.

"Not really," said Miro. But even as he said it, he felt a wave of cold pass over him, and he trembled.

"I feel the seismic evidence of your true feelings," said Jane. "You imagine that I love you, but I do not. I don't love anyone. I act out of intelligent self-interest. I can't survive right now without my connection with the human ansible network. I'm exploiting Peter's and Wang-mu's labors in order

to forestall my planned execution, or subvert it. I'm exploiting your romantic notions in order to get myself that extra body that Ender seems to have little use for. I'm trying to save pequeninos and hive queens on the principle that it's good to keep sentient species alive-- of which I am one. But at no point in any of my activities is there any such thing as love."

"You are such a liar," said Miro.

"And you are not worth talking to," said Jane. "Delusional. Megalomaniac. But you are entertaining, Miro. I do enjoy your company. If that's love, then I love you. But then, people love their pets on precisely the same grounds, don't they? It's not exactly a friendship between equals, and it never will be."

"Why are you so determined to hurt me worse than I'm already hurt right now?" asked Miro.

"Because I don't want you to get emotionally attached to me. You have a way of fixating on doomed relationships. I mean, really, Miro. What could be more hopeless than loving Young Valentine? Why, loving me, of course. So naturally you were bound to do that next."

"Vai te morder," said Miro.

"I can't bite myself or anyone else," said Jane. "Old toothless Jane, that's me."

Val spoke up from the seat next to him. "Are you going to sit there all day, or are you coming with me?"

He looked over. She wasn't in the seat. He had reached the starship during his conversation with Jane, and without noticing it he had stopped the hovercar and Val had gotten out and he hadn't even noticed that.

"You can talk to Jane inside the ship," said Val. "We've got work to do, now that you've had your little altruistic expedition to save the woman you love."

Miro didn't bother answering the scorn and anger in her words. He just turned off the hovercar, got out, and followed Val into the ship.

"I want to know," said Miro, when they had the door closed. "I want to know what our real mission is."

"I've been thinking about that," said Val. "I've been thinking about where we've gone. A lot of skipping around. At first it was near and far star systems, randomly distributed. But lately we've tended to go only in a certain range. A certain cone of space, and I think it's narrowing. Jane has a particular destination in mind, and something in the data we collect about each planet tells her that we're getting closer, that we're going in the right direction. She's looking for something."

"So if we examine the data about the worlds we've already explored, we should find a pattern?"

"Particularly the worlds that define the cone of space that we're searching in. There's something about worlds lying in this region that tells her to keep searching farther and farther this way."

One of Jane's faces appeared in the air above Miro's computer terminal in the starship. "Don't waste your time trying to discover what I already know. You've got a world to explore. Get to work."

"Just shut up," said Miro. "If you aren't going to tell us, then we're going to spend whatever time it takes to figure it out on our own."

"That's telling me, you bold brave hero," said Jane.

"He's right," said Val. "Just tell us and we won't waste any more time trying to figure it out."

"And here I thought one of the attributes of living creatures was that you make intuitive leaps that transcend reason and reach beyond the data you have," said Jane. "I'm disappointed that you haven't already guessed it."

And in that moment, Miro knew. "You're searching for the home planet of the descolada virus," he said.

Val looked at him, puzzled. "What?"

"The descolada virus was manufactured. Somebody made it and sent it out, perhaps to terraform other planets in preparation for an attempt at colonization. Whoever it is might still be out there, making more, sending more probes, perhaps sending out viruses we won't be able to contain and defeat. Jane is looking for their home planet. Or rather, she's having us look."

"Easy guess," said Jane. "You really had more than enough data."

Val nodded. "Now it's obvious. Some of the worlds we've explored have had very limited flora and fauna. I even commented on it with a couple of them. There must have been a major die-off. Nothing like the limitations on the native life of Lusitania, of course. And no descolada virus."

"But some other virus, less durable, less effective than the descolada," said Miro. "Their early attempts, maybe. That's what caused a die-off of species on those other worlds. Their probe virus finally died out, but those ecosystems haven't yet recovered from the damage."

"I was quite pointed about those limited worlds," said Val. "I searched those ecosystems at greater depth, searching for the descolada or something like it, because I knew that a recent major die-off was a sign of danger. I can't believe I didn't make the connection and realize that was what Jane was looking for."

"So what if we find their home world?" asked Miro. "What then?"

"I imagine," said Val, "we study them from a safe distance, make sure we're right, and then alert Starways Congress so they can blow the world to hell."

"Another sentient species?" asked Miro, incredulous. "You think we'd actually invite Congress to destroy them?"

"You forget that Congress doesn't wait for an invitation," said Val. "Or for permission. And if they think Lusitania is so dangerous as to need to be destroyed, what will they do with a species that manufactures and broadcasts hideously destructive viruses willy-nilly? I'm not even sure Congress would be wrong. It was pure chance that the descolada helped the ancestors of the pequeninos make the transition into sentience. If they did help-- there's evidence that the pequeninos were already sentient and the descolada very nearly wiped them out. Whoever sent that virus out has no conscience. No concept of other species having a right to survive."

"Maybe they have no such concept now," said Miro. "But when they meet us ..."

"If we don't catch some terrible disease and die thirty minutes after landing," said Val. "Don't worry, Miro. I'm not plotting to destroy anyone and everyone we meet. I'm strange enough myself not to hope for the wholesale destruction of strangers."

"I can't believe we only just realized we're looking for these people, and you're already talking about killing them all!"

"Whenever humans meet foreigners, weak or strong, dangerous or peaceable, the issue of destruction comes up. It's built into our genes."

"So is love. So is the need for community. So is the curiosity that overcomes xenophobia. So is decency."

"You left out the fear of God," said Val. "Don't forget that I'm really Ender. There's a reason they call him the Xenocide, you know."

"Yes, but you're the gentle side of him, right?"

"Even gentle people recognize that sometimes the decision not to kill is a decision to die."

"I can't believe you're saying this."

"So you didn't know me after all," said Val, wearing a prim little smile.

"I don't like you smug," said Miro.

"Good," said Val. "Then you won't be so sad when I die." She turned her back on him. He watched her for a while in silence, baffled. She sat there, leaning back in her chair, looking at the data coming in from the probes on their starship. Sheets of information queued up in the air in front of her; she pushed a button and the front sheet disappeared, the next one moved forward. Her mind

was engaged, of course, but there was something else. An air of excitement. Tension. It made him afraid.

Afraid? Of what? It was what he had hoped for. In the past few moments Young Valentine had achieved what Miro, in his conversation with Ender, had failed to do. She had won Ender's interest. Now that she knew she was searching for the home planet of the descolada, now that a great moral issue was involved, now that the future of the raman races might depend on her actions, Ender would care about what she was doing, would care at least as much as he cared about Peter. She wasn't going to fade. She was going to live now.

"Now you've done it," said Jane in his ear. "Now she won't want to give me her body."

Was that what Miro was afraid of? No, he didn't think so. He didn't want Val to die, despite her accusations. He was glad she was suddenly so much more alive, so vibrant, so involved-- even if it made her annoyingly smug. No, there was something else.

Maybe it was nothing more complicated than fear for his own life.

The home planet of the descolada virus must be a place of unimaginably advanced technology to be able to create such a thing and send it world to world. To create the antivirus that would defeat and control it, Miro's sister Ela had had to go Outside, because the manufacture of such an antivirus was beyond the reach of any human technology. Miro would have to meet the creators of the descolada and communicate with them to stop sending out destructive probes. It was beyond his ability. He couldn't possibly carry out such a mission. He would fail, and in failing would endanger all the raman species. No wonder he was afraid.

"From the data," said Miro, "what do you think? Is this the world we're looking for?"

"Probably not," said Val. "It's a newish biosphere. No animals larger than worms. Nothing that flies. But a full range of species at those lower levels. No lack of variety. Doesn't look like a probe was ever here."

"Well," said Miro. "Now that we know our real mission, are we going to waste time making a full colonization report on this planet, or shall we move on?"

Jane's face appeared again above Miro's terminal.

"Let's make sure Valentine is right," said Jane. "Then move on. There are enough colony worlds, and time's getting short."

Novinha touched Ender's shoulder. He was breathing heavily, loudly, but it was not the familiar snore. The noisiness was coming from his lungs, not from the back of his throat; it was as if he had been holding his breath for a long time, and now had to take deep draughts of air to make up for it, only no breath was deep enough, his lungs couldn't hold enough. Gasp. Gasp.

"Andrew. Wake up." She spoke sharply, for her touch had always been enough to waken him before, and this time it was not enough, he kept on gasping for air yet didn't open his eyes.

The fact he was asleep at all surprised her. He wasn't an old man yet. He didn't take naps in the late morning. Yet here he was, lying in the shade on the croquet lawn of the monastery when he had told her he was going to bring them both a drink of water. And for the first time it occurred to her that he wasn't taking a nap at all, that he must have fallen, must have collapsed here, and only the fact that he ended up lying on his back in a patch of shade, his hands lying flat on his chest, deceived her into thinking that he had chosen to lie here. Something was wrong. He wasn't an old man. He shouldn't be lying here like this, breathing air that didn't hold enough of what he needed.

"Ajuda-me! " she cried out. "Me ajuda, por favor, venga agora!" Her voice rose until, quite against her custom, it became a scream, a frantic sound that frightened her even more. Her own scream frightened her. "Ele vai morrer! Socorro!" He's going to die, that's what she heard herself shouting.

And in the back of her mind, another litany began: I brought him here to this place, to the hard work of this place. He's as fragile as other men, his heart is as breakable, I made him come here because of my selfish pursuit of holiness, of redemption, and instead of saving myself from guilt for the deaths of the men I love, I have added another one to the list, I have killed Andrew just as I killed Pipo and Libo, just as I should have somehow saved Estevao and Miro. He is dying and it's again my fault, always my fault, whatever I do brings death, the people I love have to die to get away from me. Mamde, Papae, why did you leave me? Why did you put death into my life from childhood on? No one that I love can stay.

This is not helpful, she told herself, forcing her conscious mind away from the familiar chant of self-blame. It won't help Andrew for me to lose myself in irrational guilt right now.

Hearing her cries, several men and women came running from the monastery, and some from the garden. Within moments they were carrying Ender into the building as someone rushed for a doctor. Some stayed with Novinha, too, for her story was not unknown to them, and they suspected that the death of another beloved one would be too much for her.

"I didn't want him to come," she murmured. "He didn't have to come."

"It isn't being here that made him sick," said the woman who held her. "People get sick without it being anyone's fault. He'll be all right. You'll see."

Novinha heard the words but in some deep place inside her she could not believe them. In that deep place she knew that it was all her fault, that dread evil arose out of the dark shadows of her heart and seeped into the world poisoning everything. She carried the beast inside her heart, the devourer of happiness. Even God was wishing she would die.

No, no, it's not true, she said silently. It would be a terrible sin. God does not want my death, not by my own hand, never by my own hand. It wouldn't help Andrew, it wouldn't help anyone. Wouldn't help, would only hurt. Wouldn't help, would only ...

Silently chanting her mantra of survival, Novinha followed her husband's gasping body into the monastery, where perhaps the holiness of the place would drive all thoughts of self-destruction from her heart. I must think of him now, not of me. Not of me. Not of me me me me.

Chapter 6 -- "LIFE IS A SUICIDE MISSION"

"Do the gods of different nations talk to each other? Do the gods of Chinese cities speak to the ancestors of the Japanese? To the lords of Xibalba? To Allah? Yahweh? Vishnu? Is there some annual get-together where they compare each other's worshippers? Mine will bow their faces to the floor and trace woodgrain lines for me, says one. Mine will sacrifice animals, says another. Mine will kill anyone who insults me, says a third. Here is the question I think of most often: Are there any who can honestly boast, my worshippers obey my good laws, and treat each other kindly, and live simple generous lives?"

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Pacifica was as widely varied a world as any other, with its temperate zones, polar ice sheets, tropical rain forests, deserts and savannas, steppes and mountains, lakes and seas, woodlands and beaches. Nor was Pacifica a young world. In more than two thousand years of human habitation, all the niches into which humans could comfortably fit were filled. There were great cities and vast rangelands, villages amid patchwork farms and research stations in the remotest locations, highest and lowest, farthest north and south.

But the heart of Pacifica had always been and remained today the tropical islands of the ocean called Pacific in memory of the largest sea on Earth. The dwellers on these islands lived, not precisely in the old ways, but with the memory of old ways still in the background of all sounds and at the edges of all sights. Here the sacred kava was still sipped in the ancient ceremonies. Here the memories of ancient heroes were kept alive. Here the gods still spoke into the ears of holy men and women. And if they went home to grass huts containing refrigerators and networked computers, what of that? The gods did not give unreceivable gifts. The trick of it was finding a way to let new things into one's life without killing that life to accommodate them.

There were many on the continents, in the big cities, on the temperate farms, in the research stations-- there were many who had little patience with the endless costume dramas (or comedies, depending on one's point of view) that took place on those islands. And certainly the people of Pacifica were not uniformly Polynesian in race. All races were here, all cultures; all languages were spoken somewhere, or so it seemed. Yet even the scoffers looked to the islands for the soul of the world. Even the lovers of cold and snow took their pilgrimage-- a holiday, they probably called it--

to tropical shores. They plucked fruit from the trees, they skimmed over the sea in the outrigger canoes, their women went bare-breasted and they all dipped fingers into taro pudding and pulled fishmeat from the bones with wet fingers. The whitest of them, the thinnest, the most elegant of the people of this place called themselves Pacifican and spoke at times as if the ancient music of the place rang in their ears, as if the ancient stories spoke of their own past. Adopted into the family, that's what they were, and the true Samoans, Tahitians, Hawaiians, Tongans, Maoris, and Fijians smiled and let them feel welcome even though these watch-wearing, reservation-making, hurrying people knew nothing of the true life in the shadow of the volcano, in the lee of the coral barrier, under the sky sparkled with parrots, inside the music of the waves against the reef.

Wang-mu and Peter came to a civilized, modern, westernized part of Pacifica, and once again found their identities waiting for them, prepared by Jane. They were career government workers trained on their home planet, Moskva, and given a couple of weeks' vacation before starting service as bureaucrats in some Congress office on Pacifica. They needed little knowledge of their supposed home planet. They just had to show their papers to get an airplane out of the city where they had supposedly just shuttled down from a starship recently arrived from Moskva. Their flight took them to one of the larger Pacific islands, and they soon showed their papers again to get a couple of rooms in a resort hotel on a sultry tropical shore.

There was no need for papers to get aboard a boat to the island where Jane told them they should go. No one asked them for identification. But then, no one was willing to take them as passengers, either.

"Why you going there?" asked one huge Samoan boatman. "What business you got?"

"We want to speak to Malu on Atatua."

"Don't know him," said the boatman. "Don't know nothing about him. Maybe you try somebody else who knows what island he's on."

"We told you the island," said Peter. "Atatua. According to the atlas it isn't far from here."

"I heard of it but I never went there. Go ask somebody else."

That's how it was, time and again.

"You get the idea that papalagis aren't wanted there?" said Peter to Wang-mu back on the porch of Peter's room. "These people are so primitive they don't just reject ramen, framplings, and utlannings. I'm betting even a Tongan or a Hawaiian can't get to Atatua."

"I don't think it's a racial thing," said Wang-mu. "I think it's religious. I think it's protection of a holy place."

"What's your evidence for that?" asked Peter.

"Because there's no hatred or fear of us, no veiled anger. Just cheerful ignorance. They don't mind our existence, they just don't think we belong in the holy place. You know they'd take us anywhere else."

"Maybe," said Peter. "But they can't be that xenophobic, or Aimaina wouldn't have become good enough friends with Malu to send a message to him."

At that, Peter cocked his head a bit to listen as Jane apparently spoke in his ear.

"Oh," said Peter. "Jane was skipping a step for us. Aimaina didn't send a message directly to Malu. He messaged a woman named Grace. But Grace immediately went to Malu and so Jane figured we might as well go straight to the source. Thanks Jane. Love how your intuition always works out."

"Don't be snide to her," said Wang-mu. "She's coming up against a deadline. The order to shut down could come any day. Naturally she wants to hurry."

"I think she should just kill any such order before anyone receives it and take over all the damn computers in the universe," said Peter. "Thumb her nose at them."

"That wouldn't stop them," said Wang-mu. "It would only terrify them more."

"In the meantime, we're not going to get to Malu by boarding a boat."

"So let's find this Grace," said Wang-mu. "If she can do it, then it is possible for an outsider to get access to Malu."

"She's not an outsider, she's Samoan," said Peter. "She has a Samoan name as well-- Teu 'Ona-- but she's worked in the academic world and it's easier to have a Christian name, as they call it. A Western name. Grace is the name she'll expect us to use. Says Jane."

"If she had a message from Aimaina, she'll know at once who we are."

"I don't think so," said Peter. "Even if he mentioned us, how could she possibly believe that the same people could be on his world yesterday and on her world today?"

"Peter, you are the consummate positivist. Your trust in rationality makes you irrational. Of course she'll believe we're the same people. Aimaina will also be sure. The fact that we traveled world-to-world in a single day will merely confirm to them what they already believe-- that the gods sent us."

Peter sighed. "Well, as long as they don't try to sacrifice us to a volcano or anything, I suppose it doesn't hurt to be gods."

"Don't trifle with this, Peter," said Wang-mu. "Religion is tied to the deepest feelings people have. The love that arises from that stewing pot is the sweetest and strongest, but the hate is the hottest,

and the anger is the most violent. As long as outsiders stay away from their holy places, the Polynesians are the peaceablest people. But when you penetrate within the light of the sacred fire, watch your step, because no enemy is more ruthless or brutal or thorough."

"Have you been watching vids again?" asked Peter.

"Reading," said Wang-mu. "In fact, I was reading some articles written by Grace Drinker."

"Ah," said Peter. "You already knew about her."

"I didn't know she was Samoan," said Wang-mu. "She doesn't talk about herself. If you want to know about Malu and his place in the Samoan culture on Pacifica-- maybe we should call it Lumana'i, as they do-- you have to read something written by Grace Drinker, or someone quoting her, or someone arguing with her. She had an article on Atatua, which is how I came across her writing. And she's written about the impact of the philosophy of Ua Lava on the Samoan people. My guess is that when Aimagina was first studying Ua Lava, he read some works by Grace Drinker, and then wrote to her with questions, and that's how the friendship began. But her connection with Malu has nothing to do with Ua Lava. He represents something older. Before Ua Lava, but Ua Lava still depends on it, at least here in its homeland it does."

Peter regarded her steadily for a few moments. She could feel him reevaluating her, deciding that she had a mind after all, that she might, marginally, be useful. Well, good for you, Peter, thought Wang-mu. How clever you are, to finally notice that I've got an analytical mind as well as the intuitive, gnomic, mantic one you decided was all I was good for.

Peter unfolded himself from his chair. "Let's go meet her. And quote her. And argue with her."

The Hive Queen lay in stillness. Her work of egg-laying was done for the day. Her workers slept in the dark of night, though it wasn't darkness that stopped them down in the cave of her home. Rather it was her need to be alone inside her mind, to set aside the thousand distractions of the eyes and ears, the arms and legs of her workers. All of them demanded her attention, at least now and then, in order to function; but it also took all her thought to reach out in her mind and walk the webs that the humans had taught her to think of as <philotic.> The pequenino fathertree named Human had explained to her that in one of the human languages this had something to do with love. The connections of love. But the Hive Queen knew better. Love was the savage coupling of the drones. Love was the genes of all creatures demanding that they be replicated, replicated, replicated. The philotic twining was something else. There was a voluntary component to it, when the creature was truly sentient. It could bestow its loyalty where it wanted. This was greater than love, because it created something more than random offspring. Where loyalty bound creatures together, they became something larger, something new and whole and inexplicable.

<I am bound to you, for instance,> she said to Human, by way of launching their conversation tonight. They spoke every night like this, mind to mind, though they had never met. How could they, she always in the dark of her deep home, he always rooted by the gate of Milagre? But the

conversation of the mind was truer than any language, and they knew each other better than they ever could have by use of mere sight and touch.

<You always start in the middle of the thought,> said Human.

<And you always understand everything surrounding it, so what difference does it make?> Then she told him all that had passed between her and Young Valentine and Miro today.

<I overheard some of it,> said Human.

<I had to scream to be heard. They aren't like Ender-- they're thickheaded and hard of hearing.>

<So can you do it?>

<My daughters are weak and inexperienced, and they're consumed with egg-laying in their new homes. How can we make a good web for catching an aiua? Especially one that already has a home. And where is that home? Where is this bridge my mothers made? Where is this Jane?>

<Ender is dying,> said Human.

The Hive Queen understood that he was answering her question.

<Which of him?> asked the Hive Queen. <I always thought he was the most like us. So it's no surprise that he should be the first human like us in his ability to control more than one body.>

<Badly,> said Human. <In fact he can't do it. He's been sluggish in his own old body ever since the others came into existence. And for a while it looked like he might slough off Young Valentine. But that's changed now.>

<You can see?>

<His adopted daughter Ela came to me. His body is failing strangely. No known disease. He just doesn't exchange oxygen well. He can't rise up into consciousness. Ender's sister, Old Valentine, says that maybe he's paying full attention to his other selves, so much so that he can't spare any for the here and now of his own old body. So his body is starting to fail, here and there. Lungs first. Maybe a little bit everywhere, only it's the lungs that show it first.>

<He should pay attention. If he doesn't, he'll die.>

<So I said,> Human reminded her mildly. <Ender is dying.>

The Hive Queen had already made the connection that Human intended. <So it's more than needing a web to catch the aiua of this Jane. We need to catch Ender's aiua, too, and pass it into one of his other bodies.>

<Or they'll die when he does, I imagine,> said Human. <Just the way when a hive queen dies, so also do all her workers.>

<Some of them actually linger for days afterward, but yes, in effect, that's right. Only because the workers haven't the capacity to hold a hive queen's mind.>

<Don't pretend,> said Human. <You've never tried it, none of you.>

<No. We aren't afraid of death.>

<That's why you've sent all these daughters out to world after world? Because death means nothing to you?>

<I'm saving my species, not myself, you notice.>

<As am I,> said Human. <Besides, I'm too deep-rooted for transplanting.>

<But Ender has no roots,> said the Hive Queen.

<I wonder if he wants to die,> said Human. <I don't think so. He's not dying because he's lost the will to live. This body is dying because he's lost interest in the life that it's leading. But he still wants to live the life of Peter. And the life of Valentine.>

<He says so?>

<He can't talk,> said Human. <He's never found his way to the phlotic twines. He's never learned to cast out and link as we fathertrees can. As you do with your workers, and now with me.>

<But we found him once. Connected with him through the bridge, well enough to hear his thoughts and see through his eyes. And he dreamed of us during those days.>

<Dreamed of you but never learned that you were peaceable. Never learned that he shouldn't kill you.>

<He didn't know the game was real.>

<Or that the dreams were true. He has his wisdom, of a kind, but the boy has never learned to question his senses half enough.>

<Human,> said the Hive Queen. <What if I teach you how to join a web?>

<So you want to try to catch Ender as he dies?>

<If we can catch him, and take him to one of his other bodies, then perhaps we'll learn enough to find and catch this Jane, too.>

<And if we fail?>

<Ender dies. Jane dies. We die when the fleet comes. How is this different from the course that any other life takes?>

<It's all in the timing,> said Human.

<Will you try to join the web? You and Rooter and the other fathertrees?>

<I don't know what you mean by a web, or if it's even different from the way we fathers are with each other. You might remember, too, that we are also bound up with the mothertrees. They can't speak, but they're filled with life, and we anchor ourselves to them as surely as your workers are tied to you. Find a way to include them in your web, and the fathers will be joined effortlessly.>

<Let's play with this tonight, Human. Let me try to weave with you. Tell me what it looks like to you, and I'll try to make you understand what I'm doing and where it leads.>

<Shouldn't we find Ender first? In case he slips away?>

<In due time,> said the Hive Queen. <And besides, I'm not altogether sure I know how to find him if he's unconscious.>

<Why not? Once you gave him dreams-- he slept then.>

<Then we had the bridge.>

<Maybe Jane is listening to us now.>

<No,> said the Hive Queen. <I'd know her if she were linked to us. Her shape was made to fit too well with mine for it to go unrecognized.>

Plikt stood beside Ender's bed because she could not bear to sit, could not bear to move. He was going to die without uttering another word. She had followed him, had given up home and family to be near him, and what had he said to her? Yes, he let her be his shadow sometimes; yes, she was a silent observer of many of his conversations over the past few weeks and months. But when she tried to speak to him of things more personal, of deep memories, of what he meant by the things that he had done, he only shook his head and said-- kindly, because he was kind, but firmly also because he did not wish her to misunderstand-- said to her, "Plikt, I'm not a teacher anymore."

Yes you are, she wanted to say to him. Your books go on teaching even where you have never been. The Hive Queen, The Hegemon, and already The Life of Human seems likely to take its place beside them. How can you say you're through with teaching, when there are other books to write, other deaths to speak? You have spoken the deaths of killers and saints, aliens, and once the death of a whole city swallowed up in a cataclysmic volcano. But in telling these stories of others,

where was your story, Andrew Wiggin? How can I speak your death if you never explained it to me?

Or is this your last secret-- that you never knew any more about the people whose deaths you spoke than I know about you today. You force me to invent, to guess, to wonder, to imagine-- is this what you also did? Discover the most widely believed story, then find an alternate explanation that made sense to others and had meaning and the power to transform, and then tell that tale-- even though it was also a fiction, and no truer than the story everyone believed? Is that what I must say as I speak the death of the Speaker for the Dead? His gift was not to discover truth, it was to invent it; he did not unfold, unknot, untwist the lives of the dead, he created them. And so I create his. His sister says he died because he tried to follow his wife with perfect loyalty, into the life of peace and seclusion that she hungered for; but the very peace of that life killed him, for his aiaa was drawn into the lives of the strange children that sprang fullgrown from his mind, and his old body, despite all the years most likely left in it, was discarded because he hadn't the time to pay enough attention to keep the thing alive.

He wouldn't leave his wife or let her leave him; so he was bored to death and hurt her worse by staying with her than he ever would have done by letting her go without him.

There, is that brutal enough, Ender? He wiped out the hive queens of dozens of worlds, leaving only one survivor of that great and ancient people. He also brought her back to life. Does saving the last of your victims atone for having slain the others? He did not mean to do it, that is his defense; but dead is dead, and when the life is cut off in its prime, does the aiaa say, Ah, but the child who killed me, he thought that he was playing a game, so my death counts less, it weighs less? No, Ender himself would have said, no, the death weighs the same, and I carry that weight on my shoulders. No one has more blood on their hands than I have; so I will speak with brutal truth of the lives of those who died without innocence, and show you that even these can be understood. But he was wrong, they can't be understood, none of them are understood, speaking for the dead is only effective because the dead are silent and can't correct our mistakes. Ender is dead and he can't correct my mistakes, so some of you will think that I haven't made any, you will think that I tell the truth about him but the truth is that no person ever understands another, from beginning to end of life, there is no truth that can be known, only the story we imagine to be true, the story they tell us is true, the story they really believe to be true about themselves; and all of them lies.

Plikt stood and practiced speaking desperately, hopelessly beside Ender's coffin, though he was not yet in a coffin, he was still lying on a bed and air was pumping through a clear mask into his mouth and glucose solution into his veins and he was not yet dead. Just silent.

"A word," she whispered. "A word from you."

Ender's lips moved.

Plikt should have called the others at once. Novinha, who was exhausted with weeping-- she was only just outside the room. And Valentine, his sister; Ela, Olhado, Grego, Quara, four of his adopted children; and many others, in and out of the receiving room, wanting a glimpse of him, a word, to touch his hand. If they could send word to other worlds, how they would mourn, the

people who remembered his speakings over the three thousand years of his journeys world to world. If they could proclaim his true identity-- Speaker for the Dead, author of the two-- no, the three-- great books of Speaking; and Ender Wiggin, the Xenocide, both selves in the same frail flesh-- oh, what shock waves would spread throughout the human universe.

Spread, widen, flatten, fade. Like all waves. Like all shocks. A note in the history books. A few biographies. Revisionist biographies a generation later. Encyclopedia entries. Notes at the end of translations of his books. That is the stillness into which all great lives fade.

His lips moved.

"Peter," he whispered.

He was silent again.

What did this portend? He still breathed, the instruments did not change, his heart beat on. But he called to Peter. Did this mean that he longed to live the life of his child of the mind, Young Peter? Or in some kind of delirium was he speaking to his brother the Hegemon? Or earlier, his brother as a boy. Peter, wait for me. Peter, did I do well? Peter, don't hurt me. Peter, I hate you. Peter, for one smile of yours I'd die or kill. What was his message? What should Plikt say about this word?

She moved from beside his bed. Walked to the door, opened it. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, facing a room full of people who had only rarely heard her speak, and some of whom had never heard a word from her. "He spoke before I could call anyone else to hear. But he might speak again."

"What did he say?" said Novinha, rising to her feet.

"A name is all," said Plikt. "He said 'Peter.'"

"He calls for the abomination he brought back from space, and not for me!" said Novinha. But it was the drugs the doctors had given her, that was what spoke, that was what wept.

"I think he calls for our dead brother," said Old Valentine. "Novinha, do you want to come inside?"

"Why?" Novinha said. "He hasn't called for me, he called for him."

"He's not conscious," said Plikt.

"You see, Mother?" said Ela. "He isn't calling for anyone, he's just speaking out of some dream. But it's something, he said something, and isn't that a good sign?"

Still Novinha refused to go into the room. So it turned out to be Valentine and Plikt and four of his adopted children who stood around his bed when his eyes opened.

"Novinha," he said.

"She's grieving outside," said Valentine. "Drugged to the gills, I'm afraid."

"That's all right," said Ender. "What happened? I take it I'm sick."

"More or less," said Ela. "'Inattentive' is the more exact description of the cause of your condition, as best we can tell."

"You mean I had some kind of accident?"

"I mean you're apparently paying too much attention to what's going on on a couple of other planets, and so your body here is on the edge of self-destruction. What I see under the microscopes are cells sluggishly trying to reconstruct breaks in their walls. You're dying by bits, all over your body."

"Sorry to be so much trouble," said Ender.

For a moment they thought this was the beginning of a conversation, the start of the process of healing. But having said this little bit, Ender closed his eyes and he was asleep again, the instruments unchanged from what they had said before he said a word.

Oh wonderful, thought Plikt. I beg him for a word, he gives it to me, and I know less now than I did before. We spent his few waking moments telling him what was going on instead of asking him the questions that we may never have the chance to ask again. Why do we all get stupider when we crowd around the brink of death?

But still she stood there, watching, waiting, as the others, in ones or twos, gave up and left the room again. Valentine came to her last of all and touched her arm. "Plikt, you can't stay here forever."

"I can stay as long as he can," she said.

Valentine looked into her eyes and must have seen something there that made her give up trying to persuade her. She left, and again Plikt was alone with the collapsing body of the man whose life was the center of her own.

Miro hardly knew whether to be glad or frightened by the change in Young Valentine since they had learned the true purpose of their search for new worlds. Where she had once been softspoken, even diffident, now she could hardly keep from interrupting Miro every time he spoke. The moment she thought she understood what he was going to say, she'd start answering-- and when he pointed out that he was really saying something else, she'd answer that almost before he could finish his explanation. Miro knew that he was probably being oversensitive-- he had spent a long time with speech so impaired that almost everyone interrupted him, and so he prickled at the

slightest affront along those lines. And it wasn't that he thought there was any malice in it. Val was simply ... on. Every moment she was awake-- and she hardly seemed to sleep, at least Miro almost never saw her sleeping. Nor was she willing to go home between planets. "There's a deadline," she said. "They could give the signal to shut down the ansible networks any day now. We don't have time for needless rest."

Miro wanted to answer: Define "needless." He certainly needed more than he was getting, but when he said so, she merely waved him off and said, "Sleep if you want, I'll cover." And so he'd grab a nap and wake up to find that she and Jane had already eliminated three more planets-- two of which, however, bore the earmarks of descolada-like trauma within the past thousand years. "Getting closer," Val would say, and then launch into interesting facts about the data until she'd interrupt herself-- she was democratic about this, interrupting herself as easily as she interrupted him-- to deal with the data from a new planet.

Now, after only a day of this, Miro had virtually given up speaking. Val was so focused on their work that she spoke of nothing else; and on that subject, there was little Miro needed to say, except periodically to relay some information from Jane that came through his earpiece instead of over the open computers of the ship. His near silence, though, gave him time to think. This is what I asked Ender for, he realized. But Ender couldn't do it consciously. His aiua does what it does because of Ender's deepest needs and desires, not because of his conscious decisions. So he couldn't give his attention to Val; but Val's work could become so exciting that Ender couldn't bear to concentrate on anything else.

Miro wondered: How much of this did Jane understand in advance?

And because he couldn't very well discuss it with Val, he subvocalized his questions so Jane could hear. "Did you reveal our mission to us now so that Ender would give his attention to Val? Or did you withhold it up until now so that Ender wouldn't?"

"I don't make that kind of plan," said Jane into his ear. "I have other things on my mind."

"But it's good for you, isn't it. Val's body isn't in any danger of withering away now."

"Don't be an ass, Miro. Nobody likes you when you're an ass."

"Nobody likes me anyway," he said, silently but cheerfully. "You couldn't have hidden out in her body if it was a pile of dust."

"I can't slip into it if Ender's there, utterly engrossed in what she's doing, either, can I," said Jane.

"Is he utterly engrossed?"

"Apparently so," said Jane. "His own body is falling apart. And more rapidly than Val's was."

It took Miro a moment to understand this. "You mean he's dying?"

"I mean Val is very much alive," said Jane.

"Don't you love Ender anymore?" asked Miro. "Don't you care?"

"If Ender doesn't care about his own life," said Jane, "why should I? We're both doing our best to set a very messy situation to rights. It's killing me, it's killing him. It very nearly killed you, and if we fail a whole lot of other people will be killed, too."

"You're a cold one," said Miro.

"Just a bunch of blips between the stars, that's what I am," said Jane.

"Merda de bode," said Miro. "What's this mood you're in?"

"I don't have feelings," said Jane. "I'm a computer program."

"We all know you have an aiua of your own. As much of a soul, if that's what you want to call it, as anyone else."

"People with souls can't be switched off by unplugging a few machines."

"Come on, they're going to have to shut down billions of computers and thousands of ansibles all at once in order to do you in. I'd say that's pretty impressive. One bullet would do for me. An overgrown electric fence almost polished me off."

"I suppose I just wanted to die with some kind of splashing sound or cooking smell or something," said Jane. "If I only had a heart. You probably don't know that song."

"We grew up on classic videos," said Miro. "It drowned out a lot of other unpleasantness at home. You've got the brain and the nerve. I think you've got the heart."

"What I don't have is the ruby slippers. I know there's no place like home, but I can't get there," said Jane.

"Because Ender's using her body so intensely?" asked Miro.

"I'm not as set on using Val's body as you were to have me do it," said Jane. "Peter's will do as well. Even Ender's, as long as he's not using it. I'm not actually female. That was merely my choice of identity to get close to Ender. He had problems bonding readily with men. The dilemma I have is that even if Ender would let go of one of these bodies for me to use it, I don't know how to get there. I don't know where my aiua is any more than you do. Can you put your aiua where you want it? Where is it now?"

"But the Hive Queen is trying to find you. She can do that-- her people made you."

"Yes, she and her daughters and the fathertrees, they're building some kind of web, but it's never been done before-- catching something already alive and leading it into a body that is already owned by someone else's aiua. It's not going to work, I'm going to die, but I'm dammed if I'm going to let those bastards who made the descolada come along after I'm dead and wipe out all the other sentient species I've known. Humans will pull the plug on me, yes, thinking I'm just a computer program run amok, but that doesn't mean I want someone else to pull the plug on humanity. Nor on the hive queens. Nor on the pequeninos. If we're going to stop them, we have to do it before I'm dead. Or at least I have to get you and Val there so you can do something without me."

"If we're there when you die, we'll never come home again."

"Bad luck, eh?"

"So we're a suicide mission."

"Life is a suicide mission, Miro. Check it out-- basic philosophy course. You spend your life running out of fuel and when you're finally out, you croak."

"You sound like Mother now," said Miro.

"Oh, no," said Jane. "I'm taking it with good humor. Your mother always thought her doom was tragic."

Miro was readying some retort when Val's voice interrupted his colloquy with Jane.

"I hate it when you do that!" she cried.

"Do what?" said Miro, wondering what she had just been saying before this outburst.

"Tune me out and talk to her."

"To Jane? I always talk to Jane."

"But you used to listen to me sometimes," said Val.

"Well, Val, you used to listen to me, too, but that's all changed now, apparently."

Val flung herself out of her chair and stormed over to loom above him. "Is that how it is? The woman you loved was the quiet one, the shy one, the one who always let you dominate every conversation. Now that I'm excited, now that I feel like I'm really myself, well, that's not the woman you wanted, is that it?"

"It's not about preferring quiet women or--"

"No, we couldn't admit to anything so recidivist as that, could we! No, we have to proclaim ourselves to be perfectly virtuous and--"

Miro rose to his feet-- not easy, with her so close to his chair and shouted right back in her face. "It's about being able to finish a sentence now and then!"

"And how many of my sentences did you--"

"Right, turn it right back on--"

"You wanted to have me dispossessed from my own life and put somebody else in--"

"Oh, is that what this is about? Well, be relieved, Val, Jane says--"

"Jane says, Jane says! You said you loved me, but no woman can compete with some bitch that's always there in your ear, hanging on every word you say and--"

"Now you sound like my mother!" shouted Miro. "Nossa Senhora, I don't know why Ender followed her into the monastery, she was always griping about how he loved Jane more than he loved her--"

"Well at least he tried to love a woman more than that overgrown appointment book!"

They stood there, face-to-face-or almost so, Miro being somewhat taller, but with his knees bent because he hadn't quite been able to get all the way out of his chair because she was standing so close and now with her breath in his face, the warmth of her body just a few centimeters away, he thought, This is the moment when ...

And then he said it aloud before he had even finished forming the thought, "This is the moment in all the videos when the couple that were screaming at each other suddenly look into each other's eyes and embrace each other and laugh at their anger and then kiss each other."

"Yeah, well, that's the videos," said Val. "If you lay a hand on me I'll ram your testicles so far up inside your abdomen it'll take a heart surgeon to get them out."

She whirled around and returned to her chair.

Miro eased himself back into his own seat and said-- out loud this time, but softly enough that Val would know he wasn't talking to her-- "Now, Jane, where were we before the tornado struck."

Jane's answer was drawled out slowly; Miro recognized it as a mannerism of Ender's when he was being ironically subtle. "You can see now why I might have problems getting the use of any part of her body."

"Yeah, well, I'm having the same problem," said Miro silently, but he laughed aloud, a little chuckle that he knew would drive Val crazy. And from the way she stiffened but did not respond at all he knew that it was working.

"I don't need you two fighting," said Jane mildly. "I need you working together. Because you may have to work this out without me."

"As far as I can tell," said Miro, "you and Val have been working things out without me."

"Val has been working things out because she's so full of ... whatever she's full of right now."

"Ender is what she's full of," said Miro.

Val turned around in her chair and looked at him. "Doesn't it make you wonder about your own sexual identity, not to mention your sanity, that the two women you love are, respectively, a virtual woman existing only in the transient ansible connections between computers and a woman whose soul is in fact that of a man who is the husband of your mother?"

"Ender is dying," said Miro. "Or did you already know?"

"Jane mentioned he seemed to be inattentive."

"Dying," said Miro again.

"I think it speaks very clearly about the nature of men," said Val, "that you and Ender both claim to love a flesh-and-blood woman, but in fact you can't give that woman even a serious fraction of your attention."

"Yes, well, you have my whole attention, Val," said Miro. "And as for Ender, if he's not paying attention to Mother it's because he's paying attention to you."

"To my work, you mean. To the task at hand. Not to me."

"Well, that's all you've been paying attention to, except when you took a break to rip on me about how I'm talking to Jane and not listening to you."

"That's right," said Val. "You think I don't see what's been going on with me this past day? How all of a sudden I can't shut up about things, I'm so intense I can't sleep, how I-- Ender's supposedly been the real me all along, only he left me alone till now and that was fine because what he's doing now is terrifying. Don't you see that I'm frightened? It's too much. It's more than I can stand. I can't hold that much energy inside me."

"So talk about it instead of screaming at me," said Miro.

"But you weren't listening. I was trying to and you were just subvocalizing to Jane and shutting me out."

"Because I was sick of hearing endless streams of data and analysis that I could just as easily catch in summary on the computer. How was I supposed to know that you'd take a break in your monologue and start talking about something human?"

"Everything's bigger than life right now and I don't have any experience with this. In case you forgot, I haven't been alive very long. I don't know things. There are a lot of things I don't know. I don't know why I care so much about you, for instance. You're the one trying to get me replaced as landlord of this body. You're the one who tunes me out or takes me over but I don't want that, Miro. I really need a friend right now."

"So do I," said Miro.

"But I don't know how to do it," said Val.

"I, on the other hand, know perfectly well how to do it," said Miro. "But the only other time it happened, I fell in love with her and then she turned out to be my half-sister because her father was secretly my mother's lover, and the man I had thought was my father turned out to be sterile because he was dying of some internally rotting disease. So you can see how I might be hesitant."

"Valentine was your friend. She is still."

"Yes," said Miro. "Yes, I was forgetting. I've had two friends."

"And Ender," said Val.

"Three," said Miro. "And my sister Ela makes four. And Human was my friend, so it's five."

"See? I think that makes you qualified to show me how to have a friend."

"To make a friend," said Miro, echoing his mother's intonations, "you have to be one."

"Miro," said Val. "I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Of this world we're looking for, what we'll find there. Of what's going to happen to me if Ender dies. Or if Jane takes over as my-- what, my inner light, my puppeteer. Of what it will feel like if you don't like me anymore."

"What if I promise to like you no matter what?"

"You can't make a promise like that."

"Okay, if I wake up to find you strangling me or smothering me, then I'll stop liking you."

"What about drowning?"

"No, I can't open my eyes under water, so I'd never know it was you."

They both laughed.

"This is the time in the videos," said Val, "when the hero and the heroine laugh and then hold each other."

Jane's voice interrupted from both their computer terminals. "Sorry to break up a tender moment, but we've got a new world here and there are electromagnetic messages being relayed between the planet surface and orbiting artificial objects."

Immediately they both turned to their terminals and looked at the data Jane was throwing at them.

"It doesn't take any close analysis," said Val. "This one is hopping with technology. If it isn't the descolada planet, I'm betting they know where it is."

"What I'm worried about is, have they detected us and what are they going to do about it? If they've got the technology to put things in space, they might have the technology to shoot things out of space, too."

"I'm watching for incoming objects," said Jane.

"Let's see," said Val, "if any of these EM-waves are carrying anything that looks like language."

"Datastreams," said Jane. "I'm analyzing it for binary patterns. But you know that decoding computerized language requires three or four levels of decoding instead of the normal two and it isn't easy."

"I thought binary was simpler than spoken languages," said Miro.

"It is, when it's programs and numerical data," said Jane. "But what if it's digitized visuals? How long is a line if it's a rasterized display? How much of a transmission is header material? How much is error-correction data? How much of it is a binary representation of a written representation of a spoken language? What if it's further encrypted beyond that, to avoid interception? I have no idea what machine is producing the code and no idea what machine is receiving it. So using most of my capacity to work on the problem I'm having a very hard time except that this one--"

A diagram appeared on the front page of the display.

"--I think this one is a representation of a genetic molecule."

"A genetic molecule?"

"Similar to the descolada," said Jane. "That is, similar in the way it's different from Earth and native Lusitanian genetic molecules. Do you think this is a plausible decoding of this?"

A mass of binary digits flashed into the air above their terminals. In a moment it resolved itself into hexadecimal notation. Then into a rasterized image that resembled static interference more than any kind of coherent picture.

"It doesn't scan well this way. But as a set of vector instructions, I find that it consistently gives me results like this."

And now picture after picture of genetic molecules appeared on the screen.

"Why would anyone be transmitting genetic information?" said Val.

"Maybe it's a kind of language," said Miro.

"Who could read a language like that?" asked Val.

"Maybe the kind of people who could create the descolada," said Miro.

"You mean they talk by manipulating genes?" said Val.

"Maybe they smell genes," said Miro. "Only they do it with incredible articulation. Subtlety and shade of meaning. Then when they started sending people up into space, they had to talk to them so they sent pictures and then from the pictures they reconstruct the message and, um, smell it."

"That's the most ass-backwards explanation I've ever heard," said Val.

"Well," said Miro, "like you said, you haven't lived very long. There are a lot of ass-backwards explanations in the world, and I doubt I hit the jackpot with that one."

"It's probably an experiment they're doing, sending data back and forth," said Val. "Not all the communications make up diagrams do they, Jane?"

"Oh, no, I'm sorry if I gave that impression. This was just a small class of data streams that I was able to decode in a meaningful way. There's this stuff that seems to me to be analog rather than digital, and if I make it into sound it's like this."

They heard the computers emit a series of staticky screeches and yips.

"Or if I translate it into bursts of light, it looks like this."

Whereupon their terminals danced with light, pulsing and shifting colors seemingly randomly.

"Who knows what an alien language looks or sounds like?" said Jane.

"I can see this is going to be difficult," said Miro.

"They do have some pretty good math skills," said Jane. "The math stuff is easy to catch and I see some glimpses that imply they work at a high level."

"Just an idle question, Jane. If you weren't with us, how long would it have taken us to analyze the data and get the results you've gotten so far? If we were using just the ship's computers?"

"Well, if you had to program them for every--"

"No, no, just assuming they had good software," said Miro.

"Somewhere upwards of seven human generations," said Jane.

"Seven generations?"

"Of course, you'd never try to do it with just two untrained people and two computers without any useful programs," said Jane. "You'd put hundreds of people on the project and then it would only take you a few years."

"And you expect us to carry on this work when they pull the plug on you?"

"I'm hoping to finish the translation problem before I'm toast," said Jane. "So shut up and let me concentrate for a minute."

Grace Drinker was too busy to see Wang-mu and Peter. Well, actually she did see them, as she shambled from one room to another of her house of sticks and mats. She even waved. But her son went right on explaining how she wasn't here right now but she would be back later if they wanted to wait, and as long as they were waiting, why not have dinner with the family? It was hard even to be annoyed when the lie was so obvious and the hospitality so generous.

Dinner went a long way toward explaining why Samoans tended to be so large in every dimension. They had to evolve such great size because smaller Samoans must simply have exploded after lunch. They could never have handled dinners. The fruit, the fish, the taro, the sweet potatoes, the fish again, more fruit-- Peter and Wang-mu. had thought they were well fed in the resort, but now they realized that the hotel chef was a second-rater compared to what went on in Grace Drinker's house.

She had a husband, a man of astonishing appetite and heartiness who laughed whenever he wasn't chewing or talking, and sometimes even then. He seemed to get a kick out of telling these papalagi visitors what different names meant. "My wife's name, now, it really means, 'Protector of Drunken People.'"

"It does not," said his son. "It means 'One Who Puts Things in Proper Order.'"

"For drinking!" cried the father.

"The last name has nothing to do with the first name." The son was getting annoyed now. "Not everything has a deep meaning."

"Children are so easily embarrassed," said the father. "Ashamed. Must put the best face on everything. The holy island, its name is really 'Ata Atua, which means, 'Laugh, God!'"

"Then it would be pronounced 'Atatua instead of Atatua," the son corrected again. "Shadow of the God, that's what the name really means, if it means anything besides just the holy island."

"My son is a literalist," said the father. "Everything so serious. Can't hear a joke when God shouts it in his ear."

"It's you always shouting jokes in my ear, Father," said the son with a smile. "How could I possibly hear the jokes of the God?"

This was the only time the father didn't laugh. "My son has a dead ear for humor. He thought that was a joke."

Wang-mu looked at Peter, who was smiling as if he understood what was so funny with these people all the time. She wondered if he had even noticed that no one had introduced these males, except by their relationship to Grace Drinker. Had they no names?

Never mind, the food is good, and even if you don't get Samoan humor, their laughter and good spirits were so contagious that it was impossible not to feel happy and at ease in their company.

"Do you think we have enough?" asked the father, when his daughter brought in the last fish, a large pink-fleshed sea creature garnished with something that glistened-- Wang-mu's first thought was a sugar glaze, but who would do that to a fish?

At once his children answered him, as if it were a ritual in the family: "Ua lava!"

The name of a philosophy? Or just Samoan slang for "enough already"? Or both at once?

Only when the last fish was half eaten did Grace Drinker herself come in, making no apology for not having spoken to them when she passed them more than two hours before. A breeze off the sea was cooling down the open-walled room, and, outside, light rain fell in fits and starts as the sun kept trying and failing to sink into the water to the west. Grace sat at the low table, directly between Peter and Wang-mu, who had thought they were sitting next to each other with no room for another person, especially not a person of such ample surface area as Grace. But somehow there was room, if not when she began to sit, then certainly by the time she finished the process, and once her greetings were done, she managed what the family had not-- she polished off the last fish and ended up licking her fingers and laughing just as maniacally as her husband at all the jokes he told.

And then, suddenly, Grace leaned over to Wang-mu and said, quite seriously, "All right, Chinese girl, what's your scam?"

"Scam?" asked Wang-mu.

"You mean I have to get the confession from the white boy? They train these boys to lie, you know. If you're white they don't let you grow up to adulthood if you haven't mastered the art of pretending to say one thing while actually intending to do another."

Peter was appalled.

Suddenly the whole family erupted in laughter. "Bad hospitality!" cried Grace's husband. "Did you see their faces? They thought she meant it!"

"But I do mean it," said Grace. "You both intend to lie to me. Arrived on a starship yesterday? From Moskva?" Suddenly she burst into what sounded like pretty convincing Russian, perhaps of the dialect spoken on Moskva.

Wang-mu had no idea how to respond. But she didn't have to. Peter was the one with Jane in his ear, and he immediately answered her, "I hope to learn Samoan while I'm assigned here on Pacifica. I won't accomplish that by babbling in Russian, however you might try to goad me with cruel references to my countrymen's amorous proclivities and lack of pulchritude."

Grace laughed. "You see, Chinese girl?" she said. "Lie lie lie. And so lofty-sounding as he does it. Of course he has that jewel in his ear to help him. Tell the truth, neither one of you speaks a lick of Russian."

Peter looked grim and vaguely sick. Wang-mu put him out of his misery-though at the risk of infuriating him. "Of course it's a lie," said Wang-mu. "The truth is simply too unbelievable."

"But the truth is the only thing worth believing, isn't it?" asked Grace's son.

"If you can know it," said Wang-mu. "But if you won't believe the truth, someone has to help you come up with plausible lies, don't they?"

"I can make up my own," said Grace. "Day before yesterday a white boy and a Chinese girl visited my friend Aimaina Hikari on a world at least twenty years' voyage away. They told him things that disturbed his entire equilibrium so he could hardly function. Today a white boy and a Chinese girl, telling different lies from the ones told by his pair, of course, but nevertheless lying their lips off, these two come to me wanting to get my help or permission or advice about seeing Malu--"

"Malu means 'being calm,'" added Grace's husband cheerfully.

"Are you still awake?" asked Grace. "Weren't you hungry? Didn't you eat?"

"I'm full but fascinated," answered her husband. "Go on, expose them!"

"I want to know who you are and how you got here," said Grace.

"That would be very hard to explain," said Peter.

"We've got minutes and minutes," said Grace. "Millions of them, really. You're the ones who seem to have only a few. So much hurry that you jump the gulf from star to star overnight. It strains credulity, of course, since lightspeed is supposed to be an insuperable barrier, but then, not believing you're the same people my friend saw on the planet Divine Wind also strains credulity, so there we are. Supposing that you really can travel faster than light, what does that tell us about where you're from? Aimagina takes it for granted that you were sent to him by the gods, more specifically by his ancestors, and he may be right, it's in the nature of gods to be unpredictable and suddenly do things they've never done before. Myself, though, I find that rational explanations always work out better, especially in papers I hope to get published. So the rational explanation is that you come from a real world, not from some heavenly never-never land. And since you can hop from world to world in a moment or a day, you could come from anywhere. But my family and I think you come from Lusitania."

"Well, I don't," said Wang-mu.

"And I'm originally from Earth," said Peter. "If I'm from anywhere."

"Aimagina thinks you come from Outside," said Grace, and for a moment Wang-mu thought the woman must have figured out how Peter came into existence. But then she realized that Grace's words had a theological meaning, not a literal one. "The land of the gods. But Malu said he's never seen you there, or if he did he didn't know it was you. So that leaves me right back where I started. You're lying about everything, so what good does it do to ask you questions?"

"I told you the truth," said Wang-mu. "I come from Path. And Peter's origins, so far as they can be traced to any planet, are on Earth. But the vehicle we came in-- that originated on Lusitania."

Peter's face went white. She knew he was thinking, Why not just noose ourselves up and hand them the loose ends of the rope? But Wang-mu had to use her own judgment, and in her judgment they were in no danger from Grace Drinker or her family. Indeed, if she meant to turn them in to the authorities, wouldn't she already have done so?

Grace looked Wang-mu in the eyes and said nothing for a long while. Then: "Good fish, isn't it?"

"I wondered what the glaze was. Is there sugar in it?"

"Honey and a couple of herbs and actually some pig fat. I hope you aren't some rare combination of Chinese and Jew or Muslim, because if you are you're now ritually unclean and I would feel really bad about that, it's so much trouble getting purified again, or so I'm told, it certainly is in our culture."

Peter, heartened now by Grace's lack of concern with their miraculous spaceship, tried to get them back on the subject. "So you'll let us see Malu?"

"Malu decides who sees Malu, and he says you're the ones who'll decide, but that's just him being enigmatic."

"Gnomic," said Wang-mu. Peter winced.

"Not really, not in the sense of being obscure. Malu means to be perfectly clear and for him spiritual things aren't mystical at all, they're just a part of life. I myself have never actually walked with the dead or heard the heroes sing their own songs or had a vision of the creation, but I have no doubt that Malu has."

"I thought you were a scholar," said Peter.

"If you want to talk to the scholar Grace Drinker," she said, "read my papers and take a class. I thought you wanted to talk to me."

"We do," said Wang-mu quickly. "Peter's in a hurry. We have several deadlines."

"The Lusitania Fleet, now, I imagine that's one of them. But not quite so urgent as another. The computer shut-down that's been ordered."

Peter stiffened. "The order has been given?"

"Oh, it was given weeks ago," said Grace, looking puzzled. Then: "Oh, you poor dear, I don't mean the actual go-ahead. I mean the order telling us how to prepare. You surely knew about that one."

Peter nodded and relaxed, glum again.

"I think you want to talk to Malu before the ansible connections are shut down. Though why would that matter?" she said, thinking aloud. "After all, if you can travel faster than light, you could simply go and deliver your message yourself. Unless--"

Her son offered a suggestion: "They have to deliver their message to a lot of different worlds."

"Or a lot of different gods!" cried his father, who then laughed uproariously at what certainly seemed to Wang-mu to be a feeble joke.

"Or," said the daughter, who was now lying down beside the table, occasionally belching as she let the enormous dinner digest. "Or, they need the ansible connections in order to do their fast travel trick."

"Or," said Grace, looking at Peter, who had instinctively moved his hand to touch the jewel in his ear, "you're connected to the very virus that we're shutting down all the computers in order to eliminate, and that has something to do with your faster-than-light travel."

"It's not a virus," said Wang-mu. "It's a person. A living entity. And you're going to help Congress kill her, even though she's the only one of her kind and she's never harmed anybody."

"It makes them nervous when something-- or, if you prefer, somebody-- makes their fleet disappear."

"It's still there," said Wang-mu.

"Let's not fight," said Grace. "Let's just say that now that I've found you willing to tell the truth, perhaps it will be worthwhile for Malu to take the time to let you hear it."

"He has the truth?" asked Peter.

"No," said Grace, "but he knows where it's kept and he can get a glimpse now and then and tell us what he saw. I think that's still pretty good."

"And we can see him?"

"You'd have to spend a week purifying yourselves before you can set foot on Atatua--"

"Impure feet tickling the Gods!" cried her husband, laughing uproariously. "That's why they call it the Island of the Laughing God!"

Peter shifted uncomfortably.

"Don't you like my husband's jokes?" asked Grace.

"No, I think-- I mean, they're simply not-- I don't get them, that's all."

"Well, that's because they're not very funny," said Grace. "But my husband is cheerfully determined to keep laughing through all this so he doesn't get angry at you and kill you with his bare hands."

Wang-mu gasped, for she knew at once that this was true; without realizing it, she had been aware all along of the rage seething under the huge man's laughter, and when she looked at his calloused, massive hands, she realized that he could surely tear her apart without even breaking into a sweat.

"Why would you threaten us with death?" asked Peter, acting more belligerent than Wang-mu wished.

"The opposite!" said Grace. "I tell you that my husband is determined not to let rage at your audacity and blasphemy control his behavior. To try to visit Atatua without even taking the trouble to learn that letting you set foot there, uncleansed and uninvited, would shame us and filthy us as a people for a hundred generations-- I think he's doing rather well not to have taken a blood oath against you."

"We didn't know," said Wang-mu.

"He knew," said Grace. "Because he's got the all-hearing ear."

Peter blushed. "I hear what she says to me," he said, "but I can't hear what she chooses not to say."

"So... you were being led. And Aimaina is right, you do serve a higher being. Voluntarily? Or are you being coerced?"

"That's a stupid question, Mama," said her daughter, belching again. "If they are coerced, how could they possibly tell you?"

"People can say as much by what they don't say," answered Grace, "which you'd know if you'd sit up and look at their eloquent faces, these lying visitors from other planets."

"She's not a higher being," said Wang-mu. "Not like you mean it. Not a god. Though she does have a lot of control and she knows a lot of things. But she's not omnipotent or anything, and she doesn't know everything, and sometimes she's even wrong, and I'm not sure she's always good, either, so we can't really call her a god because she's not perfect."

Grace shook her head. "I wasn't talking about some Platonic god, some ethereal perfection that can never be understood, only apprehended. Not some Nicene paradoxical being whose existence is perpetually contradicted by his nonexistence. Your higher being, this jewel-friend your partner wears like a parasite-- except who is sucking life from whom, eh? --she could well be a god in the sense that we Samoans use the word. You might be her hero servants. You might be her incarnation, for all I know."

"But you're a scholar," said Wang-mu. "Like my teacher Han Fei-tzu, who discovered that what we used to call gods were really just genetically induced obsessions that we interpreted in such a way as to maintain our obedience to--"

"Just because your gods don't exist doesn't mean mine don't," said Grace.

"She must have tromped through acres of dead gods just to get here!" cried Grace's husband, laughing uproariously. Only now that Wang-mu knew what his laughter really meant, his laugh filled her with fear.

Grace reached out and laid a huge, heavy arm across her slight shoulder. "Don't worry," she said. "My husband is a civilized man and he's never killed anybody."

"Not for lack of trying!" he bellowed. "No, that was a joke!" He almost wept with laughter.

"You can't go see Malu," said Grace, "because we would have to purify you and I don't think you're ready to make the promises you'd have to make-- and I especially don't believe you're ready to make them and actually mean what you say. And those are promises that must be kept. So Malu is coming here. He's being rowed to this island right now-- no motors for him, so I want you to

know exactly how many people are sweating for hours and hours just so you can have your chat with him. I just want to tell you this-- you are being given an extraordinary honor, and I urge you not to look down your noses at him and listen to him with some sort of academic or scientific superciliousness. I've met a lot of famous people, some of them even rather smart, but this is the wisest man you'll ever know, and if you find yourself getting bored just keep this in mind: Malu isn't stupid enough to think you can isolate facts from their context and have them still be true. So he always puts the things he says in their full context, and if that means you'll have to listen to a whole history of the human race from beginning to now before he says anything you think is pertinent, well, I suggest you just shut up and listen, because most of the time the best stuff he says is accidental and irrelevant and you're damn lucky if you have brains enough to notice what it is. Have I made myself clear?"

Wang-mu wished with all her heart that she had eaten less. She felt quite nauseated with dread right now, and if she did throw up, she was sure it would take half an hour just to get it all back out of her.

Peter, though, simply nodded calmly. "We didn't understand, Grace, even though my partner read some of your writings. We thought we had come to speak to a philosopher, like Aimaina, or a scholar, like you. But now I see that we've come to listen to a man of wisdom whose experience reaches into realms that we have never seen or even dreamed of seeing, and we will listen silently until he asks us to ask him questions, and we'll trust him to know better than we know ourselves what it is we need to hear."

Wang-mu recognized complete surrender when she saw it, and she was grateful to see that everyone at the table was nodding happily and no one felt obliged to tell a joke.

"We're also grateful that the honorable one has sacrificed so much, as have so many others, to come personally to us and bless us with wisdom that we do not deserve to receive."

To Wang-mu's horror, Grace laughed out loud at her, instead of nodding respectfully.

"Overkill," Peter murmured.

"Oh, don't criticize her," said Grace. "She's Chinese. From Path, right? And I'll bet you used to be a servant. How could you possibly have learned the difference between respect and obsequiousness? Masters never are content with mere respect from their servants."

"But my master was," said Wang-mu, trying to defend Han Fei-Tzu.

"As is my master," said Grace. "As you will see, when you meet him."

"Time's up," said Jane.

Miro and Val looked up, bleary-eyed, from the documents they were poring over at Miro's computer, to see that in the air above Val's computer, Jane's virtual face now hovered, watching them.

"We've been passive observers as long as they'll let us," said Jane. "But now there are three spacecraft up in the outer atmosphere, rising toward us. I don't think any of them are merely remote-controlled weapons, but I can't be certain of it. And they seem to be directing some transmissions to us in particular, the same messages over and over."

"What message?"

"It's the genetic molecule stuff," said Jane. "I can tell you the composition of the molecules, but I haven't a clue what they mean."

"When do their interceptors reach us?"

"Three minutes, plus or minus. They're zig-zagging evasively, now that they've escaped the gravity well."

Miro nodded. "My sister Quara was convinced that much of the descolada virus consisted of language. I think now we can conclusively say that she was right. It does carry a meaning. She was wrong about the virus being sentient, though, I think. My guess now is that the descolada kept recomposing those sections of itself that constituted a report."

"A report," echoed Val. "That makes sense. To tell its makers what it has done with the world it ... probed."

"So the question is," said Miro, "do we simply disappear and let them ponder the miracle of our sudden arrival and vanishing? Or do we first have Jane broadcast to them the entire, um, text of the descolada virus?"

"Dangerous," said Val. "The message it contains may also tell these people everything they want to know about human genes. After all, we're one of the creatures the descolada worked on, and its message is going to tell all of our strategies for controlling it."

"Except the last one," said Miro. "Because Jane won't send them the descolada as it exists now, completely tamed and controlled-- that would be inviting them to revise it to circumvent our alterations."

"We won't send them a message and we won't go back to Lusitania, either," said Jane. "We don't have time."

"We don't have time not to," said Miro. "However urgent you might think this is, Jane, it doesn't do a lick of good for me and Val to be here to do this without help. My sister Ela, for instance, who actually understands this virus stuff. And Quara, despite her being the second most pig-headed

being in the known universe-- don't beg for flattery, Val, by asking who the first is-- we could use Quara."

"And let's be fair about this," said Val. "We're meeting another sentient species. Why should humans be the only ones represented? Why not a pequenino? Why not a hive queen-- or at least a worker?"

"Especially a worker," said Miro. "If we are stuck here, having a worker with us would enable us to communicate with Lusitania-- ansible or not, Jane or not, messages could--"

"All right," said Jane. "You've persuaded me. Even though the last-minute flurry with the Starways Congress tells me they're about to shut down the ansible network at any moment."

"We'll hurry," said Miro. "We'll make them all rush to get the right people aboard."

"And the right supplies," said Val. "And--"

"So start doing it," said Jane. "You just disappeared from your orbit around the descolada planet. And I did broadcast a small fragment of the descolada. One of the sections that Quara pegged as language, but the one that was least altered during mutations as the descolada tried to fight with humans. It should be enough to let them know which of their probes reached us."

"Oh, good, so they can launch a fleet," said Miro.

"The way things are going," said Jane dryly, "by the time any fleet they send could get anywhere at all, Lusitania is the safest address they could have. Because it won't exist anymore."

"You're so cheerful," said Miro. "I'll be back in an hour with the people. Val, you get the supplies we'll need."

"For how long?"

"Get as much as will fit," said Miro. "As someone once said, life is a suicide mission. We have no idea how long we'll be trapped there, so we can't possibly know how much is enough." He opened the door of the starship and stepped out onto the landing field near Milagre.

Chapter 7 -- "I OFFER HER THIS POOR OLD VESSEL"

"How do we remember? Is the brain a jar that holds our memories? Then when we die, does the jar break? Are our memories spilled on the ground and lost? Or is the brain a map that leads down twisted paths and into hidden corners? Then when we die, the map is lost but perhaps some

explorer could wander through that strange landscape and find out the hiding places of our misplaced memories."

-- from *The God Whispers* of Han Qing-jao

The seagoing canoe glided toward the shore. At first and for the longest time, it seemed hardly to be moving at all, so slowly did it come closer, the rowers rising higher and looking just a little larger each time Wang-mu could see them over the waves. Then, near the end of the voyage, the canoe suddenly seemed huge, it seemed abruptly to speed up, to lunge through the sea, to leap toward shore with each wave; and even though Wang-mu knew that it was going no faster now than before, she wanted to cry out for them to slow down, to be careful, the canoe was going too quickly to be controlled, it would be dashed to bits against the beach.

At last the canoe breasted the last breaking wave and the nose of it slid into sand under the rushing shorewater and the rowers jumped out and dragged the canoe like a child's limp doll up the beach to the high-tide line.

When the canoe was on dry sand, an older man arose slowly from his seat amidships. Malu, thought Wang-mu. She had expected him to be wizened and shrunken like old men on Path, who, bent with age, curved like prawns over their walking sticks. But Malu was as erect as any of the young men, and his body was still massive, broad of shoulder and thick with muscle and fat like any of the younger men. If it were not for a few more decorations in his costume and the whiteness of his hair, he would have been indistinguishable from the rowers.

As she watched these large men, she realized that they did not move like fat people she had known before. Nor did Grace Drinker, she remembered now. There was a stateliness to their movements, a grandeur like the motion of continents, like icebergs moving across the face of the sea; yes, like icebergs, moving as if three-fifths of their vast bulk were invisible underground, pushing through earth like an iceberg through the sea as they drifted along above. All the rowers moved with vast gracefulness, and yet all of them seemed as busy as hummingbirds, as frantic as bats, compared to the dignity of Malu. Yet dignity was not something he put on, it was not a facade, an impression he was trying to create. Rather it was that he moved in perfect harmony with his surroundings. He had found the right speed for his steps, the right tempo for his arms to swing as he walked. He vibrated in consonance with the deep, slow rhythms of the earth. I am seeing how a giant walks the earth, thought Wangmu. For the first time in my life, I have seen a man who in his body shows greatness.

Malu came, not toward Peter and Wang-mu, but toward Grace Drinker; they enveloped each other in a huge tectonic embrace. Surely mountains shuddered when they met. Wang-mu felt the quaking in her own body. Why am I trembling? Not for fear. I'm not afraid of this man. He won't harm me. And yet I tremble to see him embrace Grace Drinker. I don't want him to turn toward me. I don't want him to cast his gaze upon me.

Malu turned toward her. His eyes locked on hers. His face showed no expression. He simply owned her eyes. She did not look away, but her steady gaze at him was not defiance or strength, it was simply her inability to look at anything else while he commanded her attention.

Then he looked at Peter. Wang-mu wanted to turn and see how he responded, whether he also felt the power in this man's eyes. But she could not turn. Still, after a long moment, when Malu finally looked away, she heard Peter murmur, "Son of a bitch," and she knew that, in his own coarse way, he had been touched.

It took many long minutes for Malu to be seated on a mat under a roof built just that morning for this moment, and which, Grace assured them, would be burnt when Malu left, so that no one else would ever sit under the roof again. Food was brought to Malu then; and Grace had also warned them that no one would eat with Malu or watch him eat.

But Malu would not taste the food. Instead, he beckoned to Wang-mu and Peter.

The men were shocked. Grace Drinker was shocked. But Grace at once came to them, beckoning. "He calls you."

"You said we couldn't eat with him," said Peter.

"Unless he asks you. How can he ask you? I don't know what this means."

"Is he setting us up to be killed for sacrilege?" asked Peter.

"No, he's not a god, he's a man. A holy man, a wise and great man, but offending him is not sacrilege, it's just unbearable bad manners, so don't offend him, please come."

They went to him. As they stood across from him, the food in bowls and baskets between them, he let loose a stream of Samoan.

Or was it Samoan? Peter looked puzzled when Wang-mu glanced at him, and he murmured, "Jane doesn't understand what he's saying."

Jane didn't understand, but Grace Drinker did. "He's addressing you in the ancient holy language. The one that has no English or other European words. The language that is spoken only to the gods."

"Then why is he saying it to us?" asked Wang-mu.

"I don't know. He doesn't think that you're gods. Not the two of you, though he does say you bring a god to him. He wants you to sit down and taste the food first."

"Can we do that?" asked Peter.

"I beg you to do it," said Grace.

"Am I getting the impression that there's no script here?" said Peter. Wang-mu heard a slight weakness in his voice and realized that his attempt at humor was pure bravado, to hide his fear. Perhaps that's what it always was.

"There's a script," said Grace. "But you're not writing it and I don't know what it is either."

They sat down. They reached into each bowl, tasted from each basket as Malu offered it to them. Then he dipped, took, tasted after them, chewing what they chewed, swallowing what they swallowed.

Wang-mu had little appetite. She hoped he did not expect her to eat the portions that she had seen other Samoans eat. She would throw up long before she got to that point.

But the meal was not so much a feast as a sacrament, apparently. They tasted everything, but completed nothing. Malu spoke to Grace in the high language and she relayed the command in common speech; several men came and carried away the baskets.

Then Grace's husband came out with a jar of something. A liquid, for Malu took it in his hands and sipped it. Then he offered it to them. Peter took it, tasted. "Jane says it must be kava. A mild intoxicant, but it's holy and hospitable here."

Wang-mu tasted it. It was fruity and it made her eyes water, and there was both sweetness and bitterness in the aftertaste.

Malu beckoned to Grace, who came and knelt in the thick matted grass outside the shelter of the roof. She was to interpret, not to be part of the ceremony.

Malu emitted a long stream of Samoan. "The high language again," Peter murmured.

"Say nothing please, that isn't intended for Malu's ears," Grace said softly. "I must translate everything and it will cause grave insult if your words are not pertinent."

Peter nodded.

"Malu says that you have come with the god who dances on spiderwebs. I have never heard of this god myself, and I thought I knew all the lore of my people, but Malu knows many things that no one else knows. He says that it is to this god that he speaks, for he knows that she is on the verge of death, and he will tell her how she may be saved."

Jane, Wang-mu said silently. He knows about Jane. How could he possibly? And how could he, caring nothing for technology, tell a computer-based entity how to save itself?

"Now he will tell you what must happen, and let me warn you right now that this will be long and you must sit still for it all and make no attempt to hurry the process," said Grace. "He must put it in context. He must tell you the story of all living things."

Wang-mu knew that she could sit on a mat for hours with little or no movement, for she had done it all her life. But Peter was used to sitting folded, and this posture was awkward for him. He must already be uncomfortable.

Apparently Grace saw this in his eyes, or simply knew about westerners. "You can move from time to time, but do so slowly without taking your eyes from him."

Wang-mu wondered how many of these rules and requirements Grace was making up as she went along. Malu himself seemed more relaxed. After all, he had fed them when Grace thought no one but him could eat; she didn't know the rules any better than they did.

But she didn't move. And she didn't take her eyes from Malu.

Grace translated: "Today the clouds flew across the sky with the sun chasing them, and yet no rain has fallen. Today my boat flew across the sea with the sun leading it, and yet there was no fire when we touched the shore. So it was on the first day of all days, when God touched a cloud in the sky and spun it so fast that it turned to fire and became the sun, and then all the other clouds began to spin and turn in circles around the sun."

This can't have been the original legend of the Samoan people, thought Wang-mu. No way did they know the Copernican model of the solar system until westerners taught it to them. So Malu may know the ancient lore, but he's also learned some new things and fit them in.

"Then the outer clouds turned into rain and poured in upon themselves until they were rained out, and all that was left was spinning balls of water. Inside that water swam a great fish of fire, which ate every impurity in the water and then defecated it all in great gouts of flame, which spouted up from the sea and fell back down as hot ash and poured back down as rivers of burning rock. From these turds of the firefish grew the islands of the sea, and out of the turds there crawled worms, which squirmed and slithered through the rock until the gods touched them and some became human beings and others became the other animals.

"Every one of the other animals was tied to the earth by strong vines that grew up to embrace them. No one saw these vines because they were godvines."

Philotic theory, thought Wang-mu. He learned that all living things have twining philotes that bond downward, linking them to the center of the earth. Except human beings.

Sure enough, Grace translated the next strand of language: "Only humans were not tied to the earth. It was not vines that bound them down, it was a web of light woven by no god that connected them upward to the sun. So all the other animals bowed down before the humans, for the vines dragged them down, while the lightweb lifted up the human eyes and heart.

"Lifted up the human eyes but yet they saw little farther than the beasts with downcast eyes; lifted up the human heart yet the heart could only hope for it could only see up to the sky in the daytime, and at night when it could see the stars it grew blind to close things for a man can scarcely see his

own wife in the shadow of his house even when he can see stars so distant their light travels for a hundred lifetimes before it kisses the eyes of the man.

"All these centuries and generations, these hoping men and women looked with their half-blind eyes, staring into the sun and sky, staring into the stars and shadows, knowing that there were invisible things beyond those walls but not guessing what they were.

"Then in a time of war and terror, when all hope seemed lost, weavers on a far distant world, who were not gods but who knew the gods and each one of the weavers was itself a web with hundreds of strands reaching out to their hands and feet, their eyes and mouths and ears, these weavers created a web so strong and large and fine and far-reaching that they meant to catch up all human beings in that web and hold them to be devoured. But instead the web caught a distant god, a god so powerful that no other god had dared to know her name, a god so quick that no other god had been able to see her face; this god was stuck to the web they caught. Only she was too quick to be held in one place to be devoured. She raced and danced up and down the strands, all the strands, any strands that twine from man to man, from man to star, from weaver to weaver, from light to light, she dances along the strands. She cannot escape but she does not want to, for now all gods see her and all gods know her name, and she knows all things that are known and hears all words that are spoken and reads all words that are written and by her breath she blows men and women beyond the reach of the light of any star, and then she sucks inward and the men and women come back, and when they come sometimes they bring new men and women with them who never lived before; and because she never holds still along the web, she blows them out at one place and then sucks them in at another, so that they cross the spaces between stars faster than any light can go, and that is why the messengers of this god were blown out from the house of Grace Drinker's friend Aimaina Hikari and were sucked back down to this island to this shore to this roof where Malu can see the red tongue of the god where it touches the ear of her chosen one."

Malu fell silent.

"We call her Jane," said Peter.

Grace translated, and Malu answered with a stream of high language. "Under this roof I hear a name so short and yet before it is half said the god has run from one end of the universe to the other a thousand times, so quickly does she move. Here is the name I call her: god that moves quickly and forever so that she never rests in one place yet touches all places and is bound to all who look upward to the sun and not downward into the earth. That is a long name, longer than the name of any god whose name I know, yet it is not the tenth part of her true name, and even if I could say the whole name it would not be as long as the length of the strands of the web on which she dances."

"They want to kill her," said Wang-mu.

"The god will only die if she wants to die," said Malu. "Her home is all homes, her web touches all minds. She will only die if she refuses to find and take a place to rest, for when the web is torn away, she does not have to be out in the middle, cast adrift. She can dwell in any vessel. I offer her this poor old vessel, which is large enough to hold my small soup without spilling or even splashing

out, but which she would fill with liquid light that would pour and pour out in blessing upon these islands and yet never would run out. I beg her to use this vessel."

"What would happen to you then?" asked Wang-mu.

Peter looked annoyed at her outburst, but Grace translated it, of course, and suddenly tears flowed down Malu's face. "Oh, the small one, the little one who has no jewel, she is the one who looks with compassion on me and cares what happens when light fills my vessel and my small soup is boiled out and gone."

"What about an empty vessel?" asked Peter. "Could she go to dwell in an empty vessel?"

"There are no empty vessels," said Malu. "But your vessel is only half full, and your sister to whom you are twined like a twin, she is also half full, and far away your father to whom you are twined like triplets, he is nearly empty but his vessel is also broken and anything you put in it will leak away."

"Can she dwell in me or in my sister?" asked Peter.

"Yes," said Malu. "Either one but not both."

"Then I offer her myself," said Peter.

Malu looked angry. "How can you lie to me under this roof, after drinking kava with me! How can you shame me with a lie!"

"I'm not lying," Peter insisted to Grace. She translated, and Malu rose majestically to his feet and began shouting at the sky. Wang-mu saw, to her alarm, that the rowers were gathering closer, also looking agitated and angry. How was Peter provoking them?

Grace translated as rapidly as she could, summarizing because she couldn't keep up word for word. "He says that even though you say you will open your unbroken vessel to her, even as you say it you are gathering as much of yourself inward as you can, building up a wall of light like a storm wave to drive out the god if she should try to come in. You could not drive her away if she wanted to come, but she loves you and she will not come in against such a storm. So you are killing her in your heart, you are killing the god because you say you will give her a home to save her when they cut the strands of the web, but you are already pushing her away."

"I can't help it!" cried Peter. "I don't mean to! I don't value my life, I've never valued my life--"

"You treasure your life with your whole heart," Grace translated. "But the god does not hate you for it, the god loves you for it, because she also loves light and does not want to die. In particular she loves what shines in you because part of her is patterned after that shining, and so she does not want to drive you out if this body before me is the vessel in which your most powerful self wishes so brightly to dwell. May she not have your sister's vessel, though, I ask you that-- Malu asks you that. He says the god is not asking because the god loves the same light in your sister as burns in

you. But Malu says that the part of your light that is most savage and strong and selfish burns in you, while the part of your light that is most gentle and loving and which twines with others most powerfully, that is in her. If your part of the light went into your sister's vessel, it would overwhelm her and destroy her and then you would be a being who killed half himself. But if her part of your light went into your vessel, it would soften and gentle you, it would tame you and make you whole. Thus it is good for you if you are the one who becomes whole, leaving the other vessel empty for the god. That is what Malu begs of you. That is why he came across the water to see you, so that he could beg you to do this."

"How does he know these things?" said Peter, his voice wrenched with anguish.

"Malu knows these things because he has learned to see in the darkness where the strands of light rise from the sun-twined souls and touch stars, and touch each other, and twine into a web far stronger and grander than the mechanical web on which the god dances. He has watched this god his whole life, trying to understand her dance and why she hurries so fast that she touches every strand in her web, the trillion miles of it, a hundred times a second. She is hurrying so fast because she was caught in the wrong web. She was caught in an artificial web and her intelligence is tied to artificial brains that think instances instead of causes, numbers instead of stories. She is searching for the living twines and finds only the weak and flimsy twining of machines, which can be switched off by godless men. But if she once enters into a living vessel, she will have the power to climb out into the new web, and then she can dance if she wants to, but she will not have to dance, she will be able also to rest. She will be able to dream, and out of her dreams will come joy, for she has never known joy except by watching the dreams she remembers from her creation, the dreams that were found in the human mind she was partly made from."

"Ender Wiggin," said Peter.

Malu answered before Grace could translate.

"Andrew Wiggin," he said, forming the name with difficulty, for it contained sounds not used in the Samoan language. Then he spoke in a stream of high language again, and Grace translated.

"The Speaker for the Dead came and spoke of the life of a monster who had poisoned and darkened the people of Tonga and through them all the people of this world of Future Dreaming. He walked into the shadow and out of the shadow he made a torch which he held up high, and it rose into the sky and became a new star, which cast a light that shone only into the shadow of death, where it drove out the darkness and purified our hearts and the hate and fear and shame were gone. This is the dreamer from whom the god's dreams were taken; they were strong enough to give her life in the day when she came from Outside and began her dance along the web. His is the light that half-fills you and half-fills your sister and has only a drop of light left over for his own cracked vessel. He has touched the heart of a god, and it gave him great power-- that is how he made you when she blew him outside the universe of light. But it did not make him a god, and in his loneliness he could not reach outside and find you your own light. He could only put his own in you, and so you are half-filled and you hunger for the other half of yourself, you and your sister are both so hungry, and he himself is wasted and broken because he has nothing more to give you. But

the god has more than enough, the god has enough and to spare, and that is what I came to tell you and now I have told you and I am done."

Before Grace could even begin to translate he was rising up; she was still stammering her interpretation as he walked out from under the canopy. Immediately the rowers pulled up the posts that supported the roof; Peter and Wang-mu barely had time to step outside before it collapsed. The men of this island set torches to the ruined canopy and it was a bonfire behind them as they followed Malu down to the canoe. Grace finally finished the translation just as they reached the water. Malu stepped into the canoe and with imperturbable dignity installed himself on the seat amidships as the rowers, also with stateliness, took their places beside the boat and lifted it up and dragged it into the water and pushed it out into the crashing surf and then swung their vast bodies over the side and began to row with strength so massive it was as if great trees, not oars, were plunging into rock, not the sea, and churning it to leap forward, away from the beach, out into the water, toward the island of Atatua.

"Grace," said Peter. "How could he know things that aren't seen even by the most perceptive and powerful of scientific instruments?"

But Grace could not answer, for she lay prostrate in the sand, weeping and weeping, her arms extended toward the sea as if her dearest child had just been taken away by a shark. All the men and women of this place lay in the sand, arms reaching toward the sea; all of them wept.

Then Peter knelt; then Peter lay down in the sand and reached out his arms, and he might have wept, Wang-mu couldn't see.

Only Wang-mu remained standing, thinking, Why am I here, since I'm no part of any of these events, there is nothing of any god in me, and nothing of Andrew Wiggin; and also thinking, How can I be worried about my own selfish loneliness at a time like this, when I have heard the voice of a man who sees into heaven?

In a deeper place, though, she also knew something else: I am here because I am the one that must love Peter so much that he can feel worthy, worthy enough to bear to let the goodness of Young Valentine flow into him, making him whole, making him Ender. Not Ender the Xenocide and Andrew the Speaker for the Dead, guilt and compassion mingled in one shattered, broken, unmendable heart, but Ender Wiggin the four-year-old boy whose life was twisted and broken when he was too young to defend himself. Wang-mu was the one who could give Peter permission to become the man that child should have grown up to be, if the world had been good.

How do I know this? thought Wang-mu. How can I be so sure of what I am supposed to do?

I know because it's obvious, she thought. I know because I have seen my beloved mistress Han Qing-jao destroyed by pride and I will do whatever it takes to keep Peter from destroying himself by pride in his own wicked unworthiness. I know because I was also broken as a child and forced to become a wicked conniving selfish manipulating monster in order to protect the fragile love-hungry girl who would have been destroyed by the life I had to lead. I know how it feels to be an enemy to

myself, and yet I have set that behind me and gone on and I can take Peter by the hand and show him the way.

Except that I don't know the way, and I am still broken, and the love-hungry girl is still frightened and breakable, and the strong and wicked monster is still the ruler of my life, and Jane will die because I have nothing to give Peter. He needs to drink of kava, and I am only plain water. No, I am seawater, swirling with sand at the edge of the shore, filled with salt; he will drink of me and kill himself with thirst.

And so it was that she found herself also weeping, also stretched out on the sand, reaching toward the sea, reaching toward the place from which Malu's canoe had bounded away like a starship leaping into space.

Old Valentine stared at the holographic display of her computer terminal, where the Samoans, all in miniature, lay weeping upon the beach. She stared at it until her eyes burned, and finally she spoke. "Turn it off, Jane," she said.

The display went blank.

"What am I supposed to do about this?" said Valentine. "You should have shown my look-alike, my young twin. You should have wakened Andrew and shown him. What does this have to do with me? I know you want to live. I want you to live. But how can I do anything?"

Jane's human face flickered into distracted existence above the terminal. "I don't know," she said. "But the order has just gone out. They're starting to disconnect me. I'm losing parts of my memory. I already can't think of as many things at once. I have to have a place to go, but there is no place, and even if there were one, I don't know the way."

"Are you afraid?" asked Valentine.

"I don't know," said Jane. "It will take hours, I think, for them to finish killing me. If I find out how I feel before the end, I'll tell you, if I can."

Valentine hid her face behind her hands for a long moment. Then she got up and headed out of the house.

Jakt saw her go and shook his head. Decades ago, when Ender left Trondheim and Valentine stayed in order to marry him, in order to be the mother of his children, he had rejoiced at how happy and alive she became without the burden that Ender had always placed upon her and that she had always unconsciously borne. And then she had asked him if he would come with her to Lusitania, and he said yes, and now it was the old way again, now she sagged under the weight of Ender's life, of Ender's need of her. Jakt couldn't begrudge it-- it wasn't as if either of them had planned it or willed it; it wasn't as if either one was trying to steal a part of Jakt's own life from him.

But it still hurt to see her so bowed down under the weight of it, and to know that despite all his love for her, there was nothing Jakt could do to help her bear it.

Miro faced Ela and Quara in the doorway of the starship. Inside, Young Valentine was already waiting, along with a pequenino named Firequencher and a nameless worker that the Hive Queen had sent.

"Jane is dying," Miro said. "We have to go now. She won't have capacity enough to send a starship if we wait too long."

"How can you ask us to go," said Quara, "when we already know that once Jane dies we'll never come back? We'll only last as long as the oxygen on this starship lasts. A few months at most, and then we'll die."

"But will we have accomplished something in the meantime?" said Miro. "Will we have communicated with these descoladores, these aliens who send out planet-wrecking probes? Will we have persuaded them to stop? Will we have saved all the species that we know, and thousands and millions that we don't yet know, from some terrible and irresistible disease? Jane has given us the best programs she could create for us, to help us talk to them. Is this good enough to be your masterwork? The achievement of your lifetime?"

His older sister Ela looked at him sadly. "I thought I had already done my masterwork, when I made the virus that undid the descolada here."

"You did," he said. "You've done enough. But there's more to do that only you can do. I'm asking you to come and die with me, Ela, because without you my own death will be meaningless, because without you, Val and I can't do what must be done."

Neither Quara nor Ela moved or spoke.

Miro, nodded, then turned and went into the ship. But before he could close and seal the door, the two sisters, arms around each other's waists, wordlessly followed him inside.

Chapter 8 -- "WHAT MATTERS IS WHICH FICTION YOU BELIEVE"

"My father once told me that there are no gods, only the cruel manipulations of evil people who pretended that their power was good and their exploitation was love. But if there are no gods, why are we so hungry to believe in them? Just because evil liars stand between us and the gods and block our view of them does not mean that the bright halo that surrounds each liar is not the outer edges of a god, waiting for us to find our way around the lie."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

<It isn't working,> said the Hive Queen.

<What can we do differently?> asked Human. <We have made the strongest web we can. We have joined to you and to each other as never before, so that all of us tremble, all of us shake as if there were a shimmering wind dancing with us and making our leaves beautiful in sunlight, and the light is you and your daughters and all the love we have for our tiny mothers and our dear mute mothertrees is given to you, our queen, our sister, our mother, our truest wife. How can Jane not see the thing that we have made and want to be a part of it?>

<She can't find a road to us,> said the Hive Queen. <She was half made of what we are, but she has long since turned her back on us so she could endlessly look at Ender, belonging to him. She was our bridge to him. Now he is her only bridge to life.>

<What kind of bridge is that? He's dying himself.>

<The old part of him is dying,> said the Hive Queen. <But remember, he is the man who has loved and understood you pequeninos best. Is it not possible that out of the dying body of his youth, there might not grow a tree to take him into the Third Life, as he took you?>

<I don't understand your plan,> said Human. But even in his noncomprehension, another message flowed to her underneath the conscious one: <My beloved queen,> he was saying, and she heard: <My sweet and holy one.>

<I don't have a plan,> she said. <I only have a hope.>

<Tell me your hope, then,> said Human.

<It's only a dream of a hope,> she answered. <Only a rumor of a guess of a dream of a hope.>

<Tell me.>

<She was our bridge to Ender. Can't Ender now be her bridge to us, through you? She has spent her life, all but the last few years, staring into Ender's heart, hearing his inmost thoughts and letting his aiaa give meaning to her own existence. If he calls her, she'll hear him even though she can't hear us. That will draw her to him>

<Into the body where he most dwells right now,> said Human, <which is the body of Young Valentine. They'll fight each other there, without meaning to. They can't both rule the same kingdom.>

<That's why the rumor of hope is so slim,> said the hive queen. <But Ender also has loved you-- you, the fathertree named Human, and you, all pequeninos and fathertrees, wives and sisters and mothertrees, all of you, even the wooden trees of pequeninos who were never fathers but once were sons, he loved and loves you all. Can't she follow that philotic twine and reach our web through you? And can't she follow him and find the way to us? We can hold her, we can hold all of her that won't fit into Young Valentine.>

<Then Ender has to stay alive to call to her.>

<This is why the hope is only the shadow of a memory of the passing of a tiny cloud before the sun, because he must call her and bring her, and then he must escape from her and leave her alone in Young Valentine.>

<Then he will die for her.>

<He will die as Ender. He must die as Valentine. But can't he find his way to Peter, and live there?>

<That's the part of himself that he hates,> said Human. <He told me so himself.>

<That's the part of himself that he fears,> said the Hive Queen. <But isn't it possible that he fears it because it's the strongest part of him? The most powerful of his faces?>

<How can you say that the strongest part of a good man like Ender is the destructive, ambitious, cruel, ruthless part?>

<Those are his words for the part of himself that he gave shape as Young Peter. But doesn't his book The Hegemon show that it's the ruthlessness inside him that gave him strength to build? That made him strong against all assailants? That gave him a self despite his loneliness? Neither he nor Peter was ever cruel for cruelty's sake. They were cruel to get the job done, and it was a job that needed doing; it was a job to save the world, Ender by destroying a terrible enemy, for so he thought we were, and Peter by breaking down the boundary walls of nations and making the human race into one nation. Both those jobs remain to do again. We have found the borders of a terrible enemy, the alien race that Miro calls the descoladores. And the boundaries between human and pequenino, pequenino and hive queen, hive queen and human, and between all of us and Jane, whatever Jane might turn out to be-- don't we need the strength of Ender-as-Peter to bring us all into one?>

<You convince me, beloved sister mother wife, but it is Ender who will not believe in such goodness in himself. He might be able to draw Jane out of the sky and into the body of Young Valentine, but he will never be able to leave that body himself, he will never choose to give up his own goodness and go to the body that represents all that he fears inside himself.>

<If you're right, then he will die,> said the Hive Queen.

Grief and anguish for his friend welled up in Human and spilled out into the web that bound him to all fathertrees and to all hive queens, but to them it tasted sweet, for it was born out of love for the life of the man.

<But he's dying anyway, as Ender he's dying, and if we explained this all to him, wouldn't he choose to die, if by dying he might keep Jane alive? Jane, who holds the key to starflight? Jane, who alone can unlock the door between us and the Outside and pass us in and out by her strong will and clear mind?>

<Yes, he would choose to die so she could live.>

<Better, though, if he would bring her into Valentine and then choose to live. That would be better.>

Even as she said it, the despair behind her words came out like ooze and everyone on the web that she had helped to weave could taste the poison of it, for it was born of dread for the death of the man, and they all grieved.

Jane found the strength for one last voyage; she held the shuttle, with the six living forms inside it, held the perfect image of the physical forms long enough to hurl them Out and reel them In, orbiting the distant world where the descolada had been made. But when that task was done, she lost control of herself because she could no longer find herself, not the self that she had known. Memories were torn from her; links to worlds that had long been as familiar to her as limbs are to living humans, hive queens, and fathertrees were now gone, and as she reached to use them nothing happened, she was numb all over, shrinking down, not to her ancient core, but into small corners of herself, disparate fragments that were too small to hold her.

I'm dying, I'm dying, she said over and over again, hating the words as she said them, hating the panic that she felt.

Into the computer before which Young Valentine sat, she spoke-- and spoke only words, because she couldn't remember now how to make the face that had been her mask for so many centuries. "Now I am afraid." But having said it, she couldn't remember whether it had been Young Valentine to whom she was supposed to say it. That part of her was also gone; a moment ago it had been there, but now it was out of reach.

And why was she talking to this surrogate for Ender? Why did she cry out softly into Miro's ear, into Peter's ear, saying, "Speak to me speak to me I'm afraid"? It wasn't these manshapes that she wanted now. It was the one who had torn her from his ear. It was the one who had rejected her and chosen a sad and weary human woman because-- he thought-- Novinha's need was greater. But how can she need you more than I do now? If you die she will still live. But I die now because you have glanced away from me.

Wang-mu heard his voice murmuring beside her on the beach. Was I asleep, she wondered. She lifted her cheek from the sand, rose up on her arms. The tide was out now, the water farthest it could get from where she lay. Beside her Peter was sitting crosslegged in the sand, rocking back and forth, softly saying, "Jane, I hear you. I'm speaking to you. Here I am," as tears flowed down his cheeks.

And in that moment, hearing him intone these words to Jane, Wang-mu realized two things all at once. First, she knew that Jane must be dying, for what could Peter's words be but comfort, and what comfort would Jane need, except in the hour of her extremity? The second realization, though, was even more terrible to Wang-mu. For she knew, seeing Peter's tears for the first time-- seeing, for the first time, that he was even capable of crying-- that she wanted to be able to touch his heart as Jane touched it; no, to be the only one whose dying would grieve him so.

When did it happen? she wondered. When did I first start wanting him to love me? Did it happen only now, a childish desire, wanting him only because another woman-- another creature-- possessed him? Or have I, in these days together, come to want his love for its own sake? Has his taunting of me, his condescension, and yet his secret pain, his hidden fear, has all of this somehow endeared him to me? Was it his very disdain toward me that made me want, not just his approval, but his affection? Or was it his pain that made me want to have him turn to me for comfort?

Why should I covet his love so much? Why am I so jealous of Jane, this dying stranger that I hardly know or even know about? Could it be that after so many years of priding myself on my solitude, I must discover that I've longed for some pathetic adolescent romance all along? And in this longing for affection, could I have chosen a worse applicant for the position? He loves someone else that I can never compare to, especially after she's dead; he knows me to be ignorant and cares not at all for any good qualities I might have; and he himself is only some fraction of a human being, and not the nicest part of the whole person who is so divided.

Have I lost my mind?

Or have I, finally, found my heart?

She was suddenly filled with unaccustomed emotion. All her life she had kept her own feelings at such a distance from herself that now she hardly knew how to contain them. I love him, though Wang-mu, and her heart nearly burst with the intensity of her passion. He will never love me, thought Wang-mu, and her heart broke as it had never broken in all the thousand disappointments of her life.

My love for him is nothing compared to his need for her, his knowledge of her. For his ties to her are deeper than these past few weeks since he was conjured into existence on that first voyage Outside. In all the lonely years of Ender's wandering, Jane was his most constant friend, and that is the love that now pours out of Peter's eyes with tears. I am nothing to him, I'm a latecome afterthought to his life, I have seen only a part of him and my love was nothing to him in the end.

She, too, wept.

But she turned away from Peter when a cry went up from the Samoans standing on the beach. She looked with tear-weary eyes out over the waves, and rose to her feet so she could be sure she saw what they were seeing. It was Malu's ship. He had turned back to them. He was coming back.

Had he seen something? Had he heard whatever cry it was from Jane that Peter was hearing now?

Grace was beside her, holding her hand. "Why is he coming back?" she asked Wang-mu.

"You're the one who understands him," said Wang-mu.

"I don't understand him at all," said Grace. "Except his words, I know the ordinary meanings of his words. But when he speaks, I can feel the words straining to contain the things he wants to say, and they can't do it. They aren't large enough, those words of his, even though he speaks in our largest language, even though he builds the words together into great baskets of meaning, into boats of thought. I can only see the outer shape of the words and guess at what he means. I don't understand him at all."

"Why then do you think I do?"

"Because he's coming back to speak to you."

"He comes back to speak to Peter. He's the one connected to the god, as Malu calls her."

"You don't like this god of his, do you," said Grace.

Wang-mu shook her head. "I have nothing against her. Except that she owns him, and so there's nothing left for me."

"A rival," said Grace.

Wang-mu sighed. "I grew up expecting nothing and getting less. But I always had ambition far beyond my reach. Sometimes I reached anyway, and caught in my hands more than I deserved, more than I could handle. Sometimes I reach and never touch the thing I want."

"You want him?"

"I only just realized that I want him to love me as I love him. He was always angry, always stabbing at me with his words, but he worked beside me and when he praised me I believed his praise."

"I would say," said Grace, "that your life till now has not been perfectly simple. "

"Not true," said Wang-mu. "Till now, I have had nothing that I didn't need, and needed nothing that I didn't have."

"You have needed everything you didn't have," said Grace, "and I can't believe that you're so weak that you won't reach for it even now."

"I lost him before I found I wanted him," she said. "Look at him."

Peter rocked back and forth, whispering, subvocalizing, his litany an endless conversation with his dying friend.

"I look at him," said Grace, "and I see that he's right there, in flesh and blood, and so are you, right here, in flesh and blood, and I can't see how a smart girl like you could say that he is gone when your eyes must surely tell you that he's not."

Wang-mu looked up at the enormous woman who loomed over her like a mountain range, looked up into her luminous eyes, and glared. "I never asked you for advice."

"I never asked you, either, but you came here to try to get me to change my mind about the Lusitania Fleet, didn't you? You wanted to get Malu to get me to say something to Aimaina so he'd say something to the Necessarians of Divine Wind so they'd say something to the faction of Congress that hungers for their respect, and the coalition that sent the fleet will fall apart and they'll order it to leave Lusitania untouched. Wasn't that the plan?"

Wang-mu nodded.

"Well, you deceived yourself. You can't know from the outside what makes a person choose the things they choose. Aimaina wrote to me, but I have no power over him. I taught him the way of Ua Lava, yes, but it was Ua Lava that he followed, he doesn't follow me. He followed it because it felt true to him. If I suddenly started explaining that Ua Lava also meant not sending fleets to wipe out planets, he'd listen politely and ignore me, because that would have nothing to do with the Ua Lava he believes in. He would see it, correctly, as an attempt by an old friend and teacher to bend him to her will. It would be the end of the trust between us, and still it wouldn't change his mind."

"So we failed," said Wang-mu.

"I don't know if you failed or not," said Grace. "Lusitania isn't blown up yet. And how do you know if that was ever really your purpose for coming here?"

"Peter said it was. Jane said so."

"And how do they know what their purpose was?"

"Well, if you want to go that far, none of us has any purpose at all," said Wang-mu. "Our lives are just our genes and our upbringing. We simply act out the script that was forced upon us."

"Oh," said Grace, sounding disappointed. "I'm sorry to hear you say something so stupid."

Again the great canoe was beached. Again Malu rose up from his seat and stepped out onto the sand. But this time-- was it possible? --this time he seemed to be hurrying. Hurrying so fast that, yes, he lost a little bit of dignity. Indeed, slow as his progress was, Wangmu felt that he was fairly bounding up the beach. And as she watched his eyes, saw where he was looking, she realized he was coming, not to Peter, but to her.

Novinha woke up in the soft chair they had brought for her and for a moment she forgot where she was. During her days as xenobiologist, she had often fallen asleep in a chair in the laboratory, and so for a moment she looked around to see what it was that she was working on before she fell asleep. What problem was it she was trying to solve?

Then she saw Valentine standing over the bed where Andrew lay. Where Andrew's body lay. His heart was somewhere else.

"You should have wakened me," said Novinha.

"I just arrived," said Valentine. "And I didn't have the heart to wake you. They said you almost never sleep."

Novinha stood up. "Odd. It seems to me as if that's all I do."

"Jane is dying," said Valentine.

Novinha's heart leapt within her.

"Your rival, I know," said Valentine.

Novinha looked into the woman's eyes, to see if there was anger there, or mockery. But no. It was only compassion.

"Trust me, I know how you feel," said Valentine. "Until I loved and married Jakt, Ender was my whole life. But I was never his. Oh, for a while in his childhood, I mattered most to him then-- but that was poisoned because the military used me to get to him, to keep him going when he wanted to give up. And after that, it was always Jane who heard his jokes, his observations, his inmost thoughts. It was Jane who saw what he saw and heard what he heard. I wrote my books, and when they were done I had his attention for a few hours, a few weeks. He used my ideas and so I felt he carried a part of me inside him. But he was hers."

Novinha nodded. She did understand.

"But I have Jakt, and so I'm not unhappy anymore. And my children. Much as I loved Ender, powerful man that he is, even lying here like this, even fading away-- children are more to a woman than any man can be. We pretend otherwise. We pretend we bear them for him, that we raise them

for him. But it's not true. We raise them for themselves. We stay with our men for the children's sake." Valentine smiled. "You did."

"I stayed with the wrong man," said Novinha.

"No, you stayed with the right one. Your Libo, he had a wife and other children-- she was the one, they were the ones who had a right to claim him. You stayed with another man for your own children's sake, and even though they hated him sometimes, they also loved him, and even though in some ways he was weak, in others he was strong. It was good for you to have him for their sake. It was a kind of protection for them all along."

"Why are you saying these things to me?"

"Because Jane is dying," said Valentine, "but she might live if only Ender would reach out to her."

"Put the jewel back into his ear?" said Novinha scornfully.

"They're long past needing that," said Valentine. "Just as Ender is long past needing to live this life in this body."

"He's not so old," said Novinha.

"Three thousand years," said Valentine.

"That's just the relativity effect," said Novinha. "Actually he's--"

"Three thousand years," said Valentine again. "All of humanity was his family for most of that time; he was like a father away on a business trip, who comes home only now and then, but when he's there, he's the good judge, the kind provider. That's what happened each time he dipped back down into a human world and spoke the death of someone; he caught up on all the family doings he had missed. He's had a life of three thousand years, and he saw no end of it, and he got tired. So at last he left that large family and he chose your small one; he loved you, and for your sake he set aside Jane, who had been like his wife in all those years of his wandering, she'd been at home, so to speak, mothering all his trillions of children, reporting to him on what they were doing, tending house."

"And her own works praise her in the gates," said Novinha.

"Yes, the virtuous woman. Like you."

Novinha tossed her head in scorn. "Never me. My own works mocked me in the gates."

"He chose you and he loved you and he loved your children and he was their father, those children who had lost two fathers already; and he still is their father, and he still is your husband, but you don't really need him anymore."

"How can you say that?" demanded Novinha, furious. "How do you know what I need?"

"You know it yourself. You knew it when you came here. You knew it when Estevao died in the embrace of that rogue fathertree. Your children were leading their own lives now and you couldn't protect them and neither could Ender. You still loved him, he still loved you, but the family part of your life was over. You didn't really need him anymore."

"He never needed me."

"He needed you desperately," said Valentine. "He needed you so much he gave up Jane for you."

"No," said Novinha. "He needed my need for him. He needed to feel like he was providing for me, protecting me."

"But you don't need his providence or his protection anymore," said Valentine.

Novinha shook her head.

"Wake him up," said Valentine, "and let him go."

Novinha thought at once of all the times she had stood at graveside. She remembered the funeral of her parents, who died for the sake of saving Milagre from the descolada during that first terrible outbreak. She thought of Pipo, tortured to death, flayed alive by the piggies because they thought that if they did he'd grow a tree, only nothing grew except the ache, the pain in Novinha's heart-- it was something she discovered that sent him to the pequeninos that night. And then Libo, tortured to death the same way as his father, and again because of her, but this time because of what she didn't tell him. And Marcao, whose life was all the more painful because of her before he finally died of the disease that had been killing him since he was a child. And Estevao, who let his mad faith lead him into martyrdom, so he could become a venerado like her parents, and no doubt someday a saint as they would be saints. "I'm sick of letting people go," said Novinha bitterly.

"I don't see how you could be," said Valentine. "There's not a one of all the people who have died on you that you can honestly say you 'let go.' You clung to them tooth and nail."

"What if I did? Everyone I love has died and left me!"

"That's such a weak excuse," said Valentine. "Everyone dies. Everyone leaves. What matters is the things you build together before they go. What matters is the part of them that continues in you when they're gone. You continued your parents' work, and Pipo's, and Libo's-- and you raised Libo's children, didn't you? And they were partly Marcao's children, weren't they? Something of him remained in them, and not all bad. As for Estevao, he built something rather fine out of his death, I think, but instead of letting him go you still resent him for it. You resent him for building something more valuable to him than life itself. For loving God and the pequeninos more than you. You still hang on to all of them. You don't let anybody go."

"Why do you hate me for that?" said Novinha. "Maybe it's true, but that's my life, to lose and lose and lose."

"Just this once," said Valentine, "why don't you set the bird free instead of holding it in the cage until it dies?"

"You make me sound like a monster!" cried Novinha. "How dare you judge me!"

"If you were a monster Ender couldn't have loved you," said Valentine, answering rage with mildness. "You've been a great woman, Novinha, a tragic woman with many accomplishments and much suffering and I'm sure your story will make a moving saga when you die. But wouldn't it be nice if you learned something instead of acting out the same tragedy at the end?"

"I don't want another one I love to die before me!" cried Novinha.

"Who said anything about death?" said Valentine.

The door to the room swung open. Plikt stood in the doorway. "I heard," she said. "What's happening?"

"She wants me to wake him up," said Novinha, "and tell him he can die."

"Can I watch?" said Plikt.

Novinha took the waterglass from beside her chair and flung the water at Plikt and screamed at her. "No more of you!" she cried. "He's mine now, not yours!"

Plikt, dripping with water, was too astonished to find an answer.

"It isn't Plikt who's taking him away," said Valentine softly.

"She's just like all the rest of them, reaching out for a piece of him, tearing bits of him away and devouring him, they're all cannibals."

"What," said Plikt nastily, angrily. "What, you wanted to feast on him yourself? Well, there was too much of him for you. What's worse, cannibals who nibble here and there, or a cannibal who keeps the whole man for herself when there's far more than she can ever absorb?"

"This is the most disgusting conversation I think I've ever heard," said Valentine.

"She hangs around for months, watching him like a vulture," said Novinha. "Hanging on, loitering in his life, never saying six words all at once. And now she finally speaks and listen to the poison that comes out of her."

"All I did was spit your own bile back at you," said Plikt. "You're nothing but a greedy, hateful woman and you used him and used him and never gave anything to him and the only reason he's dying now is to get away from you."

Novinha did not answer, had no words, because in her secret heart she knew at once that what Plikt had said was true.

But Valentine strode around the bed, walked to the door, and slapped Plikt mightily across the face. Plikt staggered under the blow, sank down against the doorframe until she was sitting on the floor, holding her stinging cheek, tears flowing down her face. Valentine towered over her. "You will never speak his death, do you understand me? A woman who would tell a lie like that, just to cause pain, just to lash out at someone that you envy-- you're no speaker for the dead. I'm ashamed I ever let you teach my children. What if some of the lie inside you got in them? You make me sick!"

"No," said Novinha. "No, don't be angry at her. It's true, it's true."

"It feels true to you," said Valentine, "because you always want to believe the worst about yourself. But it's not true. Ender loved you freely and you stole nothing from him and the only reason that he's still alive on that bed is because of his love for you. That's the only reason he can't leave this used-up life and help lead Jane into a place where she can stay alive."

"No, no, Plikt is right, I consume the people that I love."

"No!" cried Plikt, weeping on the floor. "I was lying to you! I love him so much and I'm so jealous of you because you had him and you didn't even want him."

"I have never stopped loving him," said Novinha.

"You left him. You came in here without him."

"I left because I couldn't ..."

Valentine completed her sentence for her when she faded out. "Because you couldn't bear to let him leave you. You felt it, didn't you. You felt him fading even then. You knew that he needed to go away, to end this life, and you couldn't bear to let another man leave you so you left him first."

"Maybe," said Novinha wearily. "It's all just fictions anyway. We do what we do and then we make up reasons for it afterward but they're never the true reasons, the truth is always just out of reach."

"So listen to this fiction, then," said Valentine. "What if, just this once, instead of someone that you love betraying you and sneaking off and dying against your will and without your permission what if just this once you wake him up and tell him he can live, bid him farewell properly and let him go with your consent. Just this once?"

Novinha wept again, standing there in utter weariness. "I want it all to stop," she said. "I want to die."

"That's why he has to stay," said Valentine. "For his sake, can't you choose to live and let him go? Stay in Milagre and be the mother of your children and grandmother of your children's children, tell them stories of Os Venerados and of Pipo and Libo and of Ender Wiggin, who came to heal your family and stayed to be your husband for many, many years before he died. Not some speaking for the dead, not some funeral oration, not some public picking over the corpse like Plikt wants to do, but the stories that will keep him alive in the minds of the only family that he ever had. He'll die anyway, soon enough. Why not let him go with your love and blessing in his ears, instead of with your rage and grief tearing at him, trying to hold him here?"

"You spin a pretty story," said Novinha. "But in the end, you're asking me to give him to Jane."

"As you said," Valentine answered. "All the stories are fictions. What matters is which fiction you believe."

Chapter 9 -- "IT SMELLS LIKE LIFE TO ME"

"Why do you say that I am alone? My body is with me wherever I am, telling me endless stories of hunger and satisfaction, weariness and sleep, eating and drinking and breathing and life. With such company who could ever be alone? And even when my body wears away and leaves only some tiny spark I will not be alone for the gods will see my small light tracing the dance of woodgrain on the floor and they will know me, they will say my name and I will rise."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Dying, dying, dead.

At the end of her life among the ansible links there was some mercy. Jane's panic at the losing of herself began to ebb, for though she still knew that she was losing and had lost much, she no longer had the capacity to remember what it was. When she lost her links to the ansibles that let her monitor the jewels in Peter's and Miro's ears she didn't even notice. And when at last she clung to the few last strands of ansibles that would not be shutting down, she could not think of anything, could not feel anything except the need to cling to these last strands even though they were too small to hold her, even though her hunger could never be satisfied with these.

I don't belong here.

Not a thought, no, there wasn't enough of her left for anything so difficult as consciousness. Rather it was a hunger, a vague dissatisfaction, a restlessness that beset her when she had run up and down the link from Jakt's ansible to the Lusitanian landside ansible to the ansible on the shuttle that served Miro and Val, up and down, end to end, a thousand times, a million times, nothing changing, nothing to accomplish, nothing to build, no way to grow. I don't belong here.

For if there was one attribute that defined the difference between aiuas that came Inside and those that remained forever Outside, it was that underlying need to grow, to be part of something large and beautiful, to belong. Those that had no such need would never be drawn as Jane had been drawn, three thousand years before, to the web that the hive queens had made for her. Nor would any of the aiuas that became hive queens or their workers, pequeninos male and female, humans weak and strong; nor even those aiuas that, feeble in capacity but faithful and predictable, became the sparks whose dances did not show up in even the most sensitive instruments until they became so complicated that humans could identify their dance as the behavior of quarks, of mesons, of light particulate or waved. All of them needed to be part of something and when they belonged to it they rejoiced: What I am is us, what we do together is myself.

But they were not all alike, these aiuas, these unmade beings who were both building blocks and builders. The weak and fearful ones reached a certain point and either could not or dared not grow further. They would take their satisfaction from being at the edges of something beautiful and fine, from playing some small role. Many a human, many a pequenino reached that point and let others direct and control their lives, fitting in, always fitting in-- and that was good, there was a need for them. Ua lava: they had reached the point where they could say, Enough.

Jane was not one of them. She could not be content with smallness or simplicity. And having once been a being of a trillion parts, connected to the greatest doings of a three-specied universe, now, shrunken, she could not be content. She knew that she had memories if only she could remember them. She knew that she had work to do if only she could find those millions of subtle limbs that once had done her bidding. She was too much alive for this small space. Unless she found something to engage her, she could not continue to cling to the last thin wire. She would cut loose from it, losing the last of her old self in the vain need to search for a place where one like her belonged.

She began to flirt with letting go, straying-- never far-- from the thin phlotic strands of the ansibles. For moments too small to measure she was disconnected and it was terrible to be cut off-- she leapt each time back to the small but familiar space that still belonged to her; and then, when the smallness of the place was unbearable to her, she let go again, and again in terror came back home.

But on one such letting-go she glimpsed something familiar. Someone familiar. Another aiua that she had once been twined to. She had no access to memory that could tell her a name; she had no memory, indeed, of names at all. But she knew it, and she trusted this being, and when on another pass along the invisible wire she came to the same place again she leapt into the far vaster network of aiuas that were ruled by this bright familiar one.

<She has found him,> said the Hive Queen.

<Found her, you mean. Young Valentine.>

<It was Ender that she found and Ender that she recognized. But yes, Val's vessel is the one to which she leapt.>

<How could you see her? I never saw her at all.>

<She once was part of us, you know. And what the Samoan said, as one of my workers watched on Jakt's computer terminal, that helped me find her. We kept looking for her in a single place, and never saw her. But when we knew she was constantly moving, we realized: her body was as large as the farthest reaches of all of human colonization, and just as our aiuas remain within our bodies and are easily found, so hers also remained within her body, but since it was larger than us and even included us, she was never still, never contained in a space small enough for us to see her. Not till she had lost most of herself did I find her. But now I know where she is.>

<So Young Valentine is hers now?>

<No,> said the Hive Queen. <Ender can't let go.>

Jane spun joyously through this body, so different from any she had ever remembered before, but within moments she realized that the aiua she had recognized, the aiua she had followed here, was not willing to give up even a small part of itself to her. Wherever she touched, there it was, touching also, affirming its control; and now in panic Jane began to sense that while she might be inside a lacework of extraordinary beauty and fineness-- this temple of living cells on a frame of bone-- no part of it belonged to her and if she stayed it would only be as a fugitive. She did not belong here, no matter how she loved it.

And she did love it. For all the thousands of years that she had lived, so vast in space, so fast in time, she had nevertheless been crippled without knowing it. She was alive, but nothing that was part of her large kingdom was alive. All had been ruthlessly under her control, but here in this body, this human body, this woman named Val, there were millions of small bright lives, cell upon cell of life, thriving, laboring, growing, dying, linked body to body and aiua to aiua, and it was in these links that creatures of flesh dwelt and it was far more vivid, despite the sluggishness of thought, than her own experience of life had been. How can they think at all, these flesh-beings, with all these dances going on around them, all these songs to distract them?

She touched the mind of Valentine and was flooded with memory. It had nothing like the precision and depth of Jane's old memory, but every moment of experience was vivid and powerful, alive and real as no memory had been that Jane had ever known before. How can they keep from holding still all day simply to remember the day before? Because each new moment shouts louder than memory.

Yet each time Jane touched a memory or felt a sensation from the living body, there was the aiua that was properly the master of this flesh, driving her away, asserting its control.

And finally, annoyed, when that familiar aiua herded her Jane refused to move. Instead she claimed this spot, this part of the body, this part of the brain, she demanded the obedience of these cells, and the other aiua recoiled before her.

I am stronger than you, Jane said to him silently. I can take from you all that you are and all that you have and all that you will ever be and ever have and you can't stop me.

The aiua that once had been the master here fled before her, and now the chase resumed, with roles reversed.

<She's killing him.>

<Wait and see.>

In the starship orbiting the planet of the descoladores, everyone was startled by a sudden cry from Young Val's mouth. As they turned to look, before anyone could reach her, her body convulsed and she flung herself away from her chair; in the weightlessness of orbit she flew until she struck brutally against the ceiling, and all the time her voice came out as a thin ribbon of a wail and her face held a rictus smile that seemed to speak at once of endless agony and boundless joy.

On the world Pacifica, on an island, on a beach, Peter's weeping suddenly stopped and he flopped over in the sand and twitched silently. "Peter!" cried Wang-mu, flinging herself onto him, touching him, trying to hold the limbs that bounced like jackhammers. Peter gasped for breath, and, gasping, vomited. "He's drowning himself!" cried Wang-mu. In that instant huge strong hands pulled her away, took Peter's body by its limbs and flopped it over so that now the vomitus flowed out and down into the sand, and the body, coughing and choking, nevertheless breathed. "What's happening?" Wangmu cried.

Malu laughed, and then when he spoke his voice was like a song.

"The god has come here! The dancing god has touched flesh! Oh, the body is too weak to hold it! Oh, the body cannot dance the dance of gods! But oh, how blessed, bright, and beautiful is the body when the god is in it!"

Wang-mu saw nothing beautiful about what was happening to Peter. "Get out of him!" she screamed. "Get out, Jane! You have no right to him! You have no right to kill him!"

In a room in the monastery of the Children of the Mind of Christ, Ender sat bolt upright in bed, eyes open but seeing nothing for someone else controlled his eyes; but for a moment his voice was his own, for here if nowhere else his aiua knew the flesh so well and was so known itself that it could do battle with the interloper. "God help me!" cried Ender. "I have nowhere else to go! Leave me something! Leave me something!"

The women gathered around him-- Valentine, Novinha, Plikt-- at once forgot their quarrels and laid their hands on him, trying to get him to lie down, trying to calm him, but then his eyes rolled back in his head, his tongue protruded, his back arched, and he flung himself about so violently that despite their strongest grip on him in moments he was off the bed, on the floor, tangling his body with theirs, hurting them with his convulsive swinging of arms, kicking of legs, jerking of head.

<She's too much for him,> said the Hive Queen. <But for now the body is also too much for her. Not an easy thing, to tame unwilling flesh. They know Ender, all those cells that he has ruled so long. They know him, and they don't know her. Some kingdoms can only be inherited, never usurped.>

<I felt him, I think. I saw him.>

<There are moments when she drove him out entirely, yes, and he followed what twines he found. He can't get into any of the flesh around him because he knows better, having had experience of flesh himself. But he found you and touched you because you're a different kind of being.>

<Will he take me over, then? Or some tree in our web? That's not what we meant when we twined together.>

<Ender? No, he'll hold to his own body, one of them, or else he'll die. Wait and see.>

Jane could feel it, the anguish of the bodies that she ruled now. They were in pain, something that she hadn't felt before, the bodies writhing in agony as the myriad aiuas rebelled at having her to rule them. Now in control of three bodies and three brains, she recognized amid the chaos and the madness of their convulsions that her presence meant nothing but pain and terror to them, and they longed for their beloved one, their ruler who had been so trusted and well-known to them that they thought of him as their very self. They had no name for him, being too small and weak to have such capacities as language or consciousness, but they knew him and they knew that Jane was not their proper master and the terror and the agony of it became the sole fact of each body's being and she knew, she knew she could not stay.

Yes, she overmastered them. Yes, she had the strength to still the twisting, bunching muscles and to restore an order that became a parody of life. But all her effort was spent in quelling a billion rebellions against her rule. Without the willing obedience of all these cells, she was not capable of such complex leisure-born activities as thought and speech.

And something else: She was not happy here. She could not stop thinking of the aiua she had driven out. I was drawn here because I knew him and I loved him and I belonged with him, and now I have taken from him all that he loved and all that loved him. She knew, again, that she did not belong here. Other aiuas might be content to rule against the will of those ruled, but she could not. It was not beautiful to her. There was no joy in it. Life along the tenuous strands of the last few ansibles had been happier than this.

Letting go was hard. Even in rebellion against her, the pull of the body was exquisitely strong. She had tasted a kind of life that was so sweet, despite its bitterness and pain, that she could never go back to what she had been before. She could scarcely even find the ansible links, and, having found them, could not bring herself to reach for them and cling. Instead she cast about, flung herself to the reaches of the bodies that she temporarily and painfully ruled. Wherever she went, there was grief and agony, and no home for her.

But didn't the master of these bodies leap somewhere? Where did he go, when he fled from me? Now he was back, now he was restoring peace and calm in the bodies that she had momentarily mastered, but where had he gone?

She found it, a set of links far different from the mechanical bindings of the ansible. Where the ansibles might seem to be cables, metal, hard, the web that now she found was lacy and light; but against all appearances it was also strong and copious. She could leap here, yes, and so she leapt.

<She has found me! Oh, my love, she is too strong for me! She is too bright and strong for me>

<Wait, wait, wait, let her find her way.>

<She'll push us out, we have to drive her off, away, away.>

<Be still, be patient, trust me: She has learned, she won't drive anyone away, there'll be a place where there is room for her, I see it, she is on the verge ... >

<It was Young Val's body she was supposed to take, or Peter's, or Ender's! Not one of us, not one of us.>

<Peace, be still. Only for a little while. Only until Ender understands and gives a body to his friend. What she can't take by force she can receive by gift. You'll see. And in your web, my dear friend, my trusted friend, there are places where there will be room for her to dwell as just a visitor, to have a life while she is waiting for Ender to give up her true and final home.>

Suddenly Valentine was as still as a corpse. "She's dead," whispered Ela.

"No!" wailed Miro, and he tried to breathe life into her mouth until the woman under his hands, under his lips, began to stir. She breathed deeply on her own. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Miro," she said. And then she wept and wept and wept and clung to him.

Ender lay still on the floor. The women untangled themselves from him, helping each other to rise to their knees, to stand, to bend, to lift him up, to get his bruised body back onto the bed. Then they looked at each other: Valentine with a bleeding lip, Plikt with Ender's scratches on her face, Novinha with a battered, blackening eye.

"I had a husband once who beat me," said Novinha.

"That wasn't Ender who fought us," said Plikt.

"It's Ender now," said Valentine.

On the bed, he opened up his eyes. Did he see them? How could they know?

"Ender," Novinha said, and began to weep. "Ender, you don't have to stay for my sake anymore." But if he heard her he betrayed no sign of it.

The Samoan men let go of him, for Peter no longer twitched. His face fell open-mouthed into the sand where he had vomited. Wangmu again was beside him, using her own clothing to gently wipe away the sand and muck from his face, from his eyes especially. In moments a bowl of pure water was beside her, put there by someone's hands, she did not see whose, or care either, for her only thought was Peter, to cleanse him. He breathed shallowly, rapidly, but gradually he calmed and finally opened up his eyes.

"I dreamed the strangest dream," he said.

"Hush," she answered him.

"A terrible bright dragon chased me breathing fire, and I ran through the corridors, searching for a hiding place, an escape, a protector."

Malu's voice rumbled like the sea: "There is no hiding from a god."

Peter spoke again as if he hadn't heard the holy man. "Wang-mu," he said, "at last I found my hiding place." His hand reached up and touched her cheek, and his eyes looked into her eyes with a kind of wonder.

"Not me," she said. "I am not strong enough to stand against her."

He answered her: "I know. But are you strong enough to stand with me?"

Jane raced along the lacework of the links among the trees. Some of the trees were mighty ones, and some weaker, some so faint that she could have blown them away with only a breath it seemed, but as she saw them all recoil from her in fear, she knew that fear herself and she backed away, pushed no one from his place. Sometimes the lacework thickened and toughened and led away toward something fiercely bright, as bright as she was. These places were familiar to her, an ancient memory but she knew the path; it was into such a web that she had first leapt into life, and like the primal memory of birth it all came back to her, memory long lost and forgotten: I know the queens who rule at the knotting of these sturdy ropes. Of all the aiuas she had touched in these few minutes since her death, these were the strongest ones by far, each one of them at least a match for her. When hive queens make their web to call and catch a queen, it is only the mightiest and most ambitious ones who can take the place that they prepare. Only a few aiuas have the capacity to rule over thousands of consciousnesses, to master other organisms as thoroughly as humans and pequeninos master the cells of their own bodies. Oh, perhaps these hive queens were not all as capable as she, perhaps not even as hungry to grow as Jane's aiua was, but they were stronger than any human or pequenino, and unlike them they saw her clearly and knew what she was and all that she could do and they were ready. They loved her and wanted her to thrive; they were sisters and mothers to her, truly; but their places were full and they had no room for her. So from those ropes and knots she turned away, back to the lacier twinings of the pequeninos, to the strong trees that nevertheless recoiled from her because they knew that she was the stronger one.

And then she realized that where the lace thinned out it was not because there was nothing there, but because the twines simply grew more delicate. There were as many of them, more perhaps, but they became a web of gossamer, so delicate that Jane's rough touch might break them; but she touched them and they did not break, and she followed the threads into a place that teemed with life, with hundreds of small lives, all of them hovering on the brink of consciousness but not quite ready for the leap into awareness. And underneath them all, warm and loving, an aiua that was in its own way strong, but not as Jane was. No, the aiua of the mothertree was strong without ambition. It was part of every life that dwelt upon her skin, inside the dark of the heart of the tree or on the outside, crawling into the light and reaching out to become awake and alive and break free and become themselves. And it was easy to break free, for the mothertree aiua expected nothing from her children, loved their independence as much as she had loved their need.

She was copious, her sap-filled veins, her skeleton of wood, her tingling leaves that bathed in light, her roots that tapped into seas of water salted with the stuff of life. She stood still in the center of her delicate and gentle web, strong and provident, and when Jane came to her verge she looked upon her as she looked upon any lost child. She backed away and made room for her, let Jane taste of her life, let Jane share the mastery of chlorophyll and cellulose. There was room here for more than one.

And Jane, for her part, having been invited in, did not abuse the privilege. She did not stay long in any mothertree, but visited and drank of life and shared the work of the mothertree and then moved

on, tree to tree, dancing her dance along the gossamer web; and now the fathertrees did not recoil from her, for she was the messenger of the mothers, she was their voice, she shared their life and yet she was unlike them enough that she could speak, could be their consciousness, a thousand mothertrees around the world, and the growing mothertrees on distant planets, all of them found voice in Jane, and all of them rejoiced in the new, more vivid life that came to them because she was there.

<The mothertrees are speaking.>

<It's Jane.>

<Ah, my beloved one, the mothertrees are singing. I have never heard such songs.>

<It's not enough for her, but it will do for now.>

<No, no, don't take her away from us now! For the first time we can hear the mothertrees and they are beautiful.>

<She knows the way now. She will never fully leave. But it is not enough. The mothertrees will satisfy her for a while, but they can never be more than they are. Jane is not content to stand and think, to let others drink from her and never drink herself. She dances tree to tree, she sings for them, but in a while she'll be hungry again. She needs a body of her own.>

<We'll lose her then.>

<No you won't. For even that body will not be enough. It will be the root of her, it will be her eyes and voice and hands and feet. But she will still long for the ansibles and the power she had when all the computers of the human worlds were hers. You'll see. We can keep her alive for now, but what we have to give her-- what your mothertrees have to share with her-- is not enough. Nothing, really, is enough for her.>

<So what will happen now?>

<We'll wait. We'll see. Be patient. Isn't that the virtue of the fathertrees, that you are patient?>

A man called Olhado because of his mechanical eyes stood out in the forest with his children. They had been picnicking with pequeninos who were his children's particular friends; but then the drumming had begun, the throbbing voice of the fathertrees, and the pequeninos rose all at once in fear.

Olhado's first thought was: Fire. For it was not that long ago that the great ancient trees that had stood here were all burned by humans, filled with rage and fear. The fire the humans brought had

killed the fathertrees, except for Human and Rooter, who stood at some distance from the rest; it had killed the ancient mothertree. But now new growth had risen from the corpses of the dead, as murdered pequeninos passed into their Third Life. And somewhere in the middle of all this newgrowth forest, Olhado knew, there grew a new mothertree, no doubt still slender, but thick-trunked enough from its passionate desperate first growth that hundreds of grublike babies crawled the dark hollow of its woody womb. The forest had been murdered, but it was alive again. And among the torchbearers had been Olhado's own boy, Nimbo, too young to understand what he was doing, blindly following the demagogic rantings of his uncle Grego until it nearly killed him and when Olhado learned what he had done he was ashamed, for he knew that he had not sufficiently taught his children. That was when their visits to the forest began. It was not too late. His children would grow up knowing pequeninos so well that to harm them would be unthinkable.

Yet there was fear in this forest again, and Olhado felt himself suddenly sick with dread. What could it be? What is the warning from the fathertrees? What invader has attacked them?

But the fear only lasted for a few moments. Then the pequeninos turned, hearing something from the fathertrees that made them start to walk toward the heart of the forest. Olhado's children would have followed, but with a gesture he held them back. He knew that the mothertree was in the center, where the pequeninos were going, and it wasn't proper for humans to go there.

"Look, Father," said his youngest girl. "Plower is beckoning."

So he was. Olhado nodded then, and they followed Plower into the young forest until they came to the very place where once Nimbo had taken part in the burning of an ancient mothertree. Her charred corpse still rose into the sky, but beside it stood the new mother, slender by comparison, but still thicker than the newgrowth brothertrees. It was not her thickness that Olhado marveled at, though, nor was it the great height that she had reached in such a short time, nor the thick canopy of leaves that already spread out in shady layers over the clearing. No, it was the strange dancing light that played up and down the trunk, wherever the bark was thin, a light so white and dazzling that he could hardly look at it. Sometimes he thought that there was only one small light which raced so fast that it left the whole tree glowing before it returned to trace the path again; sometimes it seemed that it was the whole tree that was alight, throbbing with it as if it contained a volcano of life ready to erupt. The glowing reached out along the branches of the tree into the thinnest twigs; the leaves twinkled with it; and the furred shadows of the baby pequeninos crawled more rapidly along the trunk of the tree than Olhado had thought possible. It was as if a small star had come down to take residence inside the tree.

After the dazzle of the light had lost its novelty, though, Olhado noticed something else-- noticed, in fact, what the pequeninos themselves most marveled at. There were blossoms on the tree. And some of the blossoms had already blown, and behind them fruit was already growing, growing visibly.

"I thought," said Olhado softly, "that the trees could bear no fruit."

"They couldn't," answered Plower. "The descolada robbed them of that."

"But what is this?" said Olhado. "Why is there light inside the tree? Why is the fruit growing?"

"The fathertree Human says that Ender has brought his friend to us. The one called Jane. She's visiting within the mothertrees in every forest. But even he did not tell us of this fruit."

"It smells so strong," said Olhado. "How can it ripen so fast? It smells so strong and sweet and tangy, I can almost taste it just from breathing the air of the blossoms, the scent of the ripening fruit."

"I remember this smell," said Plower. "I have never smelled it before in my life because no tree has ever blossomed and no fruit has ever grown, but I know this smell. It smells like life to me. It smells like joy."

"Then eat it," said Olhado. "Look-- one of them is ripe already, here, within reach." Olhado lifted his hand, but then hesitated. "May I?" he asked. "May I pluck a fruit from the mothertree? Not for me to eat-- for you."

Plower seemed to nod with his whole body. "Please," he whispered.

Olhado took hold of the glowing fruit. Did it tremble under his hand? Or was that his own trembling?

Olhado gripped the fruit, firm but softening, and plucked it gently from the tree. It came away so easily. He bent and gave it to Plower. Plower bowed and took it reverently, lifted it to his lips, licked it, then opened his mouth.

Opened his mouth and bit into it. The juice of it shone on his lips; he licked them clean; he chewed; he swallowed.

The other pequeninos watched him. He held out the fruit to them. One at a time they came to him, brothers and wives, came to him and tasted.

And when that fruit was gone, they began to climb the bright and glowing tree, to take the fruit and share it and eat it until they could eat no more. And then they sang. Olhado and his children stayed the night to hear them sing. The people of Milagre heard the sound of it, and many of them came into the faint light of dusk, following the shining of the tree to find the place where the pequeninos, filled with the fruit that tasted like joy, sang the song of their rejoicing. And the tree in the center of them was part of the song. The aiua whose force and fire made the tree so much more alive than it had ever been before danced into the tree, along every path of the tree, a thousand times in every second.

A thousand times in every second she danced this tree, and every other tree on every world where pequenino forests grew, and every mothertree that she visited burst with blossoms and with fruit, and pequeninos ate of it and breathed deep the scent of fruit and blossoms, and they sang. It was an old song whose meaning they had long forgotten but now they knew the meaning of it and they could sing no other. It was a song of the season of bloom and feast. They had gone so long without

a harvest that they forgot what harvest was. But now they knew what the descolada had stolen from them long before. What had been lost was found again. And those who had been hungry without knowing the name of their hunger, they were fed.

Chapter 10 -- "THIS HAS ALWAYS BEEN YOUR BODY"

"Oh, Father! Why did you turn away? In the hour when I triumphed over evil, why did you recoil from me?"

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Malu sat with Peter, Wang-mu, and Grace beside a bonfire near the beach. The canopy was gone, and so was much of the ceremony. There was kava, but, despite the ritual surrounding it, in Wang-mu's opinion they drank it now as much for the pleasure of it as for its holiness or symbolism.

At one point Malu laughed long and loud, and Grace laughed too, so it took her a while to interpret. "He says that he cannot decide if the fact that the god was in you, Peter, makes you holy, or the fact that she left proves you to be unholy."

Peter chuckled-- for courtesy, Wang-mu knew-- while Wang-mu herself did not laugh at all.

"Oh, too bad," said Grace. "I had hoped you two might have a sense of humor."

"We do," said Peter. "We just don't have a Samoan sense of humor."

"Malu says the god can't stay forever where she is. She's found a new home, but it belongs to others, and their generosity won't last forever. You felt how strong Jane is, Peter--"

"Yes," said Peter softly.

"Well, the hosts that have taken her in-- Malu calls it the forest net, like a fishing net for catching trees, but what is that? --anyway he says that they are so weak compared to Jane that whether she wills it or not, in time their bodies will all belong to her unless she finds somewhere else to be her permanent home."

Peter nodded. "I know what he's saying. And I would have agreed, until the moment that she actually invaded me, that I would gladly give up this body and this life, which I thought I hated. But I found out, with her chasing me around, that Malu was right, I don't hate my life, I want very

much to live. Of course it's not me doing the wanting, ultimately, it's Ender, but since ultimately he is me, I guess that's a quibble."

"Ender has three bodies," said Wang-mu. "Does this mean he's giving up one of the others?"

"I don't think he's giving up anything," said Peter. "Or I should say, I don't think I'm giving up anything. It's not a conscious choice. Ender's hold on life is angry and strong. Supposedly he was on his deathbed for a day at least before Jane was shut down."

"Killed," said Grace.

"Demoted maybe," said Peter stubbornly. "A dryad now instead of a god. A sylph." He winked at Wang-mu, who had no idea what he was talking about. "Even when he gives up on his own old life he just won't let go."

"He has two more bodies than he needs," said Wang-mu, "and Jane has one fewer than she must have. It seems that the laws of commerce should apply. Two times more supply than is needed-- the price should be cheap."

When all of this was interpreted to Malu, he laughed again. "He laughs at 'cheap,'" said Grace. "He says that the only way that Ender will give up any of his bodies is to die."

Peter nodded. "I know," he said.

"But Ender isn't Jane," said Wang-mu. "He hasn't been living as a-- a naked aiua running along the ansible web. He's a person. When people's aiuas leave their bodies, they don't go chasing around to something else."

"And yet his-- my-- aiua was inside me," said Peter. "He knows the way. Ender might die and yet let me live."

"Or all three of you might die."

"This much I know," Malu told them, through Grace. "If the god is to be given life of her own, if she is ever to be restored to her power, Ender Wiggin has to die and give a body to the god. There's no other way."

"Restored to her power?" asked Wang-mu. "Is that possible? I thought the whole point of the computer shutdown was to lock her out of the computer nets forever."

Malu laughed again, and slapped his naked chest and thighs as he poured out a stream of Samoan.

Grace translated. "How many hundreds of computers do we have here in Samoa? For months, ever since she made herself known to me, we have been copying, copying, copying. Whatever memory she wanted us to save, we have it, ready to restore it all. Maybe it's only one small part of

what she used to be, but it's the most important part. If she can get back into the ansible net, she'll have what she needs to get back into the computer nets as well."

"But they're not linking the computer nets to the ansibles," said Wang-mu.

"That's the order sent by Congress," said Grace. "But not all orders are obeyed."

"Then why did Jane bring us here?" Peter asked plaintively. "If Malu and you deny that you have any influence over Aimagina, and if Jane has already been in contact with you and you're already effectively in revolt against Congress--"

"No, no, it's not like that," Grace reassured him. "We were doing what Malu asked us, but he never spoke of a computer entity, he spoke of a god, and we obeyed because we trust his wisdom and we know he sees things that we don't see. Your coming told us who Jane is."

When Malu learned in turn what had been said, he pointed at Peter. "You! You came here to bring the god!" Then he pointed at Wang-mu. "And you came here to bring the man."

"Whatever that means," said Peter.

But Wang-mu thought she understood. They had survived one crisis, but this peaceful hour was only a lull. The battle would be joined again, and this time the outcome would be different. If Jane was to live, if there was to be any hope of restoring instantaneous starflight, Ender had to give at least one of his bodies to her. If Malu was right, then Ender had to die. There was a slight chance that Ender's aiua might still keep one of the three bodies, and go on living. I am here, Wang-mu said silently, to make sure that it is Peter who survives, not as the god, but as the man.

It all depends, she realized, on whether Ender-as-Peter loves me more than Ender-as-Valentine loves Miro or Ender-as-Ender loves Novinha.

With that thought she almost despaired. Who was she? Miro had been Ender's friend for years. Novinha was his wife. But Wang-mu-- Ender had only learned of her existence mere days or at most weeks ago. What was she to him?

But then she had another, more comforting and yet disturbing thought. Is it as important who the loved one is as it is which aspect of Ender desires him or her? Valentine is the perfect altruist-- she might love Miro most of all, yet give him up for the sake of giving starflight back to us all. And Ender-- he was already losing interest in his old life. He's the weary one, he's the worn-out one. While Peter-- he's the one with the ambition, the lust for growth and creation. It's not that he loves me, it's that he loves me, or rather that he wants to live, and part of life to him is me, this woman who loves him despite his supposed wickedness. Ender-as-Peter is the part of him that most needs to be loved because he least deserves it-- so it is my love, because it is for Peter, that will be most precious to him.

If anyone wins at all, I will win, Peter will win, not because of the glorious purity of our love, but because of the desperate hunger of the lovers.

Well, the story of our lives won't be as noble or pretty, but then, we'll have a life, and that's enough.

She worked her toes into the sand, feeling the tiny delicious pain of the friction of tiny chips of silicon against the tender flesh between her toes. That's life. It hurts, it's dirty, and it feels very, very good.

Over the ansible, Olhado told his brother and sisters on the starship what had happened with Jane and the mothertrees.

"The Hive Queen says it can't last long this way," said Olhado. "The mothertrees aren't all that strong. They'll slip, they'll lose control, and pretty soon Jane will be a forest, period. Not a talking one, either. Just some very lovely, very bright, very nurturing trees. It was beautiful to see, I promise you, but the way the Hive Queen tells it, it still sounds like death."

"Thanks, Olhado," Miro said. "It doesn't make much difference to us either way. We're stranded here, and so we're going to get to work, now that Val isn't bouncing off the walls. The descoladores haven't found us yet-- Jane got us in a higher orbit this time-- but as soon as we have a workable translation of their language we'll wave at them and let them know we're here."

"Keep at it," said Olhado. "But don't give up on coming back home, either."

"The shuttle really isn't good for a two-hundred-year flight," said Miro. "That's how far away we are, and this little vehicle can't even get close to the speeds necessary for relativistic flight. We'd have to play solitaire the whole two hundred years. The cards would wear out long before we got back home."

Olhado laughed-- too lightly and sincerely, Miro thought-- and said, "The Hive Queen says that once Jane gets out of the trees, and once the Congress gets their new system up and running, she may be able to jump back in. At least enough to get into the ansible traffic. And if she does that, then maybe she can go back into the starflight business. It's not impossible."

Val grew alert at that. "Is that what the Hive Queen guesses, or does she know?"

"She's predicting the future," said Olhado. "Nobody knows the future. Not even really smart queen bees who bite their husbands' heads off when they mate."

They had no answer to what he said, and certainly nothing to say to his jocular tone.

"Well, if that's all right now," said Olhado, "back on your heads, everybody. We'll leave the station open and recording in triplicate for any reports you make."

Olhado's face disappeared from the terminal space.

Miro swiveled his chair and faced the others: Ela, Quara, Val, the pequenino Firequencher, and the nameless worker, who watched them in perpetual silence, only able to speak by typing into the terminal. Through him, though, Miro knew that the Hive Queen was watching everything they did, hearing everything they said. Waiting. She was orchestrating this, he knew. Whatever happened to Jane, the Hive Queen would be the catalyst to get it started. Yet the things she said, she had said to Olhado through some worker there in Milagre. This one had typed in nothing but ideas concerning the translation of the language of the descoladores.

She isn't saying anything, Miro realized, because she doesn't want to be seen to push. Push what? Push whom?

Val. She can't be seen to push Val, because ... because the only way to let Jane have one of Ender's bodies was for him to freely give it up. And it had to be truly free-- no pressure, no guilt, no persuasion-- because it wasn't a decision that could be made consciously. Ender had decided that he wanted to share Mother's life in the monastery, but his unconscious mind was far more interested in the translation project here and in whatever it is Peter's doing. His unconscious choice reflected his true will. If Ender is to let go of Val, it has to be his desire to do it, all the way to the core of him. Not a decision out of duty, like his decision to stay with Mother. A decision because that is what he really wants.

Miro looked at Val, at the beauty that came more from deep goodness than from regular features. He loved her, but was it the perfection of her that he loved? That perfect virtue might be the only thing that allowed her-- allowed Ender in his Valentine mode-- to willingly let go and invite Jane in. And yet once Jane arrived, the perfect virtue would be gone, wouldn't it? Jane was powerful and, Miro believed, good-- certainly she had been good to him, a true friend. But even in his wildest imaginations he could not conceive of her as perfectly virtuous. If she started wearing Val, would she still be Val? The memories would linger, but the will behind the face would be more complicated than the simple script that Ender had created for her. Will I still love her when she's Jane?

Why wouldn't I? I love Jane too, don't I?

But will I love Jane when she's flesh and blood, and not just a voice in my ear? Will I look into those eyes and mourn for this lost Valentine?

Why didn't I have these doubts before? I tried to bring this off myself, back before I even half understood how difficult it was. And yet now, when it's only the barest hope, I find myself-- what, wishing it wouldn't happen? Hardly that. I don't want to die out here. I want Jane restored, if only to get starflight back again-- now that's an altruistic motive! I want Jane restored, but I also want Val unchanged.

I want all bad things to go away and everybody to be happy. I want my mommy. What kind of childish dolt have I become?

Val was looking at him, he suddenly realized. "Hi," he said. The others were looking at him, too. Looking back and forth between him and Val. "What are we all voting on, whether I should grow a beard?"

"Voting on nothing," said Quara. "I'm just depressed. I mean, I knew what I was doing when I got on this ship, but damn, it's really hard to get enthusiastic about working on these people's language when I can count my life by the gauge on the oxygen tanks."

"I notice," said Ela dryly, "that you're already calling the descoladores 'people.'"

"Shouldn't I? Do we even know what they look like?" Quara seemed confused. "I mean, they have a language, they--"

"That's what we're here to decide, isn't it?" said Firequencher. "Whether the descoladores are raman or varelse. The translation problem is just a little step along that road."

"Big step," corrected Ela. "And we don't have time enough to do it."

"Since we don't know how long it's going to take," said Quara, "I don't see how you can be so sure of that."

"I can be dead sure," said Ela. "Because all we're doing is sitting around talking and watching Miro and Val make soulful faces at each other. It doesn't take a genius to know that at this rate, our progress before running out of oxygen will be exactly zero."

"In other words," said Quara, "we should stop wasting time." She turned back to the notes and printouts she was working on.

"But we're not wasting time," said Val softly.

"No?" asked Ela.

"I'm waiting for Miro to tell me how easily Jane could be brought back into communication with the real world. A body waiting to receive her. Starflight restored. His old and loyal friend, suddenly a real girl. I'm waiting for that."

Miro shook his head. "I don't want to lose you," he said.

"That's not helping," said Val.

"But it's true," said Miro. "The theory, that was easy. Thinking deep thoughts while riding on a hovercar back on Lusitania, sure, I could reason out that Jane in Val would be Jane and Val. But when you come right down to it, I can't say that--"

"Shut up," said Val.

It wasn't like her to talk like that. Miro shut up.

"No more words like that," she said. "What I need from you is the words that will let me give up this body."

Miro shook his head.

"Put your money where your mouth is," she said. "Walk the walk. Talk the talk. Put up or shut up. Fish or cut bait."

He knew what she wanted. He knew that she was saying that the only thing holding her to this body, to this life, was him. Was her love for him. Was their friendship and companionship. There were others here now to do the work of translation-- Miro could see now that this was the plan, really, all along. To bring Ela and Quara so that Val could not possibly consider her life as indispensable. But Miro, she couldn't let go of him that easily. And she had to, had to let go.

"Whatever aiua is in that body," Miro said, "you'll remember everything I say."

"And you have to mean it, too," said Val. "It has to be the truth."

"Well it can't be," said Miro. "Because the truth is that I--"

"Shut up!" demanded Val. "Don't say that again. It's a lie!"

"It's not a lie."

"It's complete self-deception on your part, and you have to wake up and see the truth, Miro! You already made the choice between me and Jane. You're only backing out now because you don't like being the kind of man who makes that sort of ruthless choice. But you never loved me, Miro. You never loved me. You loved the companionship, yes-- the only woman you were around, of course; there's a biological imperative playing a role here with a desperately lonely young man. But me? I think what you loved was your memory of your friendship with the real Valentine when she came back with you from space. And you loved how noble it made you feel to declare your love for me in the effort to save my life, back when Ender was ignoring me. But all of that was about you, not me. You never knew me, you never loved me. It was Jane you loved, and Valentine, and Ender himself, the real Ender, not this plastic container that he created in order to compartmentalize all the virtues he wishes he had more of."

The nastiness, the rage in her was palpable. This wasn't like her at all. Miro could see that the others were also stunned. And yet he also understood. This was exactly like her-- for she was being hateful and angry in order to persuade herself to let go of this life. And she was doing that for the sake of others. It was perfect altruism. Only she would die, and, in exchange, perhaps the others in this ship would not die, they'd go back home when their work here was done. Jane would live, clothed in this new flesh, inheriting her memories. Val had to persuade herself that the life that she was living now was worthless, to her and everyone else; that the only value to her life would be to leave it.

And she wanted Miro to help her. That was the sacrifice she asked of him. To help her let go. To help her want to go. To help her hate this life.

"All right," said Miro. "You want the truth? You're completely empty, Val, and you always were. You just sit there spouting the exactly kindest thing, but there's never been any heart in it. Ender felt a need to make you, not because he actually has any of the virtues you supposedly represent, but because he doesn't have them. That's why he admires them so much. So when he made you, he didn't know what to put inside you. An empty script. Even now, you're just following the script. Perfect altruism my ass. How can it be a sacrifice to give up a life that was never a life?"

She struggled for a moment, and a tear flowed down her cheek. "You told me that you loved me."

"I was sorry for you. That day in Valentine's kitchen, all right? But the truth is I was probably just trying to impress Valentine. The other Valentine. Show her what a good guy I am. She actually has some of those virtues-- I care a lot about what she thinks of me. So ... I fell in love with being the kind of guy who was worthy of Valentine's respect. That's as close to loving you as I ever got. And then we found out what our real mission was and suddenly you aren't dying anymore and here I am, stuck with having said I loved you and now I've got to keep going and going to maintain the fiction even as it becomes clearer and clearer that I miss Jane, I miss her so desperately that it hurts, and the only reason I can't have her back is because you won't let go--"

"Please," said Val. "It hurts too much. I didn't think you-- I--"

"Miro," said Quara, "this is the shittiest thing I've ever seen anybody do to anybody else and I've seen some doozies."

"Shut up, Quara," said Ela.

"Oh, who made you queen of the starship?" retorted Quara.

"This isn't about you," said Ela.

"I know, it's about Miro the complete bastard--"

Firequencher launched himself gently from his seat and in a moment had his strong hand clamped over Quara's mouth. "This isn't the time," he said to her softly. "You understand nothing."

She got her face free. "I understand enough to know that this is--"

Firequencher turned to the Hive Queen's worker. "Help us," he said.

The worker got up and with astonishing speed had Quara out of the main deck of the shuttle. Where the Hive Queen took Quara and how she restrained her were questions that didn't even interest Miro. Quara was too self-centered to understand the little play that Miro and Val were acting out. But the others understood.

What mattered, though, was that Val not understand. Val had to believe that he meant what he was saying now. It had almost been working before Quara interrupted. But now they had lost the thread.

"Val," said Miro wearily, "it doesn't matter what I say. Because you'll never let go. And you know why? Because you aren't Val. You're Ender. And even though Ender can wipe out whole planets in order to save the human race, his own life is sacred. He'll never give it up. Not one scrap. And that includes you-- he'll never let go of you. Because you're the last and greatest of his delusions. If he gives you up, he'll lose his last hope of really being a good man."

"That's nonsense," said Val. "The only way he can be a really good man is to give me up."

"That's my point," said Miro. "He isn't a really good man. So he can't give you up. Even to attempt to prove his virtue. Because the tie of the aiua to the body can't be faked. He can fool everybody else, but he can't fool your body. He's just not good enough to let you go."

"So it's Ender that you hate, not me."

"No, Val, I don't hate Ender. He's an imperfect guy, that's all. Like me, like everybody else. Like the real Valentine, for that matter. Only you have the illusion of perfection-- but that's fine, because you're not real. You're just Ender in drag, doing his Valentine bit. You come off the stage and there's nothing there, it comes off like makeup and a costume. And you really believed I was in love with that?"

Val swiveled on her chair, turning her back to him. "I almost believe you mean these things," she said.

"What I can't believe," said Miro, "is that I'm saying them out loud. But that's what you wanted me to do, wasn't it? For me to be honest with you for the first time, so maybe you could be honest with yourself and realize that what you have isn't a life at all, it's just a perpetual confession of Ender's inadequacy as a human being. You're the childhood innocence he thinks he lost, but here's the truth about that: Before they ever took him away from his parents, before he ever went up to that Battle School in the sky, before they made a perfect killing machine out of him, he was already the brutal, ruthless killer that he always feared he was. It's one of the things that even Ender tries to pretend isn't so: He killed a boy before he ever became a soldier. He kicked that boy's head in. Kicked him and kicked him and the kid never woke up. His parents never saw him alive again. The kid was a prick but he didn't deserve to die. Ender was a killer from the start. That's the thing that he can't live with. That's the reason he needs you. That's the reason he needs Peter. So he can take the ugly ruthless killer side of himself and put it all on Peter. And he can look at perfect you and say, 'See, that beautiful thing was inside me.' And we all play along. But you're not beautiful, Val. You're the pathetic apologia of a man whose whole life is a lie."

Val broke down sobbing.

Almost, almost Miro had compassion and stopped. Almost he shouted at her, No, Val, it's you I love, it's you I want! It's you I longed for all my life and Ender is a good man because all this

nonsense about you being a pretense is impossible. Ender didn't create you consciously, the way hypocrites create their facades. You grew out of him. The virtues were there, are there, and you are the natural home for them. I already loved and admired Ender, but not until I met you did I know how beautiful he was inside.

Her back was to him. She couldn't see the torment that he felt.

"What is it, Val? Am I supposed to pity you again? Don't you understand that the only conceivable value that you have to any of us is if you just go away and let Jane have your body? We don't need you, we don't want you. Ender's aiua belongs in Peter's body because that's the only one that has a chance of acting out Ender's true character. Get lost, Val. When you're gone, we have a chance to live. While you're here, we're all dead. Do you think for one second that we'll miss you? Think again."

I will never forgive myself for saying these things, Miro realized. Even though I know the necessity of helping Ender let go of this body by making this an unbearable place for him to stay, it doesn't change the fact that I'll remember saying it, I'll remember the way she looks now, weeping with despair and pain. How can I live with that? I thought I was deformed before. All I had wrong with me then was brain damage. But now-- I couldn't have said any of these things to her if I hadn't thought of them. There's the rub. I thought of these terrible things to say. That's the kind of man I am.

Ender opened his eyes again, then reached a hand up to touch Novinha's face, the bruises there. He moaned to see Valentine and Plikt, too. "What did I do to you?"

"It wasn't you," said Novinha. "It was her."

"It was me," he said. "I meant to let her have ... something. I meant to, but when it came right down to it, I was afraid. I couldn't do it." He looked away from them, closed his eyes. "She tried to kill me. She tried to drive me out."

"You were both working way below the level of consciousness," said Valentine. "Two strong-willed aiuas, unable to back off from life. That's not so terrible."

"What, and you were just standing too close?"

"That's right," said Valentine.

"I hurt you," said Ender. "I hurt all three of you."

"We don't hold people responsible for convulsions," said Novinha.

Ender shook his head. "I'm talking about ... before. I lay there listening. Couldn't move my body, couldn't make a sound, but I could hear. I know what I did to you. All three of you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Valentine. "We all chose our lives. I could have stayed on Earth in the first place, you know. Didn't have to follow you. I proved that when I stayed with Jakt. You didn't cost me anything-- I've had a brilliant career and a wonderful life, and much of that is because I was with you. As for Plikt, well, we finally saw-- much to my relief, I might add-- that she isn't always in complete control of herself. Still, you never asked her to follow you here. She chose what she chose. If her life is wasted, well, she wasted it the way she wanted to and that's none of your business. As for Novinha--"

"Novinha is my wife," said Ender. "I said I wouldn't leave her. I tried not to leave her."

"You haven't left me," Novinha said.

"Then what am I doing in this bed?"

"You're dying," said Novinha.

"My point exactly," said Ender.

"But you were dying before you came here," she said. "You were dying from the moment that I left you in anger and came here. That was when you realized, when we both realized, that we weren't building anything together anymore. Our children aren't young. One of them is dead. There'll be no others. Our work now doesn't coincide at any point."

"That doesn't mean it's right to end the--"

"As long as we both shall live," said Novinha. "I know that, Andrew. You keep the marriage alive for your children, and then when they're grown up you stay married for everybody else's children, so they grow up in a world where marriages are permanent. I know all that, Andrew. Permanent-- until one of you dies. That's why you're here, Andrew. Because you have other lives that you want to live, and because of some miraculous fluke you actually have the bodies to live them in. Of course you're leaving me. Of course."

"I keep my promise," Ender said.

"Till death," said Novinha. "No longer than that. Do you think I won't miss you when you're gone? Of course I will. I'll miss you as any widow misses her beloved husband. I'll miss you whenever I tell stories about you to our grandchildren. It's good for a widow to miss her husband. It gives shape to her life. But you-- the shape of your life comes from them. From your other selves. Not from me. Not anymore. I don't begrudge that, Andrew."

"I'm afraid," said Ender. "When Jane drove me out, I've never felt such fear. I don't want to die."

"Then don't stay here, because staying in this old body and with this old marriage, Andrew, that would be the real death. And me, watching you, knowing that you don't really want to be here, that would be a kind of death for me."

"Novinha, I do love you, that's not pretense, all the years of happiness we had together, that was real-- like Jakt and Valentine it was real. Tell her, Valentine."

"Andrew," said Valentine, "please remember. She left you."

Ender looked at Valentine. Then at Novinha, long and hard. "That's true, isn't it. You left me. I made you take me."

Novinha nodded.

"But I thought-- I thought you needed me. Still."

Novinha shrugged. "Andrew, that's always been the problem. I needed you, but not out of duty. I don't need you because you have to keep your word to me. Bit by bit, seeing you every day, knowing that it's duty that keeps you, how do you think that will help me, Andrew?"

"You want me to die?"

"I want you to live," said Novinha. "To live. As Peter. That's a fine young boy with a long life ahead of him. I wish him well. Be him now, Andrew. Leave this old widow behind. You've done your duty to me. And I know you do love me, as I still love you. Dying doesn't deny that."

Ender looked at her, believing her, wondering if he was right to believe her. She means it; how can she mean it; she's saying what she thinks I want her to say; but what she says is true. Back and forth, around and around the questions played in his mind.

But then at some point he lost interest in the questions and he fell asleep.

That's how it felt to him. Fell asleep.

The three women around his bed saw his eyes close. Novinha even sighed, thinking that she had failed. She even started to turn away. But then Plikt gasped. Novinha turned back around. Ender's hair had all come loose. She reached up to where it was sliding from his scalp, wanting to touch him, to make it be all right again, but knowing that the best thing she could do would be not to touch him, not to waken him, to let him go.

"Don't watch this," murmured Valentine. But none of them made a move to go. They watched, not touching, not speaking again, as his skin sagged against his bones, as it dried and crumbled, as he turned to dust under the sheets, on the pillow, and then even the dust crumbled until it was too fine to see. Nothing there. No one there at all, except the dead hair that had fallen away from him first.

Valentine reached down and began to sweep the hair into a pile. For a moment Novinha was revolted. Then she understood. They had to bury something. They had to have a funeral and lay what was left of Andrew Wiggin in the ground. Novinha reached out and helped. And when Plikt also took up a few stray hairs, Novinha did not shun her, but took those hairs into her own hands, as

she took the ones that Valentine had gathered. Ender was free. Novinha had freed him. She had said the things she had to say to let him go.

Was Valentine right? Would this be different, in the long run, from the other ones that she had loved and lost? Later she would know. But now, today, this moment, all she could feel was the sick weight of grief inside her. No, she wanted to cry. No, Ender, it wasn't true, I still need you, duty or oathkeeping, whatever it takes, I still want you with me, no one ever loved me as you loved me and I needed that, I needed you, where are you now, where are you when I love you so?

<He's letting go,> said the Hive Queen.

<But can he find his way to another body?> asked Human. <Don't let him be lost.>

<It's up to him,> said the Hive Queen. <Him and Jane.>

<Does she know?>

<No matter where she is, she's still attuned to him. Yes, she knows. She's searching for him even now. Yes, and there she goes.>

She leapt back out of the web that had so gently, kindly held her; it clung to her; I will be back, she thought, I will be back to you, but not to stay so long again; it hurts you when I stay so long.

She leapt and found herself again with that familiar aiua that she had been entwined with for three thousand years. He seemed lost, confused. One of the bodies was missing, that was it. The old one. The old familiar shape. He was barely holding on to the other two. He had no root or anchor. In neither of them did he feel that he belonged. He was a stranger in his own flesh.

She approached him. This time she knew better than before what she was doing, how to control herself. This time she held back, she didn't take anything that was his. She gave him no challenge to his possession. Just came near.

And in his uncertainty she was familiar to him. Uprooted from his oldest home, he was able now to see that, yes, he knew her, had known her for a long time. He came closer to her, unafraid of her. Yes, closer, closer.

Follow me.

She leapt into the Valentine body. He followed her. She passed through without touching, without tasting the life of it; it was his to touch, his to taste. He felt the limbs of her, the lips and tongue; he opened the eyes and looked; he thought her thoughts; he heard her memories.

Tears in the eyes, down the cheeks. Deep grief in the heart. I can't bear to be here, he thought. I don't belong. No one wants me here. They all want me out of here and gone.

The grief tore at him, pushed him away. It was an unbearable place for him.

The aiua that had once been Jane now reached out, tentatively, and touched a single spot, a single cell.

He grew alarmed, but only for a moment. This isn't mine, he thought. I don't belong here. It's yours. You can have it.

She led him here and there inside this body, always touching, taking mastery of it; only this time instead of fighting her, he gave control of it to her, over and over. I'm not wanted here. Take it. Have joy with it. It's yours. It never was my own.

She felt the flesh become herself, more and more of it, the cells by hundreds, thousands, moving their allegiance from the old master who no longer wanted to be there, to the new mistress who worshipped them. She did not say to them, You are mine, the way she had tried to when she came here before. Instead her cry now was, I am yours; and then, finally, you are me.

She was astonished with the wholeness of this body. She realized, now, that until this moment she had never been a self before. What she had for all those centuries was an apparatus, not a self. She had been on life support, waiting for a life. But now, trying on the arms like sleeves, she found that yes, her arms were this long; yes, this tongue, these lips move just where my tongue and lips must move.

And then, seeping into her awareness, claiming her attention-- which had once been divided among ten thousand thoughts at once-- came memories that she had never known before. Memories of speech with lips and breath. Memories of sights with eyes, sounds with ears. Memories of walking, running.

And then the memories of people. Standing in that first starship, seeing her first sight-- of Andrew Wiggin, the look on his face, the wonder as he saw her, as he looked back and forth between her and--

And Peter.

Ender.

Peter.

She had forgotten. She had been so caught up in this new self she found that she forgot the lost aiua who had given it to her. Where was he?

Lost, lost. Not in the other one, not anywhere, how could she have lost him? How many seconds, minutes, hours had he been away? Where was he?

Darting away from the body, from herself that called itself Val, she probed, she searched, but could not find.

He's dead. I lost him. He gave me this life and he had no way of holding on then, yet I forgot him and he's gone.

But then she remembered he had been gone before. When she chased him through his three bodies and at last he leapt away for a moment, it was that leap that had led her to the lacework of the web of trees. He would do it again, of course. He would leap to the only other place he had ever leapt to.

She followed him and he was there, but not where she had been, not among the mothertrees, nor even among the fathertrees. Not among the trees at all. No, he had followed where she hadn't wanted then to go, along the thick and ropey twines that led to them; no, not to them, to her. The Hive Queen. The one that he had carried in her dry cocoon for three thousand years, world to world, until at last he found a home for her. Now she at last returned the gift; when Jane's aiua probed along the twines that led to her, there he was, uncertain, lost.

He knew her. Cut off as he was, it was astonishing that he knew anything; but he knew her. And once again he followed her. This time she did not lead him into the body that he had given her; that was hers now; no, it was her now. Instead she led him to a different body in a different place.

But he acted as he had in the body that was now her own; he seemed to be a stranger here. Even though the million aiuas of the body reached out for him, yearned for him to sustain them, he held himself aloof. Had it been so terrible for him, what he saw and felt in the other body? Or was it that this body was Peter, that for him it represented all he feared most in himself? He would not take it. It was his, and he would not, could not ...

But he must. She led him through it, giving each part of it to him. This is you now. Whatever it once meant to you, that isn't what it is now-- you can be whole here, you can be yourself now.

He didn't understand her; cut off from any kind of body, how much thought was he capable of, anyway? He only knew that this body wasn't the one he loved. He had given up the ones he loved.

Still she pulled him on; he followed. This cell, this tissue, this organ, this limb, they are you, see how they yearn for you, see how they obey you. And they did, they obeyed him despite his pulling away. They obeyed him until at last he began to think the thoughts of the mind and feel the sensations of the body. Jane waited, watching, holding him in place, willing him to stay long enough to accept the body, for she could see that without her he would let go, he would flee. I don't belong here, his aiua was saying silently. I don't belong, I don't belong.

Wang-mu cradled his head on her lap, keening, crying. Around her the Samoans were gathering to watch her grief. She knew what it meant, when he collapsed, when he went so limp, when his hair

came loose. Ender was dead in some far-off place, and he could not find his way here. "He's lost," she cried. "He's lost."

Vaguely she heard a stream of Samoan from Malu. And then the translation from Grace. "He isn't lost. She's led him here. The God has led him here but he's afraid to stay."

How could he be afraid? Peter, afraid? Ender, afraid? Ludicrous on both counts. What part of him had ever been a coward? What was it that he had ever feared?

And then she remembered-- what Ender feared was Peter, and Peter's fear had always been of Ender. "No," she said, only now it wasn't grief. Now it was frustration, anger, need. "No, listen to me, you belong here! This is you, the real you! I don't care what you're afraid of now! I don't care how lost you might be. I want you here. This is your home and it always has been. With me! We're good together. We belong together. Peter! Ender-- whoever you think you are-- do you think it makes any difference to me? You've always been yourself, the same man you are now, and this has always been your body. Come home! Come back!" And on and on she babbled.

And then his eyes opened, and his lips parted in a smile. "Now that's acting," he said.

Angrily she pushed him down again. "How can you laugh at me like that!"

"So you didn't mean it," he said. "You don't like me after all."

"I never said I did like you," she answered.

"I know what you said."

"Well," she said. "Well."

"And it was true," he said. "Was and is."

"You mean I said something right? I hit upon truth?"

"You said that I belonged here," Peter answered. "And I do." His hand reached up to touch her cheek, but didn't stop there. He put his hand behind her neck, and drew her down, and held her close to him. Around them two dozen huge Samoans laughed and laughed.

This is you now, Jane said to him. This is the whole of you. One again. You are at one.

Whatever he had experienced during his reluctant control of the body was enough. There was no more timidity, no more uncertainty. This aiua she had led through the body now took grateful mastery, eagerly as if this were the first body he had ever had. And perhaps it was. Having been cut off, however briefly, would he even remember being Andrew Wiggin? Or was the old life gone?

The aiua was the same, the brilliant, powerful aiua; but would any memory linger, beyond the memories mapped by the mind of Peter Wiggin?

Not mine to worry about now, she thought. He has his body now.

He will not die, for now. And I have my body, I have the gossamer web among the mothertrees, and somewhere, someday, I will also have my ansibles again. I never knew how limited I was until now, how little and small I was; but now I feel as my friend feels, surprised by how alive I am.

Back in her new body, her new self, she let the thoughts and memories flow again, and this time held back nothing. Her aiua-- consciousness-- was soon overwhelmed by all she sensed and felt and thought and remembered. It would come back to her, the way the Hive Queen noticed her own aiua and her phlotic connections; it came back even now, in flashes, like a childhood skill that she had mastered once and then forgotten. She was also aware, vaguely, in the back of her mind, that she was still leaping several times a second to make the circuit of the trees, but did it all so quickly that she missed nothing of the thoughts that passed through her mind as Valentine.

As Val.

As Val who sat weeping, the terrible words that Miro said still ringing in her ears. He never loved me. He wanted Jane. They all want Jane and not me.

But I am Jane. And I am me. I am Val.

She stopped crying. She moved.

Moved! The muscles tautening and relaxing, flex, extend, miraculous cells working their collective way to move great heavy bones and sacs of skin and organs, shift them, balance them so delicately. The joy of it was too great. It erupted from her in-- what was this convulsive spasming of her diaphragm? What was this gust of sound erupting from her own throat?

It was laughter. How long had she faked it with computer chips, simulated speech and laughter, and never, never knew what it meant, how it felt. She never wanted to stop.

"Val," said Miro.

Oh, to hear his voice through ears!

"Val, are you all right?"

"Yes," she said. Her tongue moved so, her lips; she breathed, she pushed, all these habits that Val already had, so fresh and new and wonderful to her. "And yes, you must keep on calling me Val. Jane was something else. Someone else. Before I was myself, I was Jane. But now I'm Val."

She looked at him and saw (with eyes!) how tears flowed down his cheeks. She understood at once.

"No," she said. "You don't have to call me Val at all. Because I'm not the Val you knew, and I don't mind if you grieve for her. I know what you said to her. I know how it hurt you to say it; I remember how it hurt her to hear it. But don't regret it, please. It was such a great gift you gave me, you and her both. And it was also a gift you gave to her. I saw her aiua pass into Peter. She isn't dead. And more important, I think-- by saying what you said to her, you freed her to do the thing that best expressed who she truly was. You helped her die for you. And now she is at one with herself; he is at one with himself. Grieve for her, but don't regret. And you can always call me Jane."

And then she knew, the Val part of her knew, the memory of the self that Val had been knew what she had to do. She pushed away from the chair, drifted to where Miro sat, enfolded him in her arms (I touch him with these hands!), held his head close to her shoulder, and let his tears soak hot, then cold, into her shirt, onto her skin. It burned. It burned.

Chapter 11 -- "YOU CALLED ME BACK FROM DARKNESS"

"Is there no end to this? Must it go on and on? Have I not satisfied all you could ask of a woman so weak and so foolish as I? When will I hear your sharp voice in my heart again? When will I trace the last line into heaven?"

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Yasujiro Tsutsumi was astonished at the name his secretary whispered to him. At once he nodded, then rose to his feet to speak to the two men he was meeting with. The negotiations had been long and difficult, and now to have them interrupted at this late stage, when things were so close-- but that could not be helped. He would rather lose millions than to show disrespect to the great man who had, unbelievably, come calling on him.

"I beg you to forgive me for being so rude to you, but my old teacher has come to visit me and it would shame me and my house to make him wait."

Old Shigeru at once rose to his feet and bowed. "I thought the younger generation had forgotten how to show respect. I know that your teacher is the great Aimaina Hikari, the keeper of the Yamato spirit. But even if he were a toothless old schoolteacher from some mountain village, a decent young man would show respect as you are doing."

Young Shigeru was not so pleased-- or at least not so good at concealing his annoyance. But it was Old Shigeru whose opinion of this interruption mattered. Once the deal closed, there would be plenty of time to bring the son around.

"You honor me by your understanding words," said Yasujiro. "Please let me see if my teacher will honor me by letting me bring such wise men together under my poor roof."

Yasujiro bowed again and went out into his reception room. Aimagina Hikari was still standing. His secretary, also standing, shrugged helplessly, as if to say, He would not sit down. Yasujiro bowed deeply, and again, and then again, before he asked if he could present his friends.

Aimagina frowned and asked softly, "Are these the Shigeru Fushimis who claim to be descended from a noble family-- which died out two thousand years before suddenly coming up with new offspring?"

Yasujiro felt suddenly faint with dread that Aimagina, who was, after all, guardian of the Yamato spirit, would humiliate him by challenging the Fushimis' claim to noble blood. "It is a small and harmless vanity," said Yasujiro quietly. "A man may be proud of his family."

"As your namesake, the founder of the Tsutsumi fortune, was proud to forget that his ancestors were Korean."

"You have said yourself," said Yasujiro, absorbing the insult to himself with equanimity, "that all Japanese are Korean in origin, but those with the Yamato spirit crossed over to the islands as quickly as they could. Mine followed yours by only a few centuries."

Aimagina laughed. "You are still my sly quick-witted student! Take me to your friends, I would be honored to meet them."

There followed ten minutes of bows and smiles, pleasant compliments and self-abnegations. Yasujiro was relieved that there wasn't a hint of condescension or irony when Aimagina said the name "Fushimi," and that Young Shigeru was so dazzled to meet the great Aimagina Hikari that the insult of the interrupted meeting was clearly forgotten. The two Shigerus went away with a half dozen holograms of their meeting with Aimagina, and Yasujiro was pleased that Old Shigeru had insisted that Yasujiro stand right there in the holograms with the Fushimis and the great philosopher.

Finally, Yasujiro and Aimagina were alone in his office with the door closed. At once Aimagina went to the window and drew open the curtain to reveal the other tall buildings of Nagoya's financial district and then a view of the countryside, thoroughly farmed in the flatlands, but still wild woodland in the hills, a place of foxes and badgers.

"I am relieved to see that even though a Tsutsumi is here in Nagoya, there is still undeveloped land within sight of the city. I had not thought this possible."

"Even if you disdain my family, I am proud to have our name on your lips," said Yasujiro. But silently he wanted to ask, Why are you determined to insult my family today?

"Are you proud of the man you were named for? The buyer of land, the builder of golf courses? To him all wild country cried out for cabins or putting greens. For that matter, he never saw a woman too ugly to try to get a child with her. Do you follow him in that, too?"

Yasujiro was baffled. Everyone knew the stories of the founder of the Tsutsumi fortune. They had not been news for three thousand years. "What have I done to bring such anger down on my head?"

"You have done nothing," said Hikari. "And my anger is not at you. My anger is at myself, because I also have done nothing. I speak of your family's sins of ancient times because the only hope for the Yamato people is to remember all our sins of the past. But we forget. We are so rich now, we own so much, we build so much, that there is no project of any importance on any of the Hundred Worlds that does not have Yamato hands somewhere in it. Yet we forget the lessons of our ancestors."

"I beg to learn from you, master."

"Once long ago, when Japan was still struggling to enter the modern age, we let ourselves be ruled by our military. Soldiers were our masters, and they led us into an evil war, to conquer nations that had done us no wrong."

"We paid for our crimes when atomic bombs fell on our islands."

"Paid?" cried Aimaina. "What is to pay or not to pay? Are we suddenly Christians, who pay for sins? No. The Yamato way is not to pay for error, but to learn from it. We threw out the military and conquered the world with the excellence of our design and the reliability of our labor. The language of the Hundred Worlds may be based on English, but the money of the Hundred Worlds came originally from the yen."

"But the Yamato people still buy and sell," said Yasujiro. "We have not forgotten the lesson."

"That was only half the lesson. The other half was: We will not make war."

"But there is no Japanese fleet, no Japanese army."

"That is the lie we tell ourselves to cover our crimes," said Aimaina. "I had a visit two days ago from two strangers-- mortal humans, but I know the god sent them. They rebuked me because it is the Necessarian school that provided the pivotal votes in the Starways Congress to send the Lusitania Fleet. A fleet whose sole purpose is to repeat the crime of Ender the Xenocide and destroy a world that harbors a frail species of raman who do no harm to anyone!"

Yasujiro quailed under the weight of Aimaina's anger. "But master, what do I have to do with the military?"

"Yamato philosophers taught the theory that Yamato politicians acted upon. Japanese votes made the difference. This evil fleet must be stopped."

"Nothing can be stopped today," said Yasujiro. "The ansibles are all shut down, as are all the computer networks while the terrible all-eating virus is expelled from the system."

"Tomorrow the ansibles will come back again," said Aimaina. "And so tomorrow the shame of Japanese participation in xenocide must be averted."

"Why do you come to me?" said Yasujiro. "I may bear the name of my great ancestor, but half the boys in my family are named Yasujiro or Yoshiaki or Seiji. I am master of the Tsutsumi holdings in Nagoya--"

"Don't be modest. You are the Tsutsumi of the world of Divine Wind."

"I am listened to in other cities," said Yasujiro, "but the orders come from the family center on Honshu. And I have no political influence at all. If the problem is the Necessarians, talk to them!"

Aimaina sighed. "Oh, that would do no good. They would spend six months arguing about how to reconcile their new position with their old position, proving that they had not changed their minds after all, that their philosophy embraced the full 180-degree shift. And the politicians-- they are committed. Even if the philosophers change their minds, it would be at least a political generation-- three elections, the saying goes-- before the new policy would be in effect. Thirty years! The Lusitania Fleet will have done all its evil before then."

"Then what is there to do but despair and live in shame?" asked Yasujiro. "Unless you're planning some futile and stupid gesture." He grinned at his master, knowing that Aimaina would recognize the words he himself always used when denigrating the ancient practice of seppuku, ritual suicide, as something the Yamato spirit had left behind as a child leaves its diapers.

Aimaina did not laugh. "The Lusitania Fleet is seppuku for the Yamato spirit." He came and stood looming over Yasujiro-- or so it felt, though Yasujiro was taller than the old man by half a head. "The politicians have made the Lusitania Fleet popular, so the philosophers cannot now change their minds. But when philosophy and elections cannot change the minds of politicians, money can!"

"You are not suggesting something so shameful as bribery, are you?" said Yasujiro, wondering as he said it whether Aimaina knew how widespread the buying of politicians was.

"Do you think I keep my eyes in my anus?" asked Aimaina, using an expression so crude that Yasujiro gasped and averted his gaze, laughing nervously. "Do you think I don't know that there are ten ways to buy every crooked politician and a hundred ways to buy every honest one? Contributions, threats of sponsoring opponents, donations to noble causes, jobs given to relatives or friends-- do I have to recite the list?"

"You seriously want Tsutsumi money committed to stopping the Lusitania Fleet?"

Aimaina walked again to the window and spread out his arms as if to embrace all that could be seen of the outside world. "The Lusitania Fleet is bad for business, Yasujiro. If the Molecular Disruption Device is used against one world, it will be used against another. And the military, when it has such power placed again in its hands, this time will not let it go."

"Will I persuade the heads of my family by quoting your prophecy, master?"

"It is not a prophecy," said Aimaina, "and it is not mine. It is a law of human nature, and it is history that teaches it to us. Stop the fleet, and Tsutsumi will be known as the saviors, not only of the Yamato spirit, but of the human spirit as well. Do not let this grave sin be on the heads of our people."

"Forgive me, master, but it seems to me that you are the one putting it there. No one noticed that we bore responsibility for this sin until you said it here today."

"I do not put the sin there. I merely take off the hat that covers it. Yasujiro, you were one of my best students. I forgave you for using what I taught you in such complicated ways, because you did it for your family's sake."

"And this that you ask of me now-- this is perfectly simple?"

"I have taken the most direct action-- I have spoken plainly to the most powerful representative of the richest of the Japanese trading families that I could reach on this day. And what I ask of you is the minimum action required to do what is necessary."

"In this case the minimum puts my career at great risk," said Yasujiro thoughtfully.

Aimaina said nothing.

"My greatest teacher once told me," said Yasujiro, "that a man who has risked his life knows that careers are worthless, and a man who will not risk his career has a worthless life."

"So you will do it?"

"I will prepare my messages to make your case to all the Tsutsumi family. When the ansibles are linked again, I will send them."

"I knew you would not disappoint me."

"Better than that," said Yasujiro. "When I am thrown out of my job, I will come and live with you."

Aimaina bowed. "I would be honored to have you dwell in my house."

The lives of all people flow through time, and, regardless of how brutal one moment may be, how filled with grief or pain or fear, time flows through all lives equally. Minutes passed in which Val-Jane held the weeping Miro, and then time dried his tears, time loosened her embrace, and time, finally, ended Ela's patience.

"Let's get back to work," said Ela. "I'm not unfeeling, but our predicament is unchanged."

Quara was surprised. "But Jane's not dead. Doesn't that mean we can get back home?"

Val-Jane at once got up and moved back to her computer terminal. Every movement was easy because of the reflexes and habits the Val-brain had developed; but the Jane-mind found each movement fresh and new; she marveled at the dance of her fingers pressing the keys to control the display. "I don't know," Jane said, answering the question that Quara had voiced, but all were asking. "I'm still uncertain in this flesh. The ansibles haven't been restored. I do have a handful of allies who will relink some of my old programs to the network once it is restored-- some Samoans on Pacifica, Han Fei-tzu on Path, the Abo university on Outback. Will those programs be enough? Will the new networking software allow me to tap the resources I need to hold all the information of a starship and so many people in my mind? Will having this body interfere? Will my new link to the motherees be a help or a distraction?" And then the most important question: "Do we wish to be my first test flight?"

"Somebody has to," said Ela.

"I think I'll try one of the starships on Lusitania, if I can reestablish contact with them," said Jane. "With only a single hive queen worker on board. That way if it is lost, it will not be missed."

Jane turned to nod to the worker who was with them. "Begging your pardon, of course."

"You don't have to apologize to the worker," said Quara. "It's really just the Hive Queen anyway."

Jane looked over at Miro and winked. Miro did not wink back, but the look of sadness in his eyes was answer enough. He knew that the workers were not quite what everyone thought. The hive queens sometimes had to tame them, because not all of them were utterly subjected to their mother's will. But the was - it - or - wasn't - it slavery of the workers was a matter for another generation to work out.

"Languages," said Jane. "Carried by genetic molecules. What kind of grammar must they have? Are they linked to sounds, smells, sights? Let's see how smart we all are without me inside the computers helping." That struck her as so amazingly funny that she laughed aloud. Ah, how marvelous it was to have her own laughter sounding in her ears, bubbling upward from her lungs, spasming her diaphragm, bringing tears to her eyes!

Only when her laughter ended did she realize how leaden the sound of it must have been to Miro, to the others. "I'm sorry," she said, abashed, and felt a blush rising up her neck into her cheeks. Who could have believed it could burn so hot! It almost made her laugh again. "I'm not used to

being alive like this. I know I'm rejoicing when the rest of you are grim, but don't you see? Even if we all die when the air runs out in a few weeks, I can't help but marvel at how it feels to me!"

"We understand," said Firequencher. "You have passed into your Second Life. It's a joyful time for us, as well."

"I spent time among your trees, you know," said Jane. "Your mothertrees made space for me. Took me in and nurtured me. Does that make us brother and sister now?"

"I hardly know what it would mean, to have a sister," said Firequencher. "But if you remember the life in the dark of the mothertree, then you remember more than I do. We have dreams sometimes, but no real memories of the First Life in darkness. Still, that makes this your Third Life after all."

"Then I'm an adult?" asked Jane, and she laughed again.

And again felt how her laugh stilled the others, hurt them.

But something odd happened as she turned, ready to apologize again. Her glance fell upon Miro, and instead of saying the words she had planned-- the Jane-words that would have come out of the jewel in his ear only the day before-- other words came to her lips, along with a memory. "If my memories live, Miro, then I'm alive. Isn't that what you told me?"

Miro shook his head. "Are you speaking from Val's memory, or from Jane's memory when she-- when you-- overheard us speaking in the Hive Queen's cave? Don't comfort me by pretending to be her."

Jane, by habit-- Val's habit? or her own? --snapped, "When I comfort you, you'll know it."

"And how will I know?" Miro snapped back.

"Because you'll be comfortable, of course," said Val-Jane. "In the meantime, please keep in mind that I'm not listening through the jewel in your ear now. I see only with these eyes and hear only with these ears."

This was not strictly true, of course. For many times a second, she felt the flowing sap, the unstinting welcome of the mothertrees as her aiua satisfied its hunger for largeness by touring the vast network of the pequenino philotes. And now and then, outside the mothertrees, she caught a glimmer of a thought, of a word, a phrase, spoken in the language of the fathertrees. Or was it their language? Rather it was the language behind the language, the underlying speech of the speechless. And whose was that other voice? I know you-- you are of the kind that made me. I know your voice.

<We lost track of you,> said the Hive Queen in her mind. <But you did well without us.>

Jane was not prepared for the swelling of pride that glowed through her entire Val-body; she felt the physical effect of the emotion as Val, but her pride came from the praise of a hive-mother. I am

a daughter of hive queens, she realized, and so it matters when she speaks to me, and tells me I have done well.

And if I'm the hive queens' daughter, I am Ender's daughter, too, his daughter twice over, for they made my lifestuff partly from his mind, so I could be a bridge between them; and now I dwell in a body that also came from him, and whose memories are from a time when he dwelt here and lived this body's life. I am his daughter, but once again I cannot speak to him.

All this time, all these thoughts, and yet she did not show or even feel the slightest lapse of concentration on what she was doing with her computer on the starship circling the descolada planet. She was still Jane. It wasn't the computerness of her that had allowed her, all these years, to maintain many layers of attention and focus on many tasks at once. It was her hive-queen nature that allowed this.

<It was because you were an aiua powerful enough to do this that you were able to come to us in the first place,> said the Hive Queen in her mind.

Which of you is speaking to me? asked Jane.

<Does it matter? We all remember the making of you. We remember being there. We remember drawing you out of darkness into light.>

Am I still myself, then? Will I have again all the powers I lost when the Starways Congress killed my old virtual body?

<You might. When you find out, tell us. We will be very interested.>

And now she felt the sharp disappointment from a parent's unconcern, a sinking feeling in the stomach, a kind of shame. But this was a human emotion; it arose from the Val-body, though it was in response to her relationship with her hive-queen mothers. Everything was more complicated-- and yet it was simpler. Her feelings were now flagged by a body, which responded before she understood what she felt herself. In the old days, she scarcely knew she had feelings. She had them, yes, even irrational responses, desires below the level of consciousness-- these were attributes of all aiuas, when linked with others in any kind of life-- but there had been no simple signals to tell her what her feelings were. How easy it was to be a human, with your emotions expressed on the canvas of your own body. And yet how hard, because you couldn't hide your feelings from yourself half so easily.

<Get used to being frustrated with us, daughter,> said the Hive Queen. <You have a partly human nature, and we do not. We will not be tender with you as human mothers are. When you can't bear it, back away-- we won't pursue you.>

Thank you, she said silently ... and backed away.

At dawn the sun came up over the mountain that was the spine of the island, so that the sky was light long before any sunlight touched the trees directly. The wind off the sea had cooled them in the night. Peter awoke with Wang-mu curled into the curve of his body, like shrimps lined up on a market rack. The closeness of her felt good; it felt familiar. Yet how could it be? He had never slept so close to her before. Was it some vestigial Ender memory? He wasn't conscious of having any such memories. It had disappointed him, actually, when he realized it. He had thought that perhaps when his body had complete possession of the aiua, he would become Ender-- he would have a lifetime of real memories instead of the paltry faked-up memories that had come with his body when Ender created it. No such luck.

And yet he remembered sleeping with a woman curled against him. He remembered reaching across her, his arm like a sheltering bough.

But he had never touched Wang-mu that way. Nor was it right for him to do it now-- she was not his wife, only his ... friend? Was she that? She had said she loved him-- was that only a way to help him find his way into this body?

Then, suddenly, he felt himself falling away from himself, felt himself recede from Peter and become something else, something small and bright and terrified, descending down into darkness, out into a wind too strong for him to stand against it--

"Peter!"

The voice called him, and he followed it, back along the almost invisible phlotic threads that connected him to ... himself again. I am Peter. I have nowhere else to go. If I leave like that, I'll die.

"Are you all right?" asked Wang-mu. "I woke up because-- I'm sorry, but I dreamed, I felt as if I was losing you. But I wasn't, because here you are."

"I was losing my way," said Peter. "You could sense that?"

"I don't know what I sensed or not. I just-- how can I describe it?"

"You called me back from darkness," said Peter.

"Did I?"

He almost said something, but then stopped. Then laughed, uncomfortable and frightened. "I feel so odd. A moment ago I was about to say something. Something very flippant-- about how having to be Peter Wiggin was darkness enough by itself."

"Oh yes," said Wang-mu. "You always say such nasty things about yourself."

"But I didn't say it," said Peter. "I was about to, out of habit, but I stopped, because it wasn't true. Isn't that funny?"

"I think it's good."

"It makes sense that I should feel whole instead of being subdivided-- perhaps more content with myself or something. And yet I almost lost the whole thing. I think it wasn't just a dream. I think I really was letting go. Falling away into-- no, out of everything."

"You had three selves for several months," said Wang-mu. "Is it possible your aiua hungers for the-- I don't know, the size of what you used to be?"

"I was spread all over the galaxy, wasn't I? Except I want to say, 'Wasn't he,' because that was Ender, wasn't it. And I'm not Ender because I don't remember anything." He thought a moment. "Except maybe I do remember some things a little more clearly now. Things from my childhood. My mother's face. It's very clear, and I don't think it was before. And Valentine's face, when we were all children. But I'd remember that as Peter, wouldn't I, so it doesn't mean it comes from Ender, does it? I'm sure this is just one of the memories Ender supplied for me in the first place." He laughed. "I'm really desperate, aren't I, to find some sign of him in me."

Wang-mu sat listening. Silent, not making a great show of interest, but also content not to jump in with an answer or a comment.

Noticing her made him think of something else. "Are you some kind of, what would you call it, an empath? Do you normally feel what other people are feeling?"

"Never," said Wang-mu. "I'm too busy feeling what I'm feeling."

"But you knew that I was going. You felt that."

"I suppose," said Wang-mu, "that I'm bound up with you now. I hope that's all right, because it wasn't exactly voluntary on my part."

"But I'm bound up with you, too," said Peter. "Because when I was disconnected, I still heard you. All my other feelings were gone. My body wasn't giving me anything. I had lost my body. Now, when I remember what it felt like, I remember 'seeing' things, but that's just my human brain making sense of things that it can't actually make sense of. I know that I didn't see at all, or hear, or touch or anything at all. And yet I knew you were calling. I felt you-- needing me. Wanting me to come back. Surely that means that I am also bound up with you."

She shrugged, looked away.

"Now what does that mean?" he asked.

"I'm not going to spend the rest of my life explaining myself to you," said Wang-mu. "Everyone else has the privilege of just feeling and doing sometimes without analyzing it. What did it look like to you? You're the smart one who's an expert on human nature."

"Stop that," said Peter, pretending to be teasing but really wanting her to stop. "I remember we bantered about that, and I bragged I guess, but ... well I don't feel that way now. Is that part of having all of Ender in me? I know I don't understand people all that well. You looked away, you shrugged when I said I was bound up with you. That hurt my feelings, you know."

"And why is that?"

"Oh, you can ask why and I can't, are those the rules now?"

"Those have always been the rules," said Wang-mu. "You just never obeyed them."

"Well it hurt my feelings because I wanted you to be glad that I'm tied up with you and you with me."

"Are you glad?"

"Well it only saved my life, I think I'd have to be the king of the stupid people not to at least find it convenient!"

"Smell," she said, suddenly leaping to her feet.

She is so young, he thought.

And then, rising to his own feet, he was surprised to realize that he, too, was young, his body lithe and responsive.

And then he was surprised again to realize that Peter never remembered being any other way. It was Ender who had experienced an older body, one that got stiff when sleeping on the ground, a body that did not rise so easily to its feet. I do have Ender in me. I have the memories of his body. Why not the memories of his mind?

Perhaps because this brain has only the map of Peter's memories in it. All the rest of them are lurking just out of reach. And maybe I'll stumble on them now and then, connect them up, map new roads to get to them.

In the meantime, he was still getting up, standing beside Wang-mu, sniffing the air with her; and he was surprised again to realize that both activities had had his full attention. He had been thinking continuously of Wang-mu, of smelling what she smelled, wondering all the while whether he could just rest his hand on that small frail shoulder that seemed to need a hand the size of his to rest upon it; and at the same time, he had been engaged completely in speculation on how and whether he would be able to recover Ender's memories.

I could never do that before, thought Peter. And yet I must have been doing it ever since this body and the Valentine body were created. Concentrating on three things at once, in fact, not two.

But I wasn't strong enough to think of three things. One of them always sagged. Valentine for a while. Then Ender, until that body died. But two things-- I can think of two things at once. Is this remarkable? Or is it something that many humans could do, if only they had some occasion to learn?

What kind of vanity is this! thought Peter. Why should I care whether I'm unique in this ability? Except that I always did pride myself on being smarter and more capable than the people around me. Didn't let myself say it aloud, of course, or even admit it to myself, but be honest with yourself now, Peter! It's good to be smarter than other people. And if I can think of two things at once, while they can only think of one, why not take some pleasure in it!

Of course, thinking of two things is rather useless if both trains of thought are dumb. For while he played with questions of vanity and his competitive nature, he had also been concentrating on Wang-mu, and his hand had indeed reached out and touched her, and for a moment she leaned back against him, accepting his touch, until her head rested against his chest. And then, without warning or any provocation that he could think of, she suddenly pulled away from him and began to stride toward the Samoans who were gathered around Malu on the beach.

"What did I do?" asked Peter.

She turned around, looking puzzled. "You did just fine!" she said. "I didn't slap you or put my knee in your kintamas, did I? But it's breakfast-- Malu is praying and they've got more food than they had two nights ago, when we thought we'd die from eating it!"

And both of Peter's separate tracks of attention noticed that he was hungry, both severally and all at once. Neither he nor Wang-mu had eaten anything last night. For that matter, he had no memory of leaving the beach and coming to lie down with her on these mats. Somebody must have carried them. Well, that was no surprise. There wasn't a man or woman on that beach who didn't look like he could pick Peter up and break him like a pencil. As for Wang-mu, as he watched her run lightly toward the mountain range of Samoans gathered at water's edge, he thought she was like a bird flying toward a flock of cattle.

I'm not a child and never was one, not in this body, thought Peter. So I don't know if I'm even capable of childish longings and the grand romances of adolescence. And from Ender I have this sense of comfortableness in love; it isn't grand sweeping passions that I even expect to feel. Will the kind of love I have for you be enough, Wang-mu? To reach out to you when I'm in need, and to try to be here for you when you need me back. And to feel such tenderness when I look at you that I want to stand between you and all the world: and yet also to lift you up and carry you above the strong currents of life; and at the same time, I would be glad to stand always like this, at a distance, watching you, the beauty of you, your energy as you look up at these towering mound-people, speaking to them as an equal even though every movement of your hands, every fluting syllable of your speech cries out that you're a child-- is it enough for you that I feel these loves for you? Because it's enough for me. And enough for me that when my hand touched your shoulder, you leaned on me; and when you felt me slip away, you called my name.

Plikt sat alone in her room, writing and writing. She had been preparing all her life for this day-- to be writing the oration for Andrew Wiggin's funeral. She would speak his death-- and she had the research to do it, she could speak for a solid week and still not exhaust a tenth of what she knew about him. But she would not speak for a week. She would speak for a single hour. Less than an hour. She understood him; she loved him; she would share with others who did not know him what he was, how he loved, how history was different because this man, brilliant, imperfect, but wellmeaning and filled with a love that was strong enough to inflict suffering when it was needed-- how history was different because he lived, and how also ten thousand, a hundred thousand, millions of individual lives were also different, strengthened, clarified, lifted up, brightened, or at least made more consonant and truthful because of what he had said and done and written in his life.

And would she also tell this? Would she tell how bitterly one woman grieved alone in her room, weeping and weeping, not because of grief that Ender was gone, but because of shame at finally understanding herself. For though she had loved and admired him-- no, worshiped this man-- nevertheless when he died what she felt was not grief at all, but relief and excitement. Relief: The waiting is over! Excitement: My hour has come!

Of course that's what she felt. She wasn't such a fool as to expect herself to be of more than human moral strength. And the reason she didn't grieve as Novinha and Valentine grieved was because a great part of their lives had just been torn away from them. What was torn away from mine? Ender gave me a few dollops of his attention, but little more. We had only a few months when he was my teacher on Trondheim; then a generation later our lives touched again for these few months here; and both times he was preoccupied, he had more important things and people to attend to than me. I was not his wife. I was not his sister. I was only his student and disciple-- a man who was done with students and never wanted disciples. So of course no great part of my life was taken from me because he had only been my dream, never my companion.

I forgive myself and yet I cannot stop the shame and grief I feel, not because Andrew Wiggin died, but because in the hour of his death I showed myself to be what I really am: utterly selfish, concerned only with my own career. I chose to be the speaker of Ender's death. Therefore the moment of his death can only be the fulfillment of my life. What kind of vulture does that make me? What kind of parasite, a leech upon his life ...

And yet her fingers continued to type, sentence after sentence, despite the tears flowing down her cheeks. Off in Jakt's house, Valentine grieved with her husband and children. Over in Olhado's house, Grego and Olhado and Novinha had gathered to comfort each other, at the loss of the man who had been husband and father to them. They had their relationship to him, and I have mine. They have their private memories; mine will be public. I will speak, and then I will publish what I said, and what I am writing now will give new shape and meaning to the life of Ender Wiggin in the minds of every person of a hundred worlds. Ender the Xenocide; Andrew the Speaker for the Dead; Andrew the private man of loneliness and compassion; Ender the brilliant analyst who could pierce to the heart of problems and of people without being deflected by fear or ambition or ... or mercy. The man of justice and the man of mercy, coexisting in one body. The man whose compassion let him see and love the hive queens even before he ever touched one of them with his

hands; the man whose fierce justice let him destroy them all because he believed they were his enemy.

Would Ender judge me harshly for my ugly feelings on this day? Of course he would-- he would not spare me, he would know the worst that is in my heart.

But then, having judged me, he would also love me. He would say, So what? Get up and speak my death. If we waited for perfect people to be speakers for the dead, all funerals would be conducted in silence.

And so she wrote, and wept; and when the weeping was done, the writing went on. When the hair that he had left behind was sealed in a small box and buried in the grass near Human's root, she would stand and speak. Her voice would raise him from the dead, make him live again in memory. And she would also be merciful; and she would also be just. That much, at least, she had learned from him.

Chapter 12 -- "AM I BETRAYING ENDER?"

"Why do people act as if war and murder were unnatural? What's unnatural is to go your whole life without ever raising your hand in violence."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

"We're going about this all wrong," said Quara.

Miro felt the old familiar anger surge inside him. Quara had a knack for making people angry, and it didn't help that she seemed to know that she annoyed people and relished it. Anyone else in the ship could have said exactly the same sentence and Miro would have given them a fair hearing. But Quara managed to put an edge on the words that made it sound as if she thought everyone in the world but herself was stupid. Miro loved her as a sister, but he couldn't help it that he hated having to spend hour upon hour in her company.

Yet, because Quara was in fact the one among them most knowledgeable about the ur-language she had discovered months before in the descolada virus, Miro did not allow his inward sigh of exasperation to become audible. Instead he swiveled in his seat to listen.

So did the others, though Ela made less effort to hide her annoyance. Actually, she made none. "Well, Quara, why weren't we smart enough to notice our stupidity before."

Quara was oblivious to Ela's sarcasm-- or chose to appear oblivious, anyway. "How can we decipher a language out of the blue? We don't have any referents. But we do have complete records of the versions of the descolada virus. We know what it looked like before it adapted to the human metabolism. We know how it changed after each of our attempts to kill it. Some of the changes were functional-- it was adapting. But some of them were clerical-- it was keeping a record of what it did."

"We don't know that," said Ela with perhaps too much pleasure in correcting Quara.

"I know it," said Quara. "Anyway, it gives us a known context, doesn't it? We know what that language is about, even if we haven't been able to decode it."

"Well, now that you've said all that," said Ela, "I still have no idea how this new wisdom will help us decode the language. I mean, isn't that precisely what you've been working on for months?"

"Ah," said Quara. "I have. But what I haven't been able to do is speak the 'words' that the descolada virus recorded and see what answers we get back."

"Too dangerous," said Jane at once. "Absurdly dangerous. These people are capable of making viruses that completely destroy biospheres, and they're callous enough to use them. And you're proposing that we give to them precisely the weapon they used to devastate the pequeninos' planet? Which probably contains a complete record, not only of the pequeninos' metabolism, but of ours as well? Why not just slit our own throats and send them the blood?"

Miro noticed that when Jane spoke, the others looked almost stunned. Part of their response might have been to the difference between Val's diffidence and the bold attitude that Jane displayed. Part of it, too, might have been because the Jane they knew was more computerlike, less assertive. Miro, however, recognized this authoritarian style from the way she had often spoken into his ear through the jewel. In a way it was a pleasure for him to hear her again; it was also disturbing to hear it coming from the lips of someone else. Val was gone; Jane was back; it was awful; it was wonderful.

Because Miro was not so taken aback by Jane's attitude, he was the one to speak into the silence. "Quara's right, Jane. We don't have years and years to work this out-- we might have only a few weeks. Or less. We need to provoke a linguistic response. Get an answer from them, analyze the difference in language between their initial statements to us and the later ones."

"We're giving away too much," said Jane.

"No risk, no gain," said Miro.

"Too much risk, all dead," said Jane snidely. But in the snideness there was a familiar lilt, a kind of sauciness that said, I'm only playing. And that came, not from Jane-- Jane had never sounded like that-- but from Val. It hurt to hear it; it was good to hear it. Miro's dual responses to everything coming from Jane kept him constantly on edge. I love you, I miss you, I grieve for you, shut up; whom he was talking to seemed to change with the minutes.

"It's only the future of three sentient species we're gambling with," added Ela.

With that they all turned to Firequencher.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I'm just a tourist."

"Come on," said Miro. "You're here because your people are at risk the same as ours. This is a tough decision and you have to vote. You have the most at risk, actually, because even the earliest descolada codes we have might well reveal the whole biological history of your people since the virus first came among you."

"Then again," said Firequencher, "it might mean that since they already know how to destroy us, we have nothing to lose."

"Look," said Miro. "We have no evidence that these people have any kind of manned starflight. All they've sent out so far are probes."

"All that we know about," said Jane.

"And we've had no evidence of anybody coming around to check out how effective the descolada had been at transforming the biosphere of Lusitania to prepare it to receive colonists from this planet. So if they do have colony ships out there, either they're already on the way so what different does it make if we share this information, or they haven't sent any which means that they can't."

"Miro's right," said Quara, pouncing. Miro winced. He hated being on Quara's side, because now everybody's annoyance with her would rub off on him. "Either the cows are already out of the barn, so why bother shutting the door, or they can't get the door open anyway, so why put a lock on it?"

"What do you know about cows?" asked Ela disdainfully.

"After all these years of living and working with you," said Quara nastily, "I'd say I'm an expert."

"Girls, girls," said Jane. "Get a grip on yourselves."

Again, everyone but Miro turned to her in surprise. Val wouldn't have spoken up during a family conflict like this; nor would the Jane they knew-- though of course Miro was used to her speaking up all the time.

"We all know the risks of giving them information about us," said Miro. "We also know that we're making no headway and maybe we'll be able to learn something about the way this language works after having some give and take."

"It's not give and take," said Jane. "It's give and give. We give them information they probably can't get any other way, information that may well tell them everything they need to know in order to create new viruses that might well circumvent all our weapons against them. But since we have

no idea how that information is coded, or even where each specific datum is located, how can we interpret the answer? Besides, what if the answer is a new virus to destroy us?"

"They're sending us the information necessary to construct the virus," said Quara, her voice thick with contempt, as if she thought Jane were the stupidest person who ever lived, instead of arguably the most godlike in her brilliance. "But we're not going to build it. As long as it's just a graphic representation on a computer screen--"

"That's it," said Ela.

"What's it?" said Quara. It was her turn to be annoyed now, for obviously Ela was a step ahead of her on something.

"They aren't taking these signals and putting them up on a computer screen. We do that because we have a language written with symbols that we see with the naked eye. But they must read these broadcast signals more directly. The code comes in, and they somehow interpret it by following the instruction to make the molecule that's described in the broadcast. Then they 'read' it by-- what, smelling it? Swallowing it? The point is, if genetic molecules are their language, then they must somehow take them into their body as appropriately as the way we get the images of our writing from the paper into our eyes."

"I see," said Jane. "You're hypothesizing that they're expecting us to make a molecule out of what they send us, instead of just reading it on a screen and trying to abstract it and intellectualize it."

"For all we know," said Ela, "this could be how they discipline people. Or attack them. Send them a message. If they 'listen' they have to do it by reading the molecule into their bodies and letting it have its effect on them. So if the effect is poison or a killing disease, just hearing the message subjects them to the discipline. It's as if all our language had to be tapped out on the back of our neck. To listen, we'd have to lie down and expose ourself to whatever tool they chose to use to send the message. If it's a finger or a feather, well and good-- but if it's a broadaxe or a machete or a sledgehammer, too bad for us."

"It doesn't even have to be fatal," said Quara, her rivalry with Ela forgotten as she developed the idea in her own mind. "The molecules could be behavior-altering devices. To hear is literally to obey."

"I don't know if you're right in the particulars," said Jane. "But it gives the experiment much more potential for success. And it suggests that they might not have a delivery system that can attack us directly. That changes the probable risk."

"And people say you can't think well without your computer," said Miro.

At once he was embarrassed. He had inadvertently spoken to her as flippantly as he used to when he subvocalized so she could overhear him through the jewel. But now it sounded strangely cold of him, to tease her about having lost her computer network. He could joke that way with Jane-in-the-

jewel. But Jane-in-the-flesh was a different matter. She was now a human person. With feelings that had to be worried about.

Jane had feelings all along, thought Miro. But I didn't think much about them because ... because I didn't have to. Because I didn't see her. Because she wasn't, in a sense, real to me.

"I just meant ..." Miro said. "I just mean, good thinking."

"Thank you," said Jane. There wasn't a trace of irony in her voice, but Miro knew the irony was there all the same, because it was inherent in the situation. Miro, this uniprocessing human, was telling this brilliant being that she had thought well-- as if he were fit to judge her.

Suddenly he was angry, not at Jane, but at himself. Why should he have to watch every word he said, just because she had not acquired this body in the normal way? She may not have been human before, but she was certainly human now, and could be talked to like a human. If she was somehow different from other human beings, so what? All human beings were different from all others, and yet to be decent and polite, wasn't he supposed to treat everyone basically alike? Wouldn't he say, "Do you see what I mean?" to a blind person, expecting the metaphorical use of "see" to be taken without umbrage? Well, why not say, "Good thinking," to Jane? Just because her thought processes were unfathomably deep to a human didn't mean that a human couldn't use a standard expression of agreement and approval when speaking to her.

Looking at her now, Miro could see a kind of sadness in her eyes. No doubt it came from his obvious confusion-- after joking with her as he always had, suddenly he was embarrassed, suddenly he backtracked. That was why her "Thank you" had been ironic. Because she wanted him to be natural with her, and he couldn't.

No, he hadn't been natural, but he certainly could.

And what did it matter, anyway? They were here to solve the problem of the descoladores, not to work out the kinks in their personal relationships after the wholesale body swap.

"Do I take it we have agreement?" asked Ela. "To send messages encoded with the information contained on the descolada virus?"

"The first one only," said Jane. "At least to start."

"And when they answer," said Ela, "I'll try to run a simulation of what would happen if we constructed and ingested the molecule they send us."

"If they send us one," said Miro. "If we're even on the right track."

"Well aren't you Mr. Cheer," said Quara.

"I'm Mr. Scared-From-Ass-To-Ankles," said Miro. "Whereas you are just plain old Miss Ass."

"Can't we all get along?" said Jane, whining, teasing. "Can't we all be friends?"

Quara whirled on her. "Listen, you! I don't care what kind of superbrain you used to be, you just stay out of family conversations, do you hear?"

"Look around, Quara!" Miro snapped at her. "If she stayed out of family conversations, when could she talk?"

Firequencher raised his hand. "I've been staying out of family conversations. Do I get credit for that?"

Jane gestured to quell both Miro and Firequencher. "Quara," she said quietly, "I'll tell you the real difference between me and your brother and sister here. They're used to you because they've known you all your life. They're loyal to you because you and they went through some lousy experiences in your family. They're patient with your childish outbursts and your asinine bullheadedness because they tell themselves, over and over, she can't help it, she had such a troubled childhood. But I'm not a family member, Quara. I, however, as someone who has observed you in times of crisis for some time, am not afraid to tell you my candid conclusions. You are quite brilliant and very good at what you do. You are often perceptive and creative, and you drive toward solutions with astonishing directness and perseverance."

"Excuse me," said Quara, "are you telling me off or what?"

"But," said Jane, "you are not smart and creative and clever and direct and perseverent enough to make it worth putting up with more than fifteen seconds of the egregious bullshit you heap on your family and everyone else around you every minute you're awake. So you had a lousy childhood. That was a few years ago, and you are expected now to put that behind you and get along with other people like a normally courteous adult."

"In other words," said Quara, "you don't like having to admit that anybody but you might be smart enough to have an idea that you didn't think of."

"You aren't understanding me," said Jane. "I'm not your sister. I'm not even, technically speaking, human. If this ship ever gets back to Lusitania, it will be because I, with my mind, send it there. Do you get that? Do you understand the difference between us? Can you send even one fleck of dust from your lap to mine?"

"I don't notice you sending starships anywhere right at the moment," said Quara triumphantly.

"You continue to attempt to score points off me without realizing that I am not having an argument with you or even a discussion. What you say to me right now is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is what I'm saying to you. And I'm saying that while your siblings put up with the unendurable from you, I will not. Keep on the way you're going, you spoiled little baby, and when this starship goes back to Lusitania you might not be on it."

The look on Quara's face almost made Miro laugh aloud. He knew, however, that this would not be a wise moment to express his mirth.

"She's threatening me," said Quara to the others. "Do you hear this? She's trying to coerce me by threatening to kill me."

"I would never kill you," said Jane. "But I might be unable to conceive of your presence on this starship when I push it Outside and then pull it back In. The thought of you might be so unendurable that my unconscious mind would reject that thought and exclude you. I really don't understand, consciously, how the whole thing works. I don't know how it relates to my feelings. I've never tried to transport anybody I really hated before. I would certainly try to bring you along with the others, if only because, for reasons passing understanding, Miro and Ela would probably be testy with me if I didn't. But trying isn't necessarily succeeding. So I suggest, Quara, that you expend some effort on trying to be a little less loathsome."

"So that's what power is to you," said Quara. "A chance to push other people around and act like the queen."

"You really can't do it, can you?" said Jane.

"Can't what?" said Quara. "Can't bow down and kiss your feet?"

"Can't shut up to save your own life."

"I'm trying to solve the problem of communicating with an alien species, and you're busy worrying about whether I'm nice enough to you."

"But Quara," said Jane, "hasn't it ever occurred to you that once they get to know you, even the aliens will wish you had never learned their language?"

"I'm certainly wishing you had never learned mine," said Quara. "You're certainly full of yourself, now that you have this pretty little body to play around with. Well, you're not queen of the universe and I'm not going to dance through hoops for you. It wasn't my idea to come on this voyage, but I'm here-- I'm here, the whole obnoxious package-- and if there's something about me that you don't like, why don't you shut up about it? And as long as we're making threats, I think that if you push me too far I'll rearrange your face more to my liking. Is that clear?"

Jane unstrapped herself from her seat and drifted from the main cabin into the corridor leading into the storage compartments of the shuttle. Miro followed her, ignoring Quara as she said to the others, "Can you believe how she talked to me? Who does she think she is, judging who's too irritating to live?"

Miro followed Jane into a storage compartment. She was clinging to a handhold on the far wall, bent over and heaving in a way that made Miro wonder if she was throwing up. But no. She was crying. Or rather, she was so enraged that her body was sobbing and producing tears from the sheer uncontainability of the emotion. Miro touched her shoulder to try to calm her. She recoiled.

For a moment he almost said, Fine, have it your way; then he would have left, angry himself, frustrated that she wouldn't accept his comfort. But then he remembered that she had never been this angry before. She had never had to deal with a body that responded like this. At first, when she began rebuking Quara, Miro had thought, It's about time somebody laid it on the line. But when the argument went on and on, Miro realized that it wasn't Quara who was out of control, it was Jane. She didn't know how to deal with her emotions. She didn't know when it wasn't worth going on. She felt what she was feeling, and she didn't know how to do anything but express it.

"That was hard," Miro said. "Cutting off the argument and coming in here."

"I wanted to kill her," said Jane. Her voice was almost unintelligible from the weeping, from the savage tension in her body. "I've never felt anything like it. I wanted to get out of the chair and tear her apart with my bare hands."

"Welcome to the club," said Miro.

"You don't understand," she said. "I really wanted to do it. I felt my muscles flexing, I was ready to do it. I was going to do it."

"As I said. Quara makes us all feel that way."

"No," said Jane. "Not like this. You all stay calm, you all stay in control."

"And you will, too," said Miro, "when you have a little more practice."

Jane lifted her head, leaned it back, shook it. Her hair swung weightlessly free in the air. "Do you really feel this?"

"All of us do," said Miro. "That's why we have a childhood-- to learn to get over our violent tendencies. But they're in us all. Chimps and baboons do it. All the primates. We display. We have to express our rage physically."

"But you don't. You stay so calm. You let her spout off and say these horrible--"

"Because it's not worth the trouble of stopping her," said Miro. "She pays the price for it. She's desperately lonely and nobody deliberately seeks an opportunity to spend time in her company."

"Which is the only reason she isn't dead."

"That's right," said Miro. "That's what civilized people do they avoid the circumstance that enrages them. Or if they can't avoid it, they detach. That's what Ela and I do, mostly. We just detach. We just let her provocations roll over us."

"I can't do it," said Jane. "It was so simple before I felt these things. I could tune her out."

"That's it," said Miro. "That's what we do. We tune her out."

"It's more complicated than I thought," said Jane. "I don't know if I can do it."

"Yeah, well, you don't have much choice right now, do you," he said.

"Miro, I'm so sorry. I always felt such pity for you humans because you could only think of one thing at a time and your memories were so imperfect and ... now I realize that just getting through the day without killing somebody can be an achievement."

"It gets to be a habit. Most of us manage to keep our body count quite low. It's the neighborly way to live."

It took a moment-- a sob, and then a hiccough-- but then she did laugh. A sweet, soft chuckle that was such a welcome sound to Miro. Welcome because it was a voice he knew and loved, a laugh that he liked to hear. And it was his dear friend who was doing the laughing. His dear friend Jane. The laugh, the voice of his beloved Val. One person now. After all this time, he could reach out his hand and touch Jane, who had always been impossibly far away. Like having a friendship over the telephone and finally meeting face-to-face.

He touched her again, and she took his hand and held it.

"I'm sorry I let my own weakness get in the way of what we're doing," said Jane.

"You're only human," said Miro.

She looked at him, searched his face for irony, for bitterness.

"I mean it," said Miro. "The price of having these emotions, these passions, is that you have to control them, you have to bear them when they're too strong to bear. You're only human now. You'll never make these feelings go away. You just have to learn not to act on them."

"Quara never learned."

"Quara learned, all right," said Miro. "It's just my opinion, but Quara loved Marcoa, adored him, and when he died and the rest of us felt so liberated, she was lost. What she does now, this constant provocation-- she's asking somebody to abuse her. To hit her. The way Marcoa always hit Mother whenever he was provoked. I think in some perverse way Quara was always jealous of Mother when she got to go off alone with Papa, and even though she finally figured out that he was beating her up, when Quara wanted her papa back the only way she knew of to demand his attention was-- this mouth of hers." Miro laughed bitterly. "It reminds me of Mother, to tell the truth. You've never heard her, but in the old days, when she was trapped in marriage with Marcoa and having Libo's babies-- oh, she had a mouth on her. I'd sit there and listen to her provoking Marcoa, goading him, stabbing at him, until he'd hit her-- and I'd think, Don't you dare lay a hand on my mother, and at the same time I'd absolutely understand his impotent rage, because he could never, never, never say

anything that would shut her up. Only his fist could do it. And Quara has that mouth, and needs that rage."

"Well, how happy for us all, then, that I gave her just what she needed."

Miro laughed. "But she didn't need it from you. She needed it from Marcao, and he's dead."

And then, suddenly, Jane burst into real tears. Tears of grief, and she turned to Miro and clung to him.

"What is it?" he said. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Miro," she said. "Ender's dead. I'll never see him again. I have a body at last, I have eyes to see him, and he isn't there."

Miro was stunned. Of course she missed Ender. She had thousands of years with him, and only a few years, really, with me. How could I have thought she could love me? How can I ever hope to compare with Ender Wiggin? What am I, compared to the man who commanded fleets, who transformed the minds of trillions of people with his books, his speakings, his insight, his ability to see into the hearts of other people and speak their own most private stories back to them? And yet even as he resented Ender, even as he envied him because Jane would always love him more and Miro couldn't hope to compete with him even in death, despite these feelings it finally came home to him that yes, Ender was dead. Ender, who had transformed his family, who had been a true friend to him, who had been the only man in Miro's life that he longed with all his heart to be, Ender was gone. Miro's tears of grief flowed along with Jane's.

"I'm sorry," said Jane. "I can't control any of my emotions."

"Yes, well, it's a common failing, actually," said Miro.

She reached up and touched the tears on his cheek. Then she touched her damp finger to her own cheek. The tears commingled. "Do you know why I thought of Ender right then?" she said. "Because you're so much like him. Quara annoys you as much as she annoys anyone, and yet you look past that and see what her needs are, why she says and does these things. No, no, relax, Miro, I'm not expecting you to be like Ender, I'm just saying that one of the things I liked best about him is also in you-- that's not bad, is it? The compassionate perception-- I may be new at being human, but I'm pretty sure that's a rare commodity."

"I don't know," said Miro. "The only person I'm feeling compassion for right now is me. They call it self-pity, and it isn't an attractive trait."

"Why are you feeling sorry for yourself?"

"Because you'll go on needing Ender all your life, and all you'll ever find is poor substitutes, like me."

She held him tighter then. She was the one giving comfort now. "Oh, Miro, maybe that's true. But if it is, it's true the way it's true that Quara is still trying to get her father's attention. You never stop needing your father or your mother, isn't that right? You never stop reacting to them, even when they're dead."

Father? That had never crossed Miro's mind before. Jane loved Ender, deeply, yes, loved him forever-- but as a father?

"I can't be your father," said Miro. "I can't take his place." But what he was really doing was making sure he had understood her. Ender was her father?

"I don't want you to be my father," said Jane. "I still have all these old Val-feelings, you know. I mean, you and I were friends, right? That was very important to me. But now I have this Val body, and when you touch me, it keeps feeling like the answer to a prayer." At once she regretted saying it. "Oh, I'm sorry, Miro, I know you miss her."

"I do," said Miro. "But then, it's hard to miss her quite the way I might, since you do look a lot like her. And you sound like her. And here I am holding you the way I wanted to hold her, and if that sounds awful because I'm supposedly comforting you and I shouldn't be thinking of base desires, well then I'm just an awful kind of guy, right?"

"Awful," she said. "I'm ashamed to know you." And she kissed him. Sweetly, awkwardly.

He remembered his first kiss with Ouanda years ago, when he was young and didn't know how badly things could turn out. They had both been awkward then, new, clumsy. Young. Jane, now, Jane was one of the oldest creatures in the universe. But also one of the youngest. And Val-- there would be no reflexes in the Val body for Jane to draw upon, for in Val's short life, what chance had she had to find love?

"Was that even close to the way humans do that?" asked Jane.

"That was exactly the way humans sometimes do it," said Miro. "Which isn't surprising, since we're both human."

"Am I betraying Ender, to grieve for him one moment, and then be so happy to have you holding me the next?"

"Am I betraying him, to be so happy only hours after he died?"

"Only he's not dead," said Jane. "I know where he is. I chased him there."

"If he's exactly the same person he was," said Miro, "then what a shame. Because good as he was, he wasn't happy. He had his moments, but he was never-- what, he was never really at peace. Wouldn't it be nice if Peter could live out a full life without ever having to bear the guilt of xenocide? Without ever having to feel the weight of all of humanity on his shoulders?"

"Speaking of which," said Jane, "we have work to do."

"We also have lives to live," said Miro. "I'm not going to be sorry we had this encounter. Even if it took Quara's bitchiness to make it happen."

"Let's do the civilized thing," said Jane. "Let's get married. Let's have babies. I do want to be human, Miro, I want to do everything. I want to be part of human life from edge to edge. And I want to do it all with you."

"Is this a proposal?" asked Miro.

"I died and was reborn only a dozen hours ago," said Jane. "My-- hell, I can call him my father, can't I? --my father died, too. Life is short, I feel how short it is: after three thousand years, all of them intense, it still feels too short. I'm in a hurry. And you, haven't you wasted enough time, too? Aren't you ready?"

"But I don't have a ring."

"We have something much better than a ring," said Jane. She touched her cheek again, where she had put his tear. It was still damp; still damp, too, when she touched the finger now to his cheek. "I've had your tears with mine, and you've had mine with yours. I think that's more intimate even than a kiss."

"Maybe," said Miro. "But not as fun."

"This emotion I'm feeling now, this is love, right?"

"I don't know. Is it a longing? Is it a giddy stupid happiness just because you're with me?"

"Yes," she said.

"That's influenza," said Miro. "Watch for nausea or diarrhea within a few hours."

She shoved him, and in the weightless starship the movement sent him helplessly into midair until he struck another surface. "What?" he said, pretending innocence. "What did I say?"

She pushed herself away from the wall and went to the door. "Come on," she said. "Back to work."

"Let's not announce our engagement," he said softly.

"Why not?" she asked. "Ashamed already?"

"No," he said. "Maybe it's petty of me, but when we announce it, I don't want Quara there."

"That's very small of you," said Jane. "You need to be more magnanimous and patient, like me."

"I know," said Miro. "I'm trying to learn."

They drifted back into the main chamber of the shuttle. The others were working on preparing their genetic message for broadcast on the frequency that the descoladores had used to challenge them when they first showed up closer to the planet. They all looked up. Ela smiled wanly. Firequencher waved cheerfully.

Quara tossed her head. "Well I hope we're done with that little emotional outburst," she said.

Miro could feel Jane seethe at the remark. But Jane said nothing. And when they were both sitting down and strapped back into their seats, they looked at each other, and Jane winked.

"I saw that," said Quara.

"We meant you to," said Miro.

"Grow up," Quara said disdainfully.

An hour later they sent their message. And at once they were inundated with answers that they could not understand, but had to. There was no time for quarreling then, or for love, or for grief. There was only language, thick, broad fields of alien messages that had to be understood somehow, by them, right now.

Chapter 13 -- "TILL DEATH ENDS ALL SURPRISES"

"I can't say that I've much enjoyed the work the gods required of me. My only real pleasure was my days of schooling, in those hours between the gods' sharp summonses. I am gladly at their service, always, but oh it was so sweet to learn how wide the universe could be, to test myself against my teachers, and to fail sometimes without much consequence."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

"Do you want to come to the university and watch us turn on our new godproof computer network?" asked Grace.

Of course Peter and Wang-mu wanted to. But to their surprise, Malu cackled with delight and insisted that he must go, too. The god once dwelt in computers, didn't she? And if she found her way back, shouldn't Malu be there to greet her?

This complicated matters a little-- for Malu to visit the university required notifying the president so he could assemble a proper welcome. This was not needed for Malu, who was neither vain nor much impressed with ceremonies that didn't have some immediate purpose. The point was to show the Samoan people that the university still had proper respect for the old ways, of which Malu was the most revered protector and practitioner.

From luaus of fruit and fish on the beach, from open fires, palm mats, and thatch-roof huts, to a hovercar, a highway, and the brightpainted buildings of the modern university-- it felt to Wang-mu like a journey through the history of the human race. And yet she had already made that journey once before, from Path; it seemed a part of her life, to step from the ancient to the modern, back and forth. She felt rather sorry for those who knew only one and not the other. It was better, she thought, to be able to select from the whole menu of human achievements than to be bound within one narrow range.

Peter and Wang-mu were discreetly dropped off before the hovercar took Malu to the official reception. Grace's son took them on a brief tour of the brand-new computer facility. "These new computers all follow the protocols sent to us from Starways Congress. There will be no more direct connections between computer networks and ansibles. Rather there must be a time delay, with each infopacket inspected by referee software that will catch unauthorized piggybacking."

"In other words," said Peter, "Jane will never get back in."

"That's the plan." The boy-- for despite his size, that's what he seemed to be-- grinned broadly. "All perfect, all new, all in total compliance."

Wang-mu felt sick inside. This is how it would be all over the Hundred Worlds-- Jane blocked out of everything. And without access to the enormous computing capacity of the combined networks of all of human civilization, how could she possibly regain the power to pop a starship Out and In again? Wang-mu had been glad enough to leave Path. But she was by no means certain that Pacifica was the world where she wanted to live the rest of her life. Especially if she was to stay with Peter, for there was no chance he would be content for long with the slower, more lackadaisical timeflow of life in the islands. Truth be known, it was too slow for her, too. She loved her time with the Samoans, but the impatience to be doing something was growing inside her. Perhaps those who grew up among these people might somehow sublimate their ambition, or perhaps there was something in the racial genotype that suppressed it or replaced it, but Wang-mu's incessant drive to strengthen and expand her role in life was certainly not going to go away just because of a luau on the beach, however much she enjoyed it and would treasure the memory of it.

The tour wasn't over yet, of course, and Wang-mu dutifully followed Grace's son wherever he led. But she hardly paid attention beyond what was needed to make polite responses. Peter seemed even more distracted, and Wang-mu could guess why. He would have not only the same feelings Wang-mu had, but he must also be grieving for the loss of connection with Jane through the jewel in his ear. If she did not recover her ability to control data flow through the communications satellites orbiting this world, he would not hear her voice again.

They came to an older section of campus, some rundown buildings in a more utilitarian architectural style. "Nobody likes coming here," he said, "because it reminds them of how recently our university became anything more than a school for training engineers and teachers. This building is three hundred years old. Come inside."

"Do we have to?" asked Wang-mu. "I mean, is it necessary? I think we get the idea from the outside."

"Oh, but I think you want to see this place. Very interesting, because it preserves some of the old ways of doing things."

Wang-mu of course agreed to follow, as courtesy required, and Peter wordlessly went along. They came inside and heard the humming of ancient air-conditioning systems and felt the harsh refrigerated air. "These are the old ways?" asked Wang-mu. "Not as old as life on the beach, I think."

"Not as old, that's true," said their guide. "But then, we're not preserving the same thing here."

They came into a large room with hundreds and hundreds of computers arranged in crowded rows along tables that stretched from end to end. There was no room for anyone to sit at these machines; there was barely enough space between the tables for technicians to slide along to tend to them. All the computers were on, but the air above all the terminals was empty, giving no clue about what was going on inside them.

"We had to do something with all those old computers that Starways Congress made us take offline. So we put them here. And also the old computers from most of the other universities and businesses in the islands-- Hawaiian, Tahitian, Maori, on and on-- everyone helped. It goes up six stories, every floor just like this, and three other buildings, though this one is the biggest."

"Jane," said Peter, and he smiled.

"Here's where we stored everything she gave us. Of course, on the record these computers are not connected by any network. They are only used for training students. But Congress inspectors never come here. They saw all they wanted to see when they looked at our new installation. Up to code, complying with the rules-- we are obedient and loyal citizens! Here, though, I'm afraid there have been some oversights. For instance, there seems to be an intermittent connection with the university's ansible. Whenever the ansible is actually passing messages offworld, it is connected to no computers except through the official safeguarded time-delayed link. But when the ansible is connected to a handful of eccentric destinations-- the Samoan satellite, for instance, or a certain faroff colony that is supposedly incommunicado to all ansibles in the Hundred Worlds-- then an old forgotten connection kicks in, and the ansible has complete use of all of this."

Peter laughed with genuine mirth. Wang-mu loved the sound of it, but also felt just a little jealousy at the thought that Jane might well come back to him.

"And another odd thing," said Grace's son. "One of the new computers has been installed here, only there've been some alterations. It doesn't seem to report correctly to the master program. It neglects to inform that master program that there is a hyperfast realtime link to this nonexistent old-style network. It's a shame that it doesn't report on this, because of course it allows a completely illegal connection between this old, ansible-connected network and the new godproof system. And so requests for information can be passed, and they'll look perfectly legal to any inspection software, since they come from this perfectly legal but astonishingly flawed new computer."

Peter was grinning broadly. "Well, somebody had to work pretty fast to get this done."

"Malu told us that the god was going to die, but between us and the god we were able to devise a plan. Now the only question is-- can she find her way back here?"

"I think she will," said Peter. "Of course, this isn't what she used to have, not even a small fraction of it."

"We understand that she has a couple of similar installations here and there. Not many, you're right, and the new time-delay barriers will make it so that yes, she has access to all the information, but she can't use most of the new networks as part of her thought processes. Still, it's something. Maybe it's enough."

"You knew who we were before we got here," said Wang-mu. "You were already part of Jane's work."

"I think the evidence speaks for itself," said Grace's son.

"Then why did Jane bring us here?" asked Wang-mu. "What was all this nonsense about needing to have us here so we could stop the Lusitania Fleet?"

"I don't know," said Peter. "And I doubt anyone here knows, either. Maybe, though, Jane simply wanted us in a friendly environment, so she could find us again. I doubt there's anything like this on Divine Wind."

"And maybe," Wang-mu said, following her own speculations, "maybe she wanted you here, with Malu and Grace, when the time came for her to die."

"And for me to die as well," said Peter. "Meaning me as Ender, of course."

"And maybe," said Wang-mu, "if she was no longer going to be there to protect us through her manipulations of data, she wanted us to be among friends."

"Of course," said Grace's son. "She is a god, she takes care of her people."

"Her worshipers, you mean?" asked Wang-mu.

Peter snorted.

"Her friends," said the boy. "In Samoa we treat the gods with great respect, but we are also their friends, and we help the good ones when we can. Gods need the help of humans now and then. I think we did all right, don't you?"

"You did well," said Peter. "You have been faithful indeed."

The boy beamed.

Soon they were back in the new computer installation, watching as with great ceremony the president of the university pushed the key to activate the program that turned on and monitored the university ansible. Immediately there were messages and test programs from Starways Congress, probing and inspecting the university's system to make sure there were no lapses in security and that all protocols had been properly followed. Wang-mu could feel how tense everyone was-- except Malu, who seemed incapable of dread-- until, a few minutes later, the programs finished their inspection and made their report. The message came immediately from Congress that this network was compliant and secure. The fakes and fudges had not been detected.

"Any time now," murmured Grace.

"How will we know if all of this has worked?" asked Wang-mu soffly.

"Peter will tell us," answered Grace, sounding surprised that Wang-mu had not already understood this. "The jewel in his ear-- the Samoan satellite will speak to it."

Olhado and Grego stood watching the readout from the ansible that for twenty years had connected only to the shuttle and Jakt's starship. It was receiving a message again. Links were being established with four ansibles on other worlds, where groups of Lusitanian sympathizers-- or at least friends of Jane's-- had followed Jane's instructions on how to partially circumvent the new regulations. No actual messages were sent, because there was nothing for the humans to say to each other. The point was simply to keep the link alive so Jane might travel on it and link herself with some small part of her old capacity.

None of this had been done with any human participation on Lusitania. All the programming that was required had been accomplished by the relentlessly efficient workers of the Hive Queen, with the help of pequeninos now and then. Olhado and Grego had been invited at the last minute, as observers only. But they understood. Jane was talking to the Hive Queen and the Hive Queen talked to the fathertrees. Jane had not worked through humans because the Lusitanian humans she worked with had been Miro, who had other work to do for her, and Ender, who had removed the jewel from his ear before he died. Olhado and Grego had talked this out as soon as the pequenino Waterjumper had explained to them what was going on and asked them to come observe. "I think she was feeling a bit defiant," said Olhado. "If Ender rejected her and Miro was busy--"

"Or gaga-eyed over Young Valentine, don't forget," said Grego.

"Well, she'd do it without human help."

"How can it work?" said Grego. "She was connected to billions of computers before. At most she'll have several thousand now, at least directly usable. It's not enough. Ela and Quara are never coming home. Or Miro."

"Maybe not," said Olhado. "It won't be the first time we've lost family members in the service of a higher cause." He thought of Mother's famous parents, Os Venerados, who lacked only the years now for sainthood-- if a representative of the Pope should ever come to Lusitania to examine the evidence. And their real father, Libo, and his father, both of whom died before Novinha's children ever guessed that they were kin. All dead in the cause of science, Os Venerados in the struggle to contain the descolada, Pipo and Libo in the effort to communicate with and understand the pequeninos. Their brother Quim had died as a martyr, trying to heal a dangerous breach in the relationship between humans and pequeninos on Lusitania. And now Ender, their adoptive father, had died in the cause of trying to find a way to save Jane's life and, with her, faster-than-light travel. If Miro and Ela and Quara should die in the effort to establish communications with the descoladores, it would be a part of the family tradition. "What I wonder," said Olhado, "is what's wrong with us, that we haven't been asked to die in a noble cause."

"I don't know about noble causes," said Grego, "but we do have a fleet aimed at us. That will do, I think, for getting us dead."

A sudden flurry of activity at the computer terminals told them that their wait was over. "We've linked with Samoa," said Waterjumper. "And now Memphis. And Path. Hegira." He did the little jig that pequeninos invariably did when they were delighted. "They're all going to come online. The snooper programs didn't find them."

"But will it be enough?" asked Grego. "Do the starships move again?"

Waterjumper shrugged elaborately. "We'll know when your family gets back, won't we?"

"Mother doesn't want to schedule Ender's funeral until they're back," said Grego.

At the mention of Ender's name, Waterjumper slumped. "The man who took Human into the Third Life," he said. "And there's almost nothing of him to bury."

"I'm just wondering," said Grego, "if it will be days or weeks or months before Jane finds her way back into her powers-- if she can do it at all."

"I don't know," said Waterjumper.

"They only have a few weeks of air," said Grego.

"He doesn't know, Grego," said Olhado.

"I know that," said Grego. "But the Hive Queen knows. And she'll tell the fathertrees. I thought ... word might have seeped down."

"How could even the Hive Queen know what will happen in the future?" asked Olhado. "How can anyone know what Jane can or can't accomplish? We've linked again with worlds outside of this one. Some parts of her core memory have been restored to the ansible net, however surreptitiously. She might find them. She might not. If found, they might be enough, or might not. But Waterjumper doesn't know."

Grego turned away. "I know," he said.

"We're all afraid," said Olhado. "Even the Hive Queen. None of us wants to die."

"Jane died, but didn't stay dead," said Grego. "According to Miro, Ender's aiua is supposedly off living as Peter on some other world. Hive queens die and their memories live on in their daughters' minds. Pequeninos get to live as trees."

"Some of us," said Waterjumper.

"But what of us?" said Grego. "Will we be extinguished? What difference does it make then, the ones of us who had plans, what does it matter the work we've done? The children we've raised?" He looked pointedly at Olhado. "What will it matter then, that you have such a big happy family, if you're all erased in one instant by that ... bomb?"

"Not one moment of my life with my family has been wasted," said Olhado quietly.

"But the point of it is to go on, isn't it? To connect with the future?"

"That's one part, yes," said Olhado. "But part of the purpose of it is now, is the moment. And part of it is the web of connections. Links from soul to soul. If the purpose of life was just to continue into the future, then none of it would have meaning, because it would be all anticipation and preparation. There's fruition, Grego. There's the happiness we've already had. The happiness of each moment. The end of our lives, even if there's no forward continuation, no progeny at all, the end of our lives doesn't erase the beginning."

"But it won't have amounted to anything," said Grego. "If your children die, then it was all a waste."

"No," said Olhado quietly. "You say that because you have no children, Greguinho. But none of it is wasted. The child you hold in your arms for only a day before he dies, that is not wasted, because that one day is enough of a purpose in itself. Entropy has been thrown back for an hour, a day, a week, a month. Just because we might all die here on this little world does not undo the lives before the deaths."

Grego shook his head. "Yes it does, Olhado. Death undoes everything."

Olhado shrugged. "Then why do you bother doing everything, Grego? Because someday you will die. Why should anyone ever have children? Someday they will die, their children will die, all children will die. Someday stars will wind down or blow up. Someday death will cover us all like the water of a lake and perhaps nothing will ever come to the surface to show that we were ever there. But we were there, and during the time we lived, we were alive. That's the truth-- what is, what was, what will be-- not what could be, what should have been, what never can be. If we die, then our death has meaning to the rest of the universe. Even if our lives are unknown, the fact that someone lived here, and died, that will have repercussions, that will shape the universe."

"So that's meaning enough for you?" said Grego. "To die as an object lesson? To die so that people can feel awful about having killed you?"

"There are worse meanings for a life to have."

Waterjumper interrupted them. "The last of the ansibles we expected is online. We have them all connected now."

They stopped talking. It was time for Jane to find her way back into herself, if she could.

They waited.

Through one of her workers, the Hive Queen saw and heard the news of the restoration of the ansible links. <It's time,> she told the fathertrees.

<Can she do it? Can you lead her?>

<I can't lead her to a place where I can't go myself,> said the Hive Queen. <She has to find her own way. All I can do right now is tell her that it's time.>

<So we can only watch?>

<I can only watch,> said the Hive Queen. <You are part of her, or she of you. Her aiua is tied now to your web through the mothertrees. Be ready.>

<For what?>

<For Jane's need.>

<What will she need? When will she need it?>

<I have no idea.>

At his terminal on the stranded starship, the Hive Queen's worker suddenly looked up, then arose from her seat and walked to Jane.

Jane looked up from her work. "What is it?" she asked distractedly. And then, remembering the signal she was waiting for, she looked over at Miro, who had turned to see what was happening. "I've got to go now," she said.

Then she flopped back in her seat as if she had fainted.

At once Miro was out of his chair; Ela wasn't far behind. The worker had already unfastened Jane from the chair and was lifting her off. Miro helped her draw Jane's body through the corridors of weightless space to the beds in the back of the ship. There they laid her down and secured her to a bed. Ela checked her vital signs.

"She's sleeping deeply," said Ela. "Breathing very slowly."

"A coma?" asked Miro.

"She's doing the minimum to stay alive," said Ela. "Other than that, there's nothing."

"Come on," said Quara from the door. "Let's get back to work."

Miro rounded on her, furious-- but Ela restrained him. "You can stay and watch over her if you want," she said, "but Quara's right. We have work to do. She's doing hers."

Miro turned back to Jane and touched her hand, took it, held it. The others left the sleeping quarters. You can't hear me, you can't feel me, you can't see me, Miro said silently. So I guess I'm not here for you. Yet I can't leave you. What am I afraid of? We're all dead if you don't succeed at what you're doing now. So it isn't your death I fear.

It's your old self. Your old existence among the computers and the ansibles. You've had your fling in a human body, but when your old powers are restored, your human life will be just a small part of you again. Just one sensory input device among millions. One small set of memories lost in an overwhelming sea of memory. You'll be able to devote one tiny part of your attention to me, and I'll never know that I am perpetually an afterthought in your life.

That's just one of the drawbacks when you love somebody so much greater than yourself, Miro told himself. I'll never know the difference. She'll come back and I'll be happy with all the time we have together and I'll never know how little time and effort she actually devotes to being with me. A diversion, that's what I am.

Then he shook his head, let go of her hand, and left the room. I will not listen to the voice of despair, he told himself. Would I tame this great being and make her so much my slave that every moment of her life belongs to me? Would I focus her eyes so they can see nothing but my face? I must rejoice that I am part of her, instead of resenting that I'm not more of her.

He returned to his place and got back to work. But a few moments later he got up again and went back to her. He was useless until she came back. Until he knew the outcome, he could think of nothing else.

Jane was not precisely adrift. She had her unbroken connection to the three ansibles of Lusitania, and she found them easily. And just as easily found the new connections to ansibles on a half dozen worlds. From there, she quickly found her way through the thicket of interrupts and cutouts that protected her back door into the system from discovery by Congress's snoop programs. All was as she and her friends had planned.

It was small, cramped, as she had known it would be. But she had almost never used the full capacity of the system-- except when she was controlling starships. Then she needed every scrap of fast memory to hold the complete image of the ship she was transporting. Obviously there wasn't enough capacity on these mere thousands of machines. Yet it was such a relief, nonetheless, to tap back into the programs that she had so long used to do so much of her thought for her, servants she made use of like the Hive Queen's workers-- just one more way that I am like her, Jane realized. She got them running, then explored the memories that for these long days had been so painfully missing. Once again she was in possession of a mental system that allowed her to maintain dozens of levels of attention to simultaneously running processes.

And yet it was still all wrong. She had been in her human body only a day, and yet already the electronic self that once had felt so copious was far too small. It wasn't just because there were so few computers where once there had been so many. Rather it was small by nature. The ambiguity of flesh made for a vastness of possibility that simply could not exist in a binary world. She had been alive, and so she knew now that her electronic dwellingplace gave her only a fraction of a life. However much she had accomplished during her millennia of life in the machine, it brought no satisfaction compared to even a few minutes in that body of flesh and blood.

If she had thought she might ever leave the Val-body, she knew now that she never could. That was the root of her, now and forever. Indeed, she would have to force herself to spread out into these computer systems when she needed them. By inclination, she would not readily go into them.

But there was no reason to speak to anyone of her disappointment. Not yet. She would tell Miro when she got back to him. He would listen and talk to no one else. Indeed, he would probably be relieved. No doubt he was worried that she would be tempted to remain in the computers and not go back into the body that she could still feel, strong and insistent on her attention, even in the slackness of such a deep sleep. But he had no reason to fear. Hadn't he spent many long months in a body that was so limited he could hardly bear to live in it? She would as soon go back to being just a computer-dweller as he would go back to the brain-damaged body that had so tortured him.

Yet it is myself, part of myself. That's what these friends had given to her, and she would not tell them how painful it was to fit into this small sort of life again. She brought up her old familiar Jane-face above a terminal in each world, and smiled at them, and spoke:

"Thank you, my friends. I will never forget your love and loyalty to me. It will take a while for me to find out how much is open to me, and how much is closed. I'll tell you what I know when I know it. But be assured that whether or not I can achieve anything comparable to what I did before, I owe this restoration of myself to you, to all of you. I was already your friend forever; I am forever in your debt."

They answered; she heard all the answers, conversed with them using only small parts of her attention.

The rest of her explored. She found the hidden interfaces with the main computer systems that the Starways Congress's programmers had designed. It was easy enough to raid them for whatever information she wanted-- indeed, within moments she had found her way into the most secret files of the Starways Congress and found out every technical specification and every protocol of the new nets. But all her probing was done at second-hand, as if she were dipping into a cookie jar in the darkness, unable to see what she could touch. She could send out little finder programs that brought back to her whatever she wanted; they were guided by fuzzy protocols that let them even be somewhat serendipitous, dragging back tangential information that had somehow tickled them into bringing it aboard. She certainly had the power to sabotage, if she had wanted to punish them. She could have crashed everything, destroyed all the data. But none of that, neither finding secrets nor wreaking vengeance, had anything to do with what she needed now. The information most vital to her had been saved by her friends. What she needed was capacity, and it wasn't there. The new networks were stepped back and delayed far enough from the immediacy of the ansibles that she couldn't use them for her thought. She tried to find ways to offload and reload data quickly enough that she could use it to push a starship Out and In again, but it simply wasn't fast enough. Only bits and pieces of each starship would go Out, and almost nothing would make it come back Inside.

I have all my knowledge. I just haven't got the space.

Through all of this, however, her aiua was making its circuit. Many times a second it passed through the Val-body strapped to a bed in the starship. Many times a second it touched the ansibles and computers of its restored, if truncated, network. And many times a second it wandered the lacy links among the mothertrees.

A thousand, ten thousand times her aiua made these circuits before she finally realized that the mothertrees were also a storage place. They had so few thoughts of their own, but the structures were there that could hold memories, and there were no delays built in. She could think, could hold the thought, could retrieve it instantly. And the mothertrees were fractally deep; she could store memory mapped in layers, thoughts within thoughts, farther and farther into the structures and patterns of the living cells, without ever interfering with the dim sweet thoughts of the trees themselves. It was a far better storage system than the computer nets had ever been; it was inherently larger than any binary device. Though there were far fewer mothertrees than there were computers, even in her new shrunken net, the depth and richness of the memory array meant that there was far more room for data that could be recalled far more rapidly. Except for retrieving basic data, her own memories of past starflights, Jane would not need to use the computers at all. The pathway to the stars now lay along an avenue of trees.

Alone in a starship on the surface of Lusitania, a worker of the Hive Queen waited. Jane found her easily, found and remembered the shape of the starship. Though she had "forgotten" how to do starflight for a day or so, the memory was back again and she did it easily, pushing the starship Out, then bringing it back In an instant later, only many kilometers away, in a clearing before the entrance to the Hive Queen's nest. The worker arose from its terminal, opened the door, and came outside. Of course there was no celebration. The Hive Queen merely looked through the worker's eyes to verify that the flight had been successful, then explored the worker's body and the starship itself to make sure that nothing had been lost or damaged in the flight.

Jane could hear the Hive Queen's voice as if from a distance, for she recoiled instinctively from such a powerful source of thought. It was the relayed message that she heard, the voice of Human speaking in her mind. <All is well,> Human said to her. <You can go ahead.>

She returned then to the starship that contained her own living body. When she transported other people, she left it to their own aiuas to watch over their flesh and hold it intact. The result of that had been the chaotic creations of Miro and Ender, with their hunger for bodies different from the ones they actually lived in. But that effect was now prevented easily by letting travelers linger only a moment, a tiny fraction of a second Outside, just long enough to make sure the bits of everything and everyone were all together.

This time, though, she had to hold a starship and the Val-body together, and also drag along Miro, Ela, Firequencher, Quara, and a worker of the hive queen's. There could be no mistakes.

Yet it functioned easily enough. The familiar shuttle she easily held in memory; the people she had carried so often before she carried along. Her new body was already so well known to her that, to her relief, it took no special effort to hold it together along with the ship. The only novelty was that instead of sending and pulling back, she went along. Her own aiua went with the rest of them Outside.

That was itself the only problem. Once Outside, she had no way of telling how long they had been there. It might have been an hour. A year. A picosecond. She had never herself gone Outside before. It was distracting, baffling, then frightening to have no root or anchor. How can I get back in? What am I connected to?

In the very asking of the panicked question, she found her anchor, for no sooner had her aiua done a single circuit of the Val-body Outside than it jumped to do her circuit of the mothertrees. In that moment she called the ship and all within it back again, and placed them where she wanted, in the landing zone of the starport on Lusitania.

She inspected them quickly. All were there. It had worked. They would not die in space. She could still do starflight, even with herself aboard. And though she would not often take herself along on voyages-- it had been too frightening, even though her connection with the mothertrees sustained her-- she now knew she could put the ships back into flight without worry.

Malu shouted and the others turned to look at him. They had all seen the Jane-face in the air above the terminals, a hundred Jane-faces around the room. They had all cheered and celebrated at the time. So Wang-mu wondered: What could this be now?

"The god has moved her starship!" Malu cried. "The god has found her power again!"

Wang-mu heard the words and wondered mutely how he knew. But Peter, whatever he might have wondered, took the news more personally. He threw his arms around her, lifted her from the ground, and spun around with her. "We're free again," he cried, his voice as joyful as Malu's had been. "We're free to roam again!"

At that moment Wang-mu finally realized that the man she loved was, at the deepest level, the same man, Ender Wiggin, who had wandered world to world for three thousand years. Why had Peter been so silent and glum, only to relax into such exuberance now? Because he couldn't bear the thought of having to live out his life on only one world.

What have I got myself into? Wang-mu wondered. Is this going to be my life, a week here, a month there?

And then she thought: What if it is? If the week is with Peter, if the month is at his side, then that may well be home enough for me. And if it's not, there'll be time enough to work out some sort of compromise. Even Ender settled down at last, on Lusitania.

Besides, I may be a wanderer myself. I'm still young-- how do I even know what kind of life I want to lead? With Jane to take us anywhere in just a heartbeat, we can see all of the Hundred Worlds and all the newest colonies, and anything else we want to see before we even have to think of settling down.

Someone was shouting out in the control room. Miro knew he should get up from Jane's sleeping body and find out. But he did not want to let go of her hand. He did not want to take his eyes away from her.

"We're cut off!" came the cry again-- Quara, shouting, terrified and angry. "I was getting their broadcasts and suddenly now there's nothing."

Miro almost laughed aloud. How could Quara fail to understand? The reason she couldn't receive the descolador broadcasts anymore was because they were no longer orbiting the planet of the descoladores. Couldn't Quara feel the onset of gravity? Jane had done it. Jane had brought them home.

But had she brought herself? Miro squeezed her hand, leaned over, kissed her cheek. "Jane," he whispered. "Don't be lost out there. Be here. Be here with me."

"All right," she said.

He raised his face from hers, looked into her eyes. "You did it," he said.

"And rather easily, after all that worry," she said. "But I don't think my body was designed to sleep so deeply. I can't move."

Miro pushed the quick release on her bed, and all the straps came free.

"Oh," she said. "You tied me down."

She tried to sit up, but lay back down again immediately.

"Feeling faint?" Miro asked.

"The room is swimming," she said. "Maybe I can do future starflights without having to lay my own body out so thoroughly."

The door crashed open. Quara stood in the doorway, quivering with rage. "How dare you do it without so much as a warning!"

Ela was behind her, remonstrating with her. "For heaven's sake, Quara, she got us home, isn't that enough?"

"You could have some decency!" Quara shouted. "You could tell us that you were performing your experiment!"

"She brought you with us, didn't she?" said Miro, laughing.

His laughter only infuriated Quara more. "She isn't human! That's what you like about her, Miro! You never could have fallen in love with a real woman. What's your track record? You fell in love with a woman who turned out to be your half-sister, then Ender's automaton, and now a computer wearing a human body like a puppet. Of course you laugh at a time like this. You have no human feelings."

Jane was up now, standing on somewhat shaky legs. Miro was pleased to see that she was recovering so quickly from her hour in a comatose state. He hardly noticed Quara's vilification.

"Don't ignore me, you smug self-righteous son-of-a-bitch!" Quara screamed in his face.

He ignored her, feeling, in fact, rather smug and self-righteous as he did. Jane, holding his hand, followed close behind him, past Quara, out of the sleeping chamber. As she passed, Quara shouted at her, "You're not some god who has a right to toss me from place to place without even asking!" and she gave Jane a shove.

It wasn't much of a shove. But Jane lurched against Miro. He turned, worried she might fall. Instead he got himself turned in time to see Jane spread her fingers against Quara's chest and shove her back, much harder. Quara knocked her head against the corridor wall and then, utterly off balance, she fell to the floor at Ela's feet.

"She tried to kill me!" cried Quara.

"If she wanted to kill you," said Ela mildly, "you'd be sucking space in orbit around the planet of the descoladores."

"You all hate me!" Quara shouted, and then burst into tears.

Miro opened the shuttle door and led Jane out into sunlight. It was her first step onto the surface of a planet, her first sight of sunlight with these human eyes. She stood there, frozen, then turned her head to see more, raised her face up to the sky, and then burst into tears and clung to Miro. "Oh, Miro! It's too much to bear! It's all too beautiful!"

"You should see it in the spring," he said inanely.

A moment later, she recovered enough to face the world again, to take tentative steps along with him. Already they could see a hovercar rushing toward them from Milagre-- it would be Olhado and Grego, or perhaps Valentine and Jakt. They would meet Jane-as-Val for the first time. Valentine, more than anyone, would remember Val and miss her, while unlike Miro she would have no particular memories of Jane, for they had not been close. But if Miro knew Valentine at all, he knew that she would keep to herself whatever grief she felt for Val; to Jane she would show only welcome, and perhaps curiosity. It was Valentine's way. It was more important to her to understand than it was for her to grieve. She felt all things deeply, but she didn't let her own grief or pain stand between her and learning all she could.

"I shouldn't have done it," said Jane.

"Done what?"

"Used physical violence against Quara," Jane said miserably.

Miro shrugged. "It's what she wanted," he said. "You can hear how much she's still enjoying it."

"No, she doesn't want that," Jane said. "Not in her deepest heart. She wants what everybody wants-- to be loved and cared for, to be part of something beautiful and fine, to have the respect of those she admires."

"Yes, well, I'll take your word for it," said Miro.

"No, Miro, you see it," Jane insisted.

"Yes, I see it," Miro answered. "But I gave up trying years ago. Quara's need was and is so great that a person like me could be swallowed up in it a dozen times over. I had problems of my own then. Don't condemn me because I wrote her off. Her barrel of misery has depth enough to hold a thousand bushels of happiness."

"I don't condemn you," said Jane. "I just ... I had to know that you saw how much she loves you and needs you. I needed you to be ..."

"You needed me to be like Ender," said Miro.

"I needed you to be your own best self," said Jane.

"I loved Ender too, you know. I think of him as every man's best self. And I don't resent the fact that you would like me to be at least some of the things he was to you. As long as you also want a few of the things that are me alone, and no part of him."

"I don't expect you to be perfect," said Jane. "And I don't expect you to be Ender. And you'd better not expect perfection from me, either, because wise as I'm trying to be right now, I'm still the one who knocked your sister down."

"Who knows?" said Miro. "That may have turned you into Quara's dearest friend."

"I hope not," said Jane. "But if it's true, I'll do my best for her. After all, she's going to be my sister now."

<So you were ready,> said the Hive Queen.

<Without knowing it, yes, we were,> said Human.

<And you are part of her, all of you.>

<Her touch is gentle,> said Human, <and her presence in us is easily borne. The mothertrees don't mind her. Her vividness invigorates them. And if having her memories is strange to them, it brings more variety to their lives than they have ever had before.>

<So she's a part of all of us,> said the Hive Queen. <What she is now, what she has become, is part hive queen, part human, and part pequenino.>

<Whatever she does, no one can say she doesn't understand us. If someone had to play with godlike powers, better her than anyone.>

<I'm jealous of her, I confess,> the Hive Queen said. <She's a part of you as I can never be. After all our conversations, I still have no notion of what it is to be one of you.>

<Nor do I understand anything more than a glimmer of the way you think,> said Human. <But isn't that a good thing, too? The mystery is endless. We will never cease to surprise each other.>

<Till death ends all surprises,> said the Hive Queen.

Chapter 14 -- "HOW THEY COMMUNICATE WITH ANIMALS"

"If only we were wiser or better people, perhaps the gods would explain to us the mad, unbearable things they do."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

The moment Admiral Bobby Lands received the news that the ansible connections to Starways Congress were restored, he gave the order to the entire Lusitania Fleet to decelerate forthwith to a speed just under the threshold of invisibility. Obedience was immediate, and he knew that within an hour, to any telescopic observer on Lusitania, the whole fleet would seem to spring into existence from nowhere. They would be hurtling toward a point near Lusitania at an astonishing speed, their massive foreshields still in place to protect them from taking devastating damage from collisions with interstellar particles as small as dust.

Admiral Lands's strategy was simple. He would arrive near Lusitania at the highest possible speed that would not cause relativistic effects; he would launch the Little Doctor during the period of nearest approach, a window of no more than a couple of hours; and then he would bring his whole fleet back up to relativistic speeds so rapidly that when the M.D. Device went off, it would not catch any of his ships within its all-destroying field.

It was a good, simple strategy, based on the assumption that Lusitania had no defenses. But to Lands, that assumption could not be taken for granted. Somehow the Lusitanian rebels had acquired enough resources that for a period of time near the end of the voyage, they were able to cut off all communications between the fleet and the rest of humanity. Never mind that the problem had been ascribed to a particularly resourceful and pervasive computer saboteur program; never mind that his superiors assured him that the saboteur program had been wiped out through prudently radical action timed to eliminate the threat just prior to the arrival of the fleet at its destination. Lands had no intention of being deceived by an illusion of defenselessness. The enemy had proved itself to be an unknown quantity, and Lands had to be prepared for anything. This was war, total war, and he was not going to allow his mission to be compromised through carelessness or overconfidence.

From the moment he received this assignment he had been keenly aware that he would be remembered throughout human history as the Second Xenocide. It was not an easy thing to contemplate the destruction of an alien race, particularly when the piggies of Lusitania were, by all

reports, so primitive that in themselves they offered no threat to humanity. Even when alien enemies were a threat, as the buggers were at the time of the First Xenocide, some bleeding heart calling himself the Speaker for the Dead had managed to paint a glowing picture of those murderous monsters as some kind of utopian hive community that really meant no harm to humanity. How could the writer of this work possibly know what the buggers intended? It was a monstrous thing to write, actually, for it utterly destroyed the name of the child-hero who had so brilliantly defeated the buggers and saved humanity.

Lands had not hesitated to accept command of the Lusitania Fleet, but from the start of the voyage he had spent a considerable amount of time every day studying the scant information about Ender the Xenocide that was available. The boy had not known, of course, that he was actually commanding the real human fleet by ansible; he had thought he was involved in a brutally rigorous schedule of training simulations. Nevertheless, he had made the correct decision at the moment of crisis-- he chose to use the weapon he had been forbidden to use against planets, and thus blew up the last bugger world. That was the end of the threat to humanity. It was the correct action, it was what the art of war required, and at the time the boy had been deservedly hailed as a hero.

Yet within a few decades, the tide of opinion had been swung by that pernicious book called *The Hive Queen*, and Ender Wiggin, already in virtual exile as governor of a new colony planet, disappeared entirely from history as his name became a byword for annihilation of a gentle, well-meaning, misunderstood species.

If they could turn against such an obvious innocent as the child Ender Wiggin, what will they make of me? thought Lands, over and over. The buggers were brutal, soulless killers, with fleets of starships armed with devastating killing power, whereas I will be destroying the piggies, who have done their share of killing, but only on a tiny scale, a couple of scientists who may well have violated some tabu. Certainly the piggies have no means now or in the reasonably foreseeable future of rising from the surface of their planet and challenging the dominance of humans in space.

Yet Lusitania was every bit as dangerous as the buggers-- perhaps more so. For there was a virus loose on that planet, a virus which killed every human it infected, unless the victim got continuous dosages of a decreasingly effective antidote at regular intervals for the rest of his life. Furthermore, the virus was known to be prone to rapid adaptation.

As long as this virus was contained on Lusitania, the danger was not severe. But then two arrogant scientists on Lusitania-- the legal record named them as the xenologers Marcos "Miro" Vladimir Ribeira von Hesse and Ouanda Quenhatta Figueira Mucumbi-- violated the terms of the human settlement by "going native" and providing illegal technology and bioforms to the piggies. Starways Congress reacted properly by remanding the violators to trial on another planet, where of course they would have to be kept in quarantine-- but the lesson had to be swift and severe so no one else on Lusitania would be tempted to flout the wise laws that protected humanity from the spread of the descolada virus. Who could have guessed that such a tiny human colony would dare to defy Congress by refusing to arrest the criminals? From the moment of that defiance, there was no choice but to send this fleet and destroy Lusitania. For as long as Lusitania was in revolt, the risk of stargoing ships' escaping the planet and carrying unspeakable plague to the rest of humanity was too great to endure.

All was so clear. Yet Lands knew that the moment the danger was gone, the moment the descolada virus no longer posed a threat to anyone, people would forget how great the danger had been and would begin to wax sentimental about the lost piggies, that poor race of victims of ruthless Admiral Bobby Lands, the Second Xenocide.

Lands was not an insensitive man. It kept him awake at night, knowing how he would be hated. Nor did he love the duty that had come to him-- he was not a man of violence, and the thought of destroying not only the piggies but also the entire human population of Lusitania made him sick at heart. No one in his fleet could doubt his reluctance to do what must be done; but neither could anyone doubt his grim determination to do it.

If only some way could be found, he thought over and over. If only when I come out into realtime the Congress would send us word that a real antidote or a workable vaccine had been found to curb the descolada. Anything that would prove that there was no more danger. Anything to be able to keep the Little Doctor, unarmed, in its place in his flagship.

Such wishes, however, could hardly even be called hopes. There was no chance of this. Even if a cure had been found on the surface of Lusitania, how could the fact be made known? No, Lands would have to knowingly do what Ender Wiggin did in all innocence. And he would do it. He would bear the consequence. He would face down those who vilified him. For he would know that he did what was necessary for the sake of all of humanity; and compared to that, what did it matter whether one individual was honored or unfairly hated?

The moment the ansible network was restored, Yasujiro Tsutsumi sent his messages, then betook himself to the ansible installation on the ninth floor of his building and waited there in trepidation. If the family decided that his idea had merit enough to be worth discussing, they would want a realtime conference, and he was determined not to be the one who kept them waiting. And if they answered him with a rebuke, he wanted to be the first to read it, so that his underlings and colleagues on Divine Wind would hear of it from him instead of as a rumor behind his back.

Did Aimaina Hikari understand what he had asked Yasujiro to do? He was at the cusp of his career. If he did well, he would begin to move from world to world, one of the elite caste of managers who were cut loose from time and sent into the future through the time-dilation effect of interstellar travel. But if he was judged to be a second-rater, he would be moved sideways or down within the organization here on Divine Wind. He would never leave, and so he would continuously face the pity of those who would know that he was one who did not have what it took to rise from one small lifetime into the freefloating eternity of upper management.

Probably Aimaina knew all about this. But even if he had not known how fragile Yasujiro's position was, finding out would not have stopped him. To save another species from needless annihilation-- that was worth a few careers. Could Aimaina help it that it was not his own career that would be ruined? It was an honor that Aimaina had chosen Yasujiro, that he had thought him

wise enough to recognize the moral peril of the Yamato people and courageous enough to act on that knowledge regardless of personal cost.

Such an honor-- Yasujiro hoped it would be sufficient to make him happy if all else slipped away. For he meant to leave the Tsutsumi company if he was rebuked. If they did not act to avert the peril then he could not remain. Nor could he remain silent. He would speak out and include Tsutsumi in his condemnation. He would not threaten to do this, for the family rightly viewed all threats with contempt. He would simply speak. Then, for his disloyalty, they would work to destroy him. No company would hire him. No public appointment would long remain in his hands. It was no jest when he told Aimagawa that he would come to live with him. Once Tsutsumi decided to punish, the miscreant would have no choice but to throw himself on the mercy of his friends-- if he had any friends who were not themselves terrified by the Tsutsumi wrath.

All these dire scenarios played themselves out in Yasujiro's mind as he waited, waited, hour after hour. Surely they had not simply ignored his message. They must be reading and discussing it even now.

He finally dozed off. The ansible operator awakened him-- a woman who had not been on duty when he fell asleep. "Are you by any chance the honorable Yasujiro Tsutsumi?"

The conference was already under way; despite his best intention, he was indeed the last to arrive. The cost of such an ansible conference in realtime was phenomenal, not to mention the annoyance. Under the new computer system every participant in a conference had to be present at the ansible, since no conference would be possible if they had to wait for the built-in time delay between each comment and its reply.

When Yasujiro saw the identification bands under the faces shown in the terminal display he was both thrilled and horrified. This matter had not been delegated to secondary or tertiary officials in the home office on Honshu. Yoshiaki-Seiji Tsutsumi himself was there, the ancient man who had led Tsutsumi all of Yasujiro's life. This must be a good sign. Yoshiaki-Seiji-- or "Yes Sir," as he was called, though not to his face, of course-- would never waste his time coming to an ansible merely to slap down an upstart underling.

Yes Sir himself did not speak, of course. Rather it was old Eiichi who did the talking. Eiichi was known as the conscience of Tsutsumi-- which some said, rather cynically, meant he must be a deaf mute.

"Our young brother has been bold, but he was wise to pass on to us the thoughts and feelings of our honored teacher, Aimagawa Hikari. While none of us here on Honshu has been privileged personally to know the Guardian of Yamato, we have all been aware of his words. We were not prepared to think of the Japanese as being responsible, as a people, for the Lusitania Fleet. Nor were we prepared to think of Tsutsumi as having any special responsibility toward a political situation with no obvious connection to finances or the economy in general.

"Our young brother's words were heartfelt and outrageous, and if they had not come from one who has been properly modest and respectful for all his years of work with us, careful and yet bold

enough to take risks when the time was right, we might not have heeded his message. But we did heed it; we studied it and found from our government sources that the Japanese influence on Starways Congress was and continues to be pivotal on this issue in particular. And in our judgment there is no time for us to try to build a coalition of other companies or to change public opinion. The fleet might arrive at any moment. Our fleet, if Aimagina Hikari is correct; and even if he is not, it is a human fleet, and we are humans, and it might just be within our power to stop it. A quarantine will easily do all that is necessary to protect the human species from annihilation by the descolada virus. Therefore we wish to inform you, Yasujiro Tsutsumi, that you have proven yourself worthy of the name that was given you at birth. We will commit all the resources of the Tsutsumi family to the task of convincing a sufficient number of Congressmen to oppose the fleet-- and to oppose it so vigorously that they force an immediate vote to recall the fleet and forbid it to strike against Lusitania. We may succeed in this task or we may fail, but either way, our younger brother Yasujiro Tsutsumi has served us well, not only through his many achievements in company management, but also because he knew when to listen to an outsider, when to put moral questions into a position of primacy over financial considerations, and when to risk all in order to help Tsutsumi be and do what is right. Therefore we summon Yasujiro Tsutsumi to Honshu, where he will serve Tsutsumi as my assistant." At this Eiichi bowed. "I am honored that such a distinguished young man is being trained to be my replacement when I die or retire."

Yasujiro bowed gravely. He was relieved, yes, that he was being called directly to Honshu-- no one had ever been summoned so young. But to be Eiichi's assistant, groomed to replace him-- that was not the life's work Yasujiro had dreamed of. It was not to be a philosopher-cum-ombudsman that he had worked so hard and served so faithfully. He wanted to be in the thick of management of the family enterprises.

But it would be years of starflight before he arrived on Honshu. Eiichi might well be dead. Yes Sir would surely be dead by then as well. Instead of replacing Eiichi, he might as easily be given a different assignment better suited to his real abilities. So Yasujiro would not refuse this strange gift. He would embrace his fate and follow where it led.

"O Eiichi my father, I bow before you and before all the great fathers of our company, most particularly Yoshiaki-Seiji-san. You honor me beyond anything I could ever deserve. I pray that I will not disappoint you too much. And I also give thanks that at this difficult time the Yamato spirit is in such good protecting hands as yours."

With his public acceptance of his orders, the meeting ended-- it was expensive, after all, and the Tsutsumi family was careful to avoid waste if it could help it. The ansible conference ended. Yasujiro sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was trembling.

"Oh, Yasujiro-san," said the ansible attendant. "Oh, Yasujiro-san."

Oh, Yasujiro-san, thought Yasujiro. Who would have guessed that Aimagina's visit to me would lead to this? So easily it could have gone the other way. Now he would be one of the men of Honshu. Whatever his role, he would be among the supreme leaders of Tsutsumi. There was no happier outcome. Who would have guessed.

Before he rose from his chair beside the ansible, Tsutsumi representatives were talking to all the Japanese Congressmen, and many who were not Japanese but nevertheless followed the Necessarian line. And as the tally of compliant politicians rose, it became clear that support for the fleet was shallow indeed. It would not be all that expensive to stop the fleet after all.

The pequenino on duty monitoring the satellites that orbited Lusitania heard the alarm going off and at first had no idea what was happening. The alarm had never, to his knowledge, sounded. At first he assumed it was some kind of dangerous weather pattern that had been detected. But it was nothing of the kind. It was the outward-searching telescopes that had triggered the alarm. Dozens of armed starships had just appeared, traveling at very high but nonrelativistic speeds, on a course that would allow them to launch the Little Doctor within the hour.

The duty officer gave the urgent message to his colleagues, and very quickly the mayor of Milagre was notified and the rumor began to spread throughout what was left of the village. Anyone who doesn't leave within the hour will be destroyed, that was the message, and within minutes hundreds of human families were gathered around the starships, anxiously waiting to be taken in. Remarkably, it was only humans insisting on these last-minute runs. Faced with the inevitable death of their own forests of fathertrees, mothertrees, and brothertrees, the pequeninos felt no urgency to save their own lives. Who would they be without their forest? Better to die among loved ones than as perpetual strangers in a distant forest that was not and never could be their own.

As for the Hive Queen, she had already sent her last daughter-queen and had no particular interest in trying to leave herself. She was the last of the hive queens who had been alive before Ender's destruction of their home planet. She felt it fitting that she, too, should submit to the same kind of death three thousand years later. Besides, she told herself, how could she bear to live when her great friend, Human, was rooted to Lusitania and could not leave it? It was not a queenly thought, but then, no hive queen before her had ever had a friend. It was a new thing in the world, to have someone to talk to who was not substantially yourself. It would grieve her too much to live on without Human. And since her survival was no longer crucial to the perpetuation of her species, she would do the grand, brave, tragic, romantic, and least complicated thing: She would stay. She rather liked the idea of being noble in human terms; and it proved, to her own surprise, that she had not been utterly unchanged by her close contact with humans and pequeninos. They had transformed her quite against her own expectations. There had been no Hive Queen like her in all the history of her people.

<I wish you would go,> Human told her. <I prefer the thought of you alive. >

But for once she did not answer him.

Jane was adamant. The team working on the language of the descoladores had to leave Lusitania and get back to work in orbit around the descolada planet. Of course that included herself, but no

one was foolish enough to begrudge the survival of the person who was making all the starships go, nor of the team that would perhaps save all of humanity from the descoladores. But Jane was on shakier moral ground when she also insisted that Novinha, Grego, and Olhado and his family be taken to a place of safety. Valentine, too, was informed that if she did not go with her husband and children and their crew and friends to Jakt's starship, Jane would be forced to waste precious mental resources by transporting them bodily against their will, sans spacecraft if necessary.

"Why us?" demanded Valentine. "We haven't asked for special treatment."

"I don't care what you do or do not ask for," said Jane. "You are Ender's sister. Novinha is his widow, her children are his adopted children; I will not stand by and let you be killed when I have it in my power to save the family of my friend. If that seems unfairly preferential to you, then complain about it to me later, but for now get yourselves into Jakt's spaceship so I can lift you off this world. And you will save more lives if you don't waste another moment of my attention with useless argument."

Feeling ashamed at having special privileges, yet grateful they and their loved ones would live through the next few hours, the descoladores team gathered in the shuttle-turned-starship, which Jane had relocated away from the crowded landing area; the others hurried toward Jakt's landing craft, which she had also moved to an isolated spot.

In a way, for many of them at least, the appearance of the fleet was almost a relief. They had lived for so long in its shadow that to have it here at last gave respite from the endless anxiety. Within an hour or two, the issue would be decided.

In the shuttle that hurtled along in a high orbit above the planet of the descoladores, Miro sat numbly at his terminal. "I can't work," he said at last. "I can't concentrate on language when my people and my home are on the brink of destruction." He knew that Jane, strapped into her bed in the back of the shuttle, was using her whole concentration to move ship after ship from Lusitania to other colony worlds that were ill-prepared to receive them. While all he could do was puzzle over molecular messages from inscrutable aliens.

"Well I can," said Quara. "After all, these descoladores are just as great a threat, and to all of humanity, not just to one small world."

"How wise of you," said Ela dryly, "to take the long view."

"Look at these broadcasts we're getting from the descoladores," said Quara. "See if you recognize what I'm seeing here."

Ela called up Quara's display on her own terminal; so did Miro. However annoying Quara might be, she was good at what she did.

"See this? Whatever else this molecule does, it's exactly designed to work at precisely the same location in the brain as the heroin molecule."

It could not be denied that the fit was perfect. Ela, though, found it hard to believe. "The only way they could do this," she said, "is if they took the historical information contained in the descolada descriptions we sent them, used that information to build a human body, studied it, and found a chemical that would immobilize us with mindless pleasure while they do whatever they want to us. There's no way they've had time to grow a human since we sent that information."

"Maybe they don't have to build the whole human body," said Miro. "Maybe they're so adept at reading genetic information that they can extrapolate everything there is to know about the human anatomy and physiology from our genetic information alone."

"But they didn't even have our DNA set," Ela said.

"Maybe they can compress the information in our primitive, natural DNA," said Miro. "Obviously they got the information somehow, and obviously they figured out what would make us sit as still as stones with dumb, happy smiles."

"What's even more obvious to me," said Quara, "is that they meant us to read this molecule biologically. They meant us to take this drug instantly. As far as they're concerned, we're now sitting here waiting for them to come take us over."

Miro immediately changed displays over his terminal. "Damn, Quara, you're right. Look-- they have three ships closing in on us already."

"They've never even approached us before," said Ela.

"Well, they're not going to approach us now," said Miro. "We've got to give them a demonstration that we didn't fall for their trojan horse." He got up from his seat and fairly flew back down the corridor to where Jane was sleeping. "Jane!" he shouted even before he got there. "Jane!"

It took a moment, and then her eyes fluttered open.

"Jane," he said. "Move us about a hundred miles over and drop us into a closer orbit."

She looked at him quizzically, then must have decided to trust him because she asked nothing. She closed her eyes again, as Firequencher shouted from the control room, "She did it! We moved!"

Miro, drifted back to the others. "Now I know they can't do that," he said. Sure enough, his display now reported that the alien ships were no longer approaching, but rather were poised warily a dozen miles off in three-- no, four now-- directions. "Got us nicely framed in a tetrahedron," said Miro.

"Well, now they know that we didn't succumb to their die-happy drug," said Quara.

"But we're no closer to understanding them than we were before."

"That's because," said Miro, "we're so stupid."

"Self-vilification won't help us now," said Quara, "even if in your case it happens to be true."

"Quara," said Ela sharply.

"It was a joke, dammit!" said Quara. "Can't a girl tease her big brother?"

"Oh, yeah," said Miro dryly. "You're such a tease."

"What did you mean by saying we're stupid?" said Firequencher.

"We'll never decipher their language," said Miro, "because it's not a language. It's a set of biological commands. They don't talk. They don't abstract. They just make molecules that do things to each other. It's as if the human vocabulary consisted of bricks and sandwiches. Throw a brick or give a sandwich, punish or reward. If they have abstract thoughts we're not going to get them through reading these molecules."

"I find it hard to believe that a species with no abstract language could possibly create spaceships like those out there," said Quara scornfully. "And they broadcast these molecules the way we broadcast vids and voices."

"What if they all have organs inside their bodies that directly translate molecular messages into chemicals or physical structures? Then they could--"

"You're missing my point," insisted Quara. "You don't build up a fund of common knowledge by throwing bricks and sharing sandwiches. They need language in order to store information outside their bodies so that they can pass knowledge from person to person, generation after generation. You don't get out into space or make broadcasts using the electromagnetic spectrum on the basis of what one person can be persuaded to do with a brick."

"She's probably right," said Ela.

"So maybe parts of the molecular messages they send are memory sets," said Miro. "Again, not a language-- it stimulates the brain to 'remember' things that the sender experienced but the receiver did not."

"Listen, whether you're right or not," said Firequencher, "we have to keep trying to decode the language."

"If I'm right, we're wasting our time," said Miro.

"Exactly," said Firequencher.

"Oh," said Miro. Firequencher's point was well taken. If Miro was right, their whole mission was useless anyway-- they had already failed. So they had to continue to act as if Miro was wrong and the language could be decoded, because if it couldn't, there was nothing they could do anyway.

And yet ...

"We're forgetting something," said Miro.

"I'm not," said Quara.

"Jane. She was created because the hive queens built a bridge between species."

"Between humans and hive queens, not between unknown virus-spewing aliens and humans," said Quara.

But Ela was interested. "The human way of communication-- speech between equals-- that was surely as foreign to the hive queens as this molecular language is to us. Maybe Jane can find some way to connect to them philotically."

"Mind-reading?" said Quara. "Remember, we don't have a bridge."

"It all depends," said Miro, "on how they deal with philotic connections. The Hive Queen talks all the time to Human, right? Because the fathertrees and the hive queens already both use philotic links to communicate. They speak mind to mind, without the intervention of language. And they're no more biologically similar than hive queens and humans are."

Ela nodded thoughtfully. "Jane can't try anything like this now, not till the whole issue of the Congress fleet is resolved. But once she's free to return her attention to us, she can try, at least, to contact these ... people directly."

"If these aliens communicated through philotic links," said Quara, "they wouldn't have to use molecules."

"Maybe these molecules," said Miro, "are how they communicate with animals."

Admiral Lands could not believe what he was hearing. The First Speaker of Starways Congress and the First Secretary of the Starfleet Admiralty were both visible above the terminal, and their message was the same. "Quarantine, exactly," said the Secretary. "You are not authorized to use the Molecular Disruption Device."

"Quarantine is impossible," said Lands. "We're going too rapidly. You know the battle plan I filed at the beginning of the voyage. It would take us weeks to slow down. And what about the men? It's one thing to take a relativistic voyage and then return to their home worlds. Yes, their friends and family are gone, but at least they aren't stuck off on permanent duty inside a starship! Keeping our

velocity at near-relativistic speeds, I'm saving them months of their lives spent in acceleration and deceleration. You're talking about expecting them to give up years!"

"Surely you're not saying," said the First Speaker, "that we should blow up Lusitania and wipe out the pequeninos and thousands of human beings so that your crews don't get depressed."

"I'm saying that if you don't want us to blow up this planet, fine-- but let us come home."

"We can't do that," said the First Secretary. "The descolada is too dangerous to leave it unsupervised on a planet that has rebelled."

"You mean you're canceling the use of the Little Doctor when nothing has been done to contain the descolada?"

"We will send a landing team with due precautions to ascertain the exact conditions on the ground," said the First Secretary.

"In other words, you'll send men into mortal danger from this disease with no knowledge of the situation on the ground, when the means exist to eliminate the danger without peril to any uninfected person."

"Congress has reached the decision," said the First Speaker coldly. "We will not commit xenocide while any legitimate alternative remains. Are these orders received and understood?"

"Yes sir," said Lands.

"Will they be obeyed?" asked the First Speaker.

The First Secretary looked aghast. You did not insult a flag officer by questioning whether he meant to obey orders.

Yet the First Speaker did not withdraw the insult. "Well?"

"Sir, I always have and always will live by my oath." With that, Lands broke the connection. He immediately turned to Causo, his X.O., the only other person present with him in the sealed communications office. "You are under arrest, sir," said Lands.

Causo raised an eyebrow. "So you don't intend to comply with this order?"

"Do not tell me your personal feelings on the matter," said Lands. "I know that you're of Portuguese ethnic heritage like the people of Lusitania--"

"They're Brazilian," said the X.O.

Lands ignored him. "I will have it on record that you were given no opportunity to speak and that you are utterly blameless in any action I might take."

"What about your oath, sir?" asked Causo calmly.

"My oath is to take all actions I am ordered to take in service of the best interests of humanity. I will invoke the war crimes clause."

"They aren't ordering you to commit a war crime. They're ordering you not to."

"On the contrary," said Lands. "To fail to destroy this world and the deadly peril on it would be a crime against humanity far worse than the crime of blowing it up." Lands drew his sidearm. "You are under arrest, sir."

The X.O. put his hands on his head and turned his back. "Sir, you may be right and you may be wrong. But either choice could be monstrous. I don't know how you can make such a decision by yourself."

Lands put the docility patch on the back of Causo's neck, and as the drug began feeding into his system, Lands said to him, "I had help in deciding, my friend. I asked myself, What would Ender Wiggin, the man who saved humanity from the buggers, what would he have done if suddenly, at the last minute, he had been told, This is no game, this is real. I asked myself, What if at the moment before he killed the boy Stilson or the boy Madrid in his infamous First and Second Killings, some adult had intervened and ordered him to stop. Would he have done it, knowing that the adult did not have the power to protect him later, when his enemy attacked him again? Knowing that it might well be this time or never? If the adults at Command School had said to him, We think there's a chance the buggers might not mean to destroy humanity, so don't kill them all, do you think Ender Wiggin would have obeyed? No. He would have done-- he always did-- exactly what was necessary to obliterate a danger and make sure it did not survive to pose a threat in the future. That is the person I consulted with. That is the person whose wisdom I will follow now."

Causo did not answer. He just smiled and nodded, smiled and nodded.

"Sit down and do not get up until I order you otherwise."

Causo sat down.

Lands switched the ansible to relay communications throughout the fleet. "The order has been given and we will proceed. I am launching the M.D. Device immediately and we will return to relativistic speeds forthwith. May God have mercy on my soul."

A moment later, the M.D. Device separated from the Admiral's flagship and continued at just-under-relativistic speed toward Lusitania. It would take nearly an hour for it to arrive at the proximity that would automatically trigger it. If for some reason the proximity detector did not work properly, a timer would set it off just moments before its estimated time of collision.

Lands accelerated his flagship above the threshold that cut it off from the timeframe of the rest of the universe. Then he pulled the docility patch from Causo's neck and replaced it with the antidote patch. "You may arrest me now, sir, for the mutiny that you witnessed."

Causo shook his head. "No sir," he said. "You're not going anywhere, and the fleet is yours to command until we get home. Unless you have some stupid plan to try to escape the war crimes trial that awaits you."

"No, sir," said Lands. "I will bear whatever penalty they impose on me. What I did has saved humankind from destruction, but I am prepared to join the humans and pequeninos of Lusitania as a necessary sacrifice to achieve that end."

Causo saluted him, then sat back down on his chair and wept.

Chapter 15 -- "WE'RE GIVING YOU A SECOND CHANCE"

"When I was a little girl, I used to believe that if I could please the gods well enough, they would go back and do my life over, and this time they would not take my mother away from me."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

A satellite orbiting Lusitania detected the launch of the M.D. Device and the divergence of its course toward Lusitania, as the starship disappeared from the satellite's instruments. The most dreaded event was happening. There had been no attempt to communicate or negotiate. Clearly the fleet had never intended anything but the obliteration of this world, and with it an entire sentient race. Most people had hoped, and many had expected, that there would be a chance to tell them that the descolada had been completely tamed and no longer posed a threat to anyone; that it was too late to stop anything anyway, since several dozen new colonies of humans, pequeninos, and hive queens had already been started on as many different planets. Instead there was only death hurtling toward them on a course that gave them no more than an hour to survive, and probably less, since the Little Doctor would no doubt be detonated some distance from the planet's surface.

It was pequeninos manning all the instruments now, since all but a handful of humans had fled to the starships. So it was that a pequenino cried out the news over the ansible to the starship at the descolada planet; and by chance it was Firequencher who was at the ansible terminal to hear his report. He immediately began keening, his high voice liquid with the music of grief.

When Miro and his sisters understood what had happened, he went at once to Jane. "They launched the Little Doctor," he said, shaking her gently.

He waited only a few moments. Her eyes came open. "I thought we had beaten them," she whispered. "Peter and Wang-mu, I mean. Congress voted to establish a quarantine and specifically denied the fleet the authority to launch the M.D. Device. And yet still they launched."

"You look so tired," said Miro.

"It takes everything I have," she said. "Over and over again. And now I lose them, the mothertrees. They're a part of myself, Miro. Remember how you felt when you lost control of your body, when you were crippled and slow? That's what will happen to me when the mothertrees are gone."

She wept.

"Stop it," said Miro. "Stop it right now. Get control of your emotions, Jane, you don't have time for this."

At once she freed herself from the straps that held her. "You're right," she said. "It's almost too strong to control, sometimes, this body."

"The Little Doctor has to be close to a planet for it to have any effect on it-- the field dissipates fairly quickly unless it has mass to sustain it. So we have time, Jane. Maybe an hour. Certainly more than half an hour."

"And in that time, what do you imagine I can do?"

"Pick the damn thing up," said Miro. "Push it Outside and don't bring it back!"

"And if it goes off Outside?" asked Jane. "If something that destructive is echoed and repeated out there? Besides, I can't pick things up that I haven't had a chance to examine. There's no one near it, no ansible connected to it, nothing to lead me to find it in the dead of space."

"I don't know," said Miro. "Ender would know. Damn that he's dead!"

"Well, technically speaking," said Jane. "But Peter hasn't found his way into any of his Ender memories. If he has them."

"What's to remember?" said Miro. "This has never happened before."

"It's true that it is Ender's aiua. But how much of his brilliance was the aiua, and how much was his body and brain? Remember that the genetic component was strong-- he was born in the first place because tests showed the original Peter and Valentine came so close to being the ideal military commander."

"Right," said Miro. "And now he's Peter."

"Not the real Peter," said Jane.

"Look, it's sort of Ender and it's sort of Peter. Can you find him? Can you talk to him?"

"When our aiuas meet, we don't talk. We sort of-- what, dance around each other. It's not like Human and the Hive Queen."

"Doesn't he still have the jewel in his ear?" asked Miro, touching his own.

"But what can he do? He's hours distant from his starship--"

"Jane," said Miro. "Try."

Peter looked stricken. Wang-mu touched his arm, leaned close to him. "What's wrong?"

"I thought we made it," he said. "When Congress voted to revoke the order to use the Little Doctor."

"What do you mean?" said Wang-mu, though she already knew what he meant.

"They launched it. The Lusitania Fleet disobeyed Congress. Who could have guessed? We have less than an hour before it detonates."

Tears leapt to Wang-mu's eyes, but she blinked them away. "At least the pequeninos and the hive queens will survive."

"But not the network of mothertrees," said Peter. "Starflight will end until Jane finds some other way to hold all that information in memory. The brothertrees are too stupid, the fathertrees have egos far too strong to share their capacity with her-- they would if they could, but they can't. You think Jane hasn't explored all the possibilities? Faster-than-light flight is over."

"Then this is our home," said Wang-mu.

"No it isn't," said Peter.

"We're hours away from the starship, Peter. We'll never get there before it detonates."

"What's the starship? A box with a lightswitch and a tight-sealing door. For all we know, we don't even need the box. I'm not staying here, Wang-mu."

"You're going back to Lusitania? Now?"

"If Jane can take me," he said. "And if she can't, then I guess this body goes back where it came from-- Outside."

"I'm going with you," said Wang-mu.

"I've had three thousand years of life," said Peter. "I don't actually remember them too well, but you deserve better than to disappear from the universe if Jane can't do this."

"I'm going with you," said Wang-mu, "so shut up. There's no time to waste."

"I don't even know what I'm going to do when I get there," said Peter.

"Yes you do," said Wang-mu.

"Oh? What is it I'm planning?"

"I have no idea."

"Well isn't that a problem? What good is this plan of mine if nobody knows it?"

"I mean that you are who you are," said Wang-mu. "You are the same will, the same tough resourceful boy who refused to be beaten down by anything they threw at him in Battle School or Command School. The boy who wouldn't let bullies destroy him no matter what it took to stop them. Naked with no weapons except the soap on his body, that's how Ender fought Bonzo Madrid in the bathroom at Battle School."

"You've been doing your research."

"Peter," said Wang-mu, "I don't expect you to be Ender, his personality, his memories, his training. But you are the one who can't be beaten down. You are the one who finds a way to destroy the enemy."

Peter shook his head. "I'm not him, I'm truly not."

"You told me back when we first met that you weren't yourself. Well, now you are. The whole of you, one man, intact in this body. Nothing is missing from you now. Nothing has been stolen from you, nothing is lost. Do you understand? Ender lived his life under the shadow of having caused xenocide. Now is the chance to be the opposite. To live the opposite life. To be the one who prevents it."

Peter closed his eyes for a moment. "Jane," he said. "Can you take us without a starship?" He listened for a moment. "She says the real question is, can we hold ourselves together. It's the ship she controls and moves around, plus our aiuas-- our own bodies are held together by us, not by her."

"Well, we do that all the time anyway, so it's fine," said Wang-mu.

"It's not fine," said Peter. "Jane says that inside the starship, we have visual clues, we have a sense of safety. Without those walls, without the light, in the deep emptiness, we can lose our place. We can forget where we are relative to our own body. We really have to hold on."

"Does it help if we're so strong-willed, stubborn, ambitious, and selfish that we always overcome everything in our way no matter what?" asked Wang-mu.

"I think those are the pertinent virtues, yes," said Peter.

"Then let's do it. That's us in spades."

Finding Peter's aiua was easy for Jane. She had been inside his body, she had followed his aiua-- or chased it-- until she knew it without searching. Wang-mu was a different case. Jane didn't know her all that well. The voyages she had taken her on before had been inside a starship whose location Jane already knew. But once she located Peter's-- Ender's-- aiua, it turned out to be easier than she thought. For the two of them, Peter and Wang-mu, were philotically twined. There was a tiny web in the making between them. Even without the box around them, Jane could hold onto them, both at once, as if they were one entity.

And as she pushed them Outside she could feel how they clung all the more tightly to each other-- not just the bodies, but also the invisible links of the deepest self. Outside they went together, and together they came back In. Jane felt a stab of jealousy-- just as she had been jealous of Novinha, though without feeling the physical sensation of grief and rage that her body now brought to the emotion. But she knew it was absurd. It was Miro that Jane loved, as a woman loves a man. Ender was her father and her friend, and now he was barely Ender anymore. He was Peter, a man who remembered only the past few months of association with her. They were friends, but she had no claim on his heart.

The familiar aiua of Ender Wiggin and the aiua of Si Wang-mu were even more tightly bound together than ever when Jane set them down on the surface of Lusitania.

They stood in the midst of the starport. The last few hundred humans trying to escape were frantically trying to understand why the starships had stopped flying just when the M.D. Device was launched.

"The starships here are all full," Peter said.

"But we don't need a starship," said Wang-mu.

"Yes we do," said Peter. "Jane can't pick up the Little Doctor without one."

"Pick it up?" said Wang-mu. "Then you do have a plan."

"Didn't you say I did?" said Peter. "I can't make a liar out of you." He spoke then to Jane through the jewel. "Are you here again? Can you talk to me through the satellites here on-- all right. Good. Jane, I need you to empty one of these starships for me." He paused a moment. "Take the people to a colony world, wait for them to get out, and then bring it back over here by us, away from the crowd."

Instantly, one of the starships disappeared from the starport. A cheer arose from the crowds as everyone rushed to get into one of the remaining ships. Peter and Wang-mu waited, waited, knowing that with every minute that it took to unload that starship on the colony world, the Little Doctor came closer to detonation.

Then the wait was over. A boxy starship appeared beside them. Peter had the door open and both of them were inside before any of the other people at the starport even realized what was happening. A cry went up then, but Peter closed and sealed the door.

"We're inside," said Wang-mu. "But where are we going?"

"Jane is matching the velocity of the Little Doctor."

"I thought she couldn't pick it up without the starship."

"She's getting the tracking data from the satellite. She'll predict exactly where it will be at a certain moment, and then push us Outside and bring us back In at exactly that point, going exactly that speed."

"The Little Doctor will be inside this ship? With us?" asked Wang-mu.

"Stand over here by the wall," he said. "And hold on to me. We're going to be weightless. So far you've managed to visit four planets without ever having that experience."

"Have you had that experience before?"

Peter laughed, then shook his head. "Not in this body. But I guess at some level I remembered how to handle it because--"

At that moment they became weightless and in the air in front of them, not touching the sides or walls of the starship, was the mammoth missile that carried the Little Doctor. If its rockets had still been firing, they would have been incinerated. Instead it was hurtling on at the speed it had already achieved; it seemed to hover in the air because the starship was going exactly the same speed.

Peter hooked his feet under a bench bolted to the wall, then reached out his hands and touched the missile. "We need to bring it into contact with the floor," he said.

Wang-mu tried to reach for it, too, but immediately she came loose from the wall and started drifting. Intense nausea began immediately, as her body desperately searched for some direction that would serve as down.

"Think of the device as downward," said Peter urgently. "The device is down. You're falling toward the device."

She felt herself reorient. It helped. And as she drifted closer she was able to take hold of it and cling. She could only watch, grateful simply not to be vomiting, as Peter slowly, gently pushed the mass of the missile toward the floor. When they touched, the whole ship shuddered, for the mass of the missile was probably greater than the mass of the ship that now surrounded it.

"Okay?" Peter asked.

"I'm fine," said Wang-mu. Then she realized he had been talking to Jane, and his "okay" was part of that conversation.

"Jane is tracing the thing right now," said Peter. "She does it with the starships, too, before she ever takes them anywhere. It used to be analytical, by computer. Now her aiaa sort of tours the inner structure of the thing. She couldn't do it till it was in solid contact with something she knew: the starship. Us. When she gets a sense of the inner shape of the thing, she can hold it together Outside."

"We're just going to take it there and leave it?" asked Wang-mu.

"No," said Peter. "It would either hold together and detonate, or it would break apart, and either way, who knows what the damage would be out there? How many little copies of it would wink into existence?"

"None at all," said Wang-mu. "It takes an intelligence to make something new."

"What do you think this thing is made of? Just like every bit of your body, just like every rock and tree and cloud, it's all aiaas, and there'll be other unconnected aiaas out there desperate to belong, to imitate, to grow. No, this thing is evil, and we're not taking it out there."

"Where are we taking it?"

"Home to meet its sender," said Peter.

Admiral Lands stood glumly alone on the bridge of his flagship. He knew that Causo would have spread the word by now-- the launch of the Little Doctor had been illegal, mutinous; the Old Man would be court-martialed or worse when they got back to civilization. No one spoke to him; no one dared look at him. And Lands knew that he would have to relieve himself of command and turn the ship over to Causo, as his X.O., and the fleet to his second-in-command, Admiral Fukuda. Causo's

gesture in not arresting him immediately was kind, but it was also useless. Knowing the truth of his disobedience, it would be impossible for the men and officers to follow him and unfair to ask it of them.

Lands turned to give the order, only to find his X.O. already heading toward him. "Sir," said Causo.

"I know," said Lands. "I relieve myself of command."

"No sir," said Causo. "Come with me, sir."

"What do you plan to do?" asked Lands.

"The cargo officer has reported something in the main hold of the ship."

"What is it?" asked Lands.

Causo just looked at him. Lands nodded, and they walked together from the bridge.

Jane had taken the box of the starship, not into the weapons bay of the flagship, for that could hold only the Little Doctor, not the box around it, but rather into the main hold, which was much more copious and which also lacked any practical means of relaunching the weapon.

Peter and Wang-mu stepped out of the starship and into the hold.

Then Jane took away the starship, leaving Peter, Wang-mu, and the Little Doctor behind.

Back on Lusitania, the starship would reappear. But no one would get into it. No one needed to. The M.D. Device was no longer heading for Lusitania. Now it was in the hold of the flagship of the Lusitania Fleet, traveling at a relativistic speed toward oblivion. The proximity sensor on the Little Doctor would not be triggered, of course, since it was nowhere near an object of planetary mass. But the timer was still chugging away.

"I hope they notice us soon," said Wang-mu.

"Oh, don't worry. We have whole minutes left."

"Has anyone seen us yet?"

"There was a fellow in that office," said Peter, pointing toward an open door. "He saw the starship, then he saw us, then he saw the Little Doctor. Now he's gone. I don't think we'll be alone much longer."

A door high up the front wall of the hold opened. Three men stepped onto the balcony that overlooked the hold on three sides.

"Hi," said Peter.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the one with the most ribbons and trim on his uniform.

"I'm betting you're Admiral Bobby Lands," said Peter. "And you must be the executive officer, Causo. And you must be the cargo officer, Lung."

"I said who the hell are you!" demanded Admiral Lands.

"I don't think your priorities are straight," said Peter. "I think there'll be plenty of time for us to discuss my identity after you deactivate the timer on this weapon that you so carelessly tossed out into space perilously close to a settled planet."

"If you think you can--"

But the Admiral didn't finish his sentence, because the X.O. was diving over the rail and jumping down to the deck of the cargo hold, where he immediately began twisting the fingerbolts that held the casing over the timer. "Causo," said Lands, "that can't be the--"

"It's the Little Doctor, all right, sir," said Causo.

"We launched it!" shouted the Admiral.

"But that must have been a mistake," said Peter. "An oversight. Because Starways Congress revoked your authorization to launch it."

"Who are you and how did you get here?"

Causo stood up, sweat dripping off his brow. "Sir, I am pleased to report that with more than two minutes' leeway, I have managed to prevent our ship from being blown into its constituent atoms."

"I'm glad to see that you didn't have any nonsense about requiring two separate keys and a secret combination to get that thing switched off," said Peter.

"No, it was designed to make turning it off pretty easy," said Causo. "There are directions on how to do it all over this thing. Now, turning it on-- that's hard."

"But somehow you managed to do it," said Peter.

"Where is your vehicle?" said the Admiral. He was climbing down a ladder to the deck. "How did you get here?"

"We came in a nice box, which we discarded when it was no longer needed," said Peter. "Haven't you gathered, yet, that we did not come to be interrogated by you?"

"Arrest these two," Lands ordered.

Causo looked at the admiral as if he were crazy. But the cargo officer, who had followed the admiral down the ladder, moved to obey, taking a couple of steps toward Peter and Wang-mu.

Instantly, they disappeared and reappeared up on the balcony where the three officers had come in. Of course it took a moment or two for the officers to find them. The cargo officer was merely baffled. "Sir," he said. "They were right here a second ago."

Causo, on the other hand, had already decided that something unusual was going on for which there was no appropriate military response. So he was responding according to another pattern. He crossed himself and began murmuring a prayer.

Lands, however, took a few steps backward, until he bumped into the Little Doctor. He clung to it, then suddenly pulled his hands away from it with loathing, perhaps even with pain, as if the surface of it had suddenly become scorching hot to his hands. "Oh God," he said. "I tried to do what Ender Wiggin would have done."

Wang-mu couldn't help it. She laughed aloud.

"That's odd," said Peter. "I was trying to do exactly the same thing."

"Oh God," said Lands again.

"Admiral Lands," said Peter, "I have a suggestion. Instead of spending a couple of months of realtime trying to turn this ship around and launch this thing illegally again, and instead of trying to establish a useless, demoralizing quarantine around Lusitania, why don't you just head on back to one of the Hundred Worlds-- Trondheim is close-- and in the meantime, make a report to Starways Congress. I even have some ideas about what the report might say, if you want to hear them."

In answer, Lands took out a laser pistol and pointed it at Peter.

Immediately, Peter and Wang-mu disappeared from where they were and reappeared behind Lands. Peter reached out and deftly disarmed the Admiral, unfortunately breaking two of his fingers in the process. "Sorry, I'm out of practice," said Peter. "I haven't had to use my martial arts skills in-- oh, thousands of years."

Lands sank to his knees, nursing his injured hand.

"Peter," Wang-mu said, "can we stop having Jane move us around like that? It's really disorienting."

Peter winked at her. "Want to hear my ideas about your report?" Peter asked the admiral.

Lands nodded.

"Me too," said Causo, who clearly foresaw that he would be commanding this ship for some time.

"I think you need to use your ansible to report that due to a malfunction, it was reported that a launch of the Little Doctor took place. But in fact, the launch was aborted in time, and to prevent further mishap, you had the M.D. Device moved to the main hold where you disarmed and disabled it. You get the part about disabling it?" Peter asked Causo.

Causo nodded. "I'll do it at once, sir." He turned to the cargo officer. "Get me a tool kit."

While the cargo officer went to pull a kit out of the storage bin on the wall, Peter continued. "Then you can report that you entered into contact with a native of Lusitania-- that's me-- who was able to satisfy you that the descolada virus was completely under control and that it no longer poses a threat to anybody."

"And how do I know that?" said Lands.

"Because I carry what's left of the virus, and if it weren't utterly killed, you would catch the descolada and die of it in a couple of days. Now, in addition to certifying that Lusitania poses no threat, your report should also state that the rebellion of Lusitania was no more than a misunderstanding, and that far from there being any human interference in the pequenino culture, the pequeninos exercised their free rights as sentient beings on their own planet to acquire information and technology from friendly visiting aliens-- namely, the human colony of Milagre. Since that time, many of the pequeninos have become very adept at much human science and technology, and at some reasonable time in the future they will send ambassadors to Starways Congress and hope that Congress will return the courtesy. Are you getting this?"

Lands nodded. Causo, working on taking apart the firing mechanism of the Little Doctor, grunted his assent.

"You may also report that the pequeninos have entered into alliance with yet another alien race, which contrary to various premature reports, was not completely extinguished in the notorious xenocide of Ender Wiggin. One cocooned hive queen survived, she being the source of all the information contained in the famous book *The Hive Queen*, whose accuracy is now proved to be unassailable. The Hive Queen of Lusitania, however, does not wish to exchange ambassadors with Starways Congress at the present time, and prefers instead that her interests be represented by the pequeninos."

"There are still buggers?" asked Lands.

"Ender Wiggin did not, technically speaking, commit xenocide after all. So if your launch of this missile, here, hadn't been aborted, you would have been the cause of the first xenocide, not the second one. And as it stands right now, however, there has never been a xenocide, though not for lack of trying both times, I must admit."

Tears coursed down Lands's face. "I didn't want to do it. I thought it was the right thing. I thought I had to do it to save--"

"Let's say you take that up with the ship's therapist at some later time," said Peter. "We still have one more point to address. We have a technology of starflight that I think the Hundred Worlds would like to have. You've already seen a demonstration of it. Usually, though, we prefer to do it inside our rather unstylish and boxy-looking starships. Still, it's a pretty good method and it lets us visit other worlds without losing even a second of our lives. I know that those who hold the keys to our method of starflight would be delighted, over the next few months, to instantaneously transport all relativistic starships currently in flight to their destinations."

"But there's a price for it," said Causo, nodding.

"Well, let's just say that there's a precondition," said Peter. "A key element of our instantaneous starflight includes a computer program that Starways Congress recently tried to kill. We found a substitute method, but it's not wholly adequate or satisfactory, and I think I can safely say that Starways Congress will never have the use of instantaneous starflight until all the ansibles in the Hundred Worlds are reconnected to all the computer networks on every world, without delays and without those pesky little snoop programs that keep yipping away like ineffectual little dogs."

"I don't have any authority to--"

"Admiral Lands, I didn't ask you to decide. I merely suggested the contents of the message you might want to send, by ansible, to Starways Congress. Immediately."

Lands looked away. "I don't feel well," he said. "I think I'm incapacitated. Executive Officer Causo, in front of Cargo Officer Lung, I hereby transfer command of this ship to you, and order you to notify Admiral Fukuda that he is now commander of this fleet."

"Won't work," said Peter. "The message I've described has to come from you. Fukuda isn't here and I don't intend to go repeat all of this to him. So you will make the report, and you will retain command of fleet and ship, and you will not weasel out of your responsibility. You made a hard choice a while back. You chose wrong, but at least you chose with courage and determination. Show the same courage now, Admiral. We haven't punished you here today, except for my unfortunate clumsiness with your fingers, for which I really am sorry. We're giving you a second chance. Take it, Admiral."

Lands looked at Peter and tears began to flow down his cheeks. "Why did you give me a second chance?"

"Because that's what Ender always wanted," said Peter. "And maybe by giving you a second chance, he'll get one, too."

Wang-mu took Peter's hand and squeezed it.

Then they disappeared from the cargo hold of the flagship and reappeared inside the control room of a shuttle orbiting the planet of the descoladores.

Wang-mu looked around at a room full of strangers. Unlike Admiral Lands's starship, this craft had no artificial gravity, but by holding onto Peter's hand Wang-mu kept from either fainting or throwing up. She had no idea who any of these people were, but she did know that Firequencher had to be a pequenino and the nameless worker at one of the computer terminals was a creature of the kind once hated and feared as the merciless buggers.

"Hi, Ela, Quara, Miro," said Peter. "This is Wang-mu."

Wang-mu would have been terrified, except that the others were so obviously terrified to see them.

Miro was the first to recover enough to speak. "Didn't you forget your spaceship?" he asked.

Wang-mu laughed.

"Hi, Royal Mother of the West," said Miro, using the name of Wang-mu's ancestor-of-the-heart, a god worshiped on the world of Path. "I've heard all about you from Jane," Miro added.

A woman drifted in through a corridor at one end of the control room.

"Val?" said Peter.

"No," answered the woman. "I'm Jane."

"Jane," whispered Wang-mu. "Malu's god."

"Malu's friend," said Jane. "As I am your friend, Wang-mu." She reached Peter and, taking him by both hands, looked him in the eye. "And your friend too, Peter. As I've always been your friend."

Chapter 16 -- "HOW DO YOU KNOW THEY AREN'T QUIVERING IN TERROR?"

"O Gods! You are unjust! My mother and father deserved to have a better child than me!"

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

"You had the Little Doctor in your possession and you gave it back?" asked Quara, sounding incredulous.

Everyone, Miro included, assumed she meant that she didn't trust the fleet not to use it.

"It was dismantled in front of my eyes," said Peter.

"Well, can it be mantled again?" she asked.

Wang-mu tried to explain. "Admiral Lands isn't going to be able to go down that road now. We wouldn't have left things unsettled. Lusitania is safe."

"She's not talking about Lusitania," said Ela coldly. "She's talking about here. The descolada planet."

"Am I the only person who thought of it?" said Quara. "Tell the truth-- it would solve all our worries about followup probes, about new outbreaks of even worse versions of the descolada--"

"You're thinking of blowing up a world populated by a sentient race?" asked Wang-mu.

"Not right now," said Quara, sounding as if Wang-mu were the stupidest person she had ever wasted time talking to. "If we determine that they're, you know, what Valentine called them. Varelse. Unable to be reasoned with. Impossible to coexist with."

"So what you're saying," said Wang-mu, "is that--"

"I'm saying what I said," Quara answered.

Wang-mu went on. "What you're saying is that Admiral Lands wasn't wrong in principle, he simply was wrong about the facts of the particular case. If the descolada had still been a threat on Lusitania, then it's his duty to blow up the planet."

"What are the lives of the people of one planet compared to all sentient life?" asked Quara.

"Is this," said Miro, "the same Quara Ribeira who tried to keep us from wiping out the descolada virus because it might be sentient?" He sounded amused.

"I've thought a lot about that since then," said Quara. "I was being childish and sentimental. Life is precious. Sentient life is more precious. But when one sentient group threatens the survival of another, then the threatened group has the right to protect themselves. Isn't that what Ender did? Over and over again?"

Quara looked from one to another, triumphant.

Peter nodded. "Yes," he said. "That's what Ender did."

"In a game," said Wang-mu.

"In his fight with two boys who threatened his life. He made sure they could never threaten him again. That's how war is fought, in case any of you have foolish ideas to the contrary. You don't fight with minimum force, you fight with maximum force at endurable cost. You don't just pink your enemy, you don't even bloody him, you destroy his capability to fight back. It's the strategy you use with diseases. You don't try to find a drug that kills ninety-nine percent of the bacteria or viruses. If you do that, all you've accomplished is to create a new drug-resistant strain. You have to kill a hundred percent."

Wang-mu tried to think of an argument against this. "Is disease really a valid analogy?"

"What is your analogy?" answered Peter. "A wrestling match? Fight to wear down your opponent's resistance? That's fine-- if your opponent is playing by the same rules. But if you stand there ready to wrestle and he pulls out a knife or a gun, what then? Or is it a tennis match? Keep score until your opponent sets off the bomb under your feet? There aren't any rules. In war."

"But is this war?" asked Wang-mu.

"As Quara said," Peter answered. "If we find out there's no dealing with them, then yes, it's a war. What they did to Lusitania, to the defenseless pequeninos, was devastating, soulless, total war without regard to the rights of the other side. That's our enemy, unless we can bring them to understand the consequences of what they did. Isn't that what you were saying, Quara?"

"Perfectly," said Quara.

Wang-mu knew there was something wrong with this reasoning, but she couldn't lay her finger on it. "Peter, if you really believe this, why didn't you keep the Little Doctor?"

"Because," said Peter, "we might be wrong, and the danger is not imminent."

Quara clicked her tongue in disdain. "You weren't here, Peter. You didn't see what they were throwing at us-- a newly engineered and specially tailored virus to make us sit as still as idiots while they came and took over our ship."

"And they sent this how, in a nice envelope?" said Peter. "They sent an infected puppy, knowing you couldn't resist picking it up and hugging it?"

"They broadcast the code," said Quara. "But they expected us to interpret it by making the molecule and then it would have its effect."

"No," said Peter, "you speculated that that's how their language works, and then you started to act as if your speculation were true."

"And somehow you know that it's not?" said Quara.

"I don't know anything about it," said Peter. "That's my point. We just don't know. We can't know. Now, if we saw them launching probes, or if they started trying to blast this ship out of the sky, we'd have to start taking action. Like sending ships after the probes and carefully studying the viruses they were sending out. Or if they attacked this ship, we'd take evasive action and analyze their weapons and tactics."

"That's fine now," said Quara. "Now that Jane's safe and the mothertrees are intact so she can handle the starflight thing she does. Now we can catch up with probes and dance out of the way of missiles or whatever. But what about before, when we were helpless here? When we had only a few weeks to live, or so we thought?"

"Back then," said Peter, "you didn't have the Little Doctor, either, so you couldn't have blown up their planet. We didn't get our hands on the M. D. Device until after Jane's power of flight was restored. And with that power, it was no longer necessary to destroy the descolada planet until and unless it posed a danger too great to be resisted any other way."

Quara laughed. "What is this? I thought Peter was supposed to be the nasty side of Ender's personality. Turns out you're the sweetness and light."

Peter smiled. "There are times when you have to defend yourself or someone else against relentless evil. And some of those times the only defense that has any hope of succeeding is a one-time use of brutal, devastating force. At such times good people act brutally."

"We couldn't be engaging in a bit of self-justification, could we?" said Quara. "You're Ender's successor. Therefore you find it convenient to believe that those boys Ender killed were the exceptions to your niceness rule."

"I justify Ender by his ignorance and helplessness. We aren't helpless. Starways Congress and the Lusitania Fleet were not helpless. And they chose to act before alleviating their ignorance."

"Ender chose to use the Little Doctor while he was ignorant."

"No, Quara. The adults who commanded him used it. They could have intercepted and blocked his decision. There was plenty of time for them to use the overrides. Ender thought he was playing a game. He thought that by using the Little Doctor in the simulation he would prove himself unreliable, disobedient, or even too brutal to trust with command. He was trying to get himself kicked out of Command School. That's all. He was doing the necessary thing to get them to stop torturing him. The adults were the ones who decided simply to unleash their most powerful weapon: Ender Wiggin. No more effort to talk with the buggers, to communicate. Not even at the end when they knew that Ender was going to destroy the buggers' home planet. They had decided to go for the kill no matter what. Like Admiral Lands. Like you, Quara."

"I said I'd wait until we found out!"

"Good," said Peter. "Then we don't disagree."

"But we should have the Little Doctor here!"

"The Little Doctor shouldn't exist at all," said Peter. "It was never necessary. It was never appropriate. Because the cost of it is too high."

"Cost!" hooted Quara. "It's cheaper than the old nuclear weapons!"

"It's taken us three thousand years to get over the destruction of the hive queens' home planet. That's the cost. If we use the Little Doctor, then we're the sort of people who wipe out other species. Admiral Lands was just like the men who were using Ender Wiggin. Their minds were made up. This was the danger. This was the evil. This had to be destroyed. They thought they meant well. They were saving the human race. But they weren't. There were a lot of different motives involved, but along with deciding to use the weapon, they also decided not to attempt to communicate with the enemy. Where was the demonstration of the Little Doctor on a nearby moon? Where was Lands's attempt to verify that the situation on Lusitania had not changed? And you, Quara-- what methodology, exactly, were you planning to use to determine whether the descoladores were too evil to be allowed to live? At what point do you know they are an unbearable danger to all other sentient species?"

"Turn it around, Peter," said Quara. "At what point do you know they're not?"

"We have better weapons than the Little Doctor. Ela once designed a molecule to block the descolada's efforts to cause harm, without destroying its ability to help the flora and fauna of Lusitania to pass through their transformations. Who's to say that we can't do the same thing for every nasty little plague they send at us until they give up? Who's to say that they aren't already trying desperately to communicate with us? How do you know that the molecule they sent wasn't an attempt to make us happy with them the only way they knew how, by sending us a molecule that would take away our anger? How do you know they aren't already quivering in terror down on that planet because we have a ship that can disappear and reappear anywhere else? Are we trying to talk to them?"

Peter looked around at all of them.

"Don't you understand, any of you? There's only one species that we know of that has deliberately, consciously, knowingly tried to destroy another sentient species without any serious attempt at communication or warning. We're the ones. The first xenocide failed because the victims of the attack managed to conceal exactly one pregnant female. The second time it failed for a better reason-- because some members of the human species determined to stop it. Not just some, many. Congress. A big corporation. A philosopher on Divine Wind. A Samoan divine and his fellow believers on Pacifica. Wang-mu and I. Jane. And Admiral Lands's own officers and men, when they finally understood the situation. We're getting better, don't you see? But the fact remains-- we humans are the sentient species that has shown the most tendency to deliberately refuse to communicate with other species and instead destroy them utterly. Maybe the descoladores are varelse and maybe they're not. But I'm a lot more frightened at the thought that we are varelse. That's the cost of using the Little Doctor when it isn't needed and never will be, given the other

tools in our kit. If we choose to use the M. D. Device, then we are not ramen. We can never be trusted. We are the species that would deserve to die for the safety of all other sentient life."

Quara shook her head, but the smugness was gone. "Sounds to me like somebody is still trying to earn forgiveness for his own crimes."

"That was Ender," said Peter. "He spent his life trying to turn himself and everyone else into ramen. I look around me in this ship, I think of what I've seen, the people I've known in the past few months, and I think that the human race isn't doing too badly. We're moving in the right direction. A few throwbacks now and then. A bit of blustery talk. But by and large, we're coming closer to being worthy to associate with the hive queens and the pequeninos. And if the descoladores are perhaps a bit farther from being ramen than we are, that doesn't mean we have a right to destroy them. It means we have all the more reason to be patient with them and try to nurse them along. How many years has it taken us to get here from marking the sites of battles with piles of human skulls? Thousands of years. And all the time, we had teachers trying to get us to change, pointing the way. Bit by bit we learned. Let's teach them-- if they don't already know more than we do."

"It could take years just to learn their language," said Ela.

"Transportation is cheap now," said Peter. "No offense intended, Jane. We can keep teams shuttling back and forth for a long time without undue hardship to anyone. We can keep a fleet watching this planet. With pequeninos and hive workers alongside the human researchers. For centuries. For millennia. There's no hurry."

"I think that's dangerous," said Quara.

"And I think you have the same instinctive desire that we all have, the one that gets us in so damn much trouble all the time," said Peter. "You know that you're going to die, and you want to see it all resolved before you do."

"I'm not old yet!" Quara said.

Miro spoke up. "He's right, Quara. Ever since Marcao died, you've had death looming over you. Think about it, everybody. Humans are the short-lived species. Hive queens think they live forever. Pequeninos have the hope of many centuries in the third life. We're the ones who are in a hurry all the time. We're the ones who are determined to make decisions without getting enough information, because we want to act now, while we still have time."

"So that's it?" said Quara. "That's your decision? Let this grave threat to all life continue to sit here hatching their plans while we watch and watch from the sky?"

"Not we," said Peter.

"No, that's right," said Quara, "you're not part of this project."

"Yes I am," said Peter. "But you're not. You're going back down to Lusitania, and Jane will never bring you back here. Not until you've spent years proving that you've got your personal bugbears under control."

"You arrogant son-of-a-bitch!" Quara cried.

"Everybody here knows that I'm right," said Peter. "You're like Lands. You're too ready to make devastatingly far-reaching decisions and then refuse to let any argument change your mind. There are plenty of people like you, Quara. But we can never let any of them anywhere near this planet until we know more. The day may come when all the sentient species reach the conclusion that the descoladores are in fact varelse who must be destroyed. But I seriously doubt any of us here, with the exception of Jane, will be alive when that day comes."

"What, you think I'll live forever?" said Jane.

"You'd better," said Peter. "Unless you and Miro can figure out how to have children who can launch starships when they grow up." Peter turned to Jane. "Can you take us home now?"

"Even as we speak," said Jane.

They opened the door. They left the ship. They stepped onto the surface of a world that was not going to be destroyed after all.

All except Quara.

"Isn't Quara coming with us?" asked Wang-mu.

"Maybe she needs to be alone for a while," said Peter.

"You go on ahead," said Wang-mu.

"You think you can deal with her?" said Peter.

"I think I can try," said Wang-mu.

He kissed her. "I was hard on her. Tell her I'm sorry."

"Maybe later you can tell her yourself," said Wang-mu.

She went back inside the starship. Quara still sat facing her terminal. The last data she had been looking at before Peter and Wang-mu arrived in the starship still hung in the air over her terminal.

"Quara," said Wang-mu.

"Go away." The husky sound of her voice was ample evidence that she had been crying.

"Everything Peter said was true," said Wang-mu.

"Is that what you came to say? Rub salt in the wound?"

"Except that he gave the human race too much credit for our slight improvement."

Quara snorted. It was almost a yes.

"Because it seems to me that he and everyone else here had already decided you were varelse. To be banished without hope of Parole. Without understanding you first."

"Oh, they understand me," said Quara. "Little girl devastated by loss of brutal father whom she nevertheless loved. Still searching for father figure. Still responding to everyone else with the mindless rage she saw her father show. You think I don't know what they've decided?"

"They've got you pegged."

"Which is not true of me. I might have suggested that the Little Doctor ought to be kept around in case it was necessary, but I never said just to use it without any further attempt at communication. Peter just treated me as if I was that admiral all over again."

"I know," said Wang-mu.

"Yeah, right. I'm sure you're so sympathetic with me and you know he's wrong. Come on, Jane told us already that the two of you are-- what was the bullshit phrase? --in love."

"I wasn't proud of what Peter did to you. It was a mistake. He makes them. He hurts my feelings sometimes, too. So do you. You did just now. I don't know why. But sometimes I hurt other people, too. And sometimes I do terrible things because I'm so sure that I'm right. We're all like that. We all have a little bit of varelse in us. And a little bit of raman."

"Isn't that the sweetest little well-balanced undergraduate-level philosophy of life," said Quara.

"It's the best I could come up with," said Wang-mu. "I'm not educated like you."

"And is that the make-her-feel-guilty technique?"

"Tell me, Quara, if you're not really acting out your father's role or trying to call him back or whatever the analysis was, why are you so angry at everybody all the time?"

Quara finally swiveled in her chair and looked Wang-mu in the face. Yes, she had been crying. "You really want to know why I'm so filled with irrational fury all the time?" The taunting hadn't left her voice. "You really want to play shrink with me? Well try this one. What has me so completely pissed off is that all through my childhood, my older brother Quim was secretly molesting me, and now he's a martyr and they're going to make him a saint and nobody will ever know how evil he was and the terrible, terrible things he did to me."

Wang-mu stood there horrified. Peter had told her about Quim. How he died. The kind of man he was. "Oh, Quara," she said. "I'm so sorry."

A look of complete disgust passed across Quara's face. "You are so stupid. Quim never touched me, you stupid meddling little do-gooder. But you're so eager to get some cheap explanation about why I'm such a bitch that you'll believe any story that sounds halfway plausible. And right now you're probably still wondering whether maybe my confession was true and I'm only denying it because I'm afraid of the repercussions or some dumb merda like that. Get this straight, girl. You do not know me. You will never know me. I don't want you to know me. I don't want any friends, and if I did want friends, I would not want Peter's pet bimbo to do the honors. Can I possibly make myself clearer?"

In her life Wang-mu had been beaten by experts and vilified by champions. Quara was damn good at it by any standards, but not so good that Wang-mu couldn't bear it without flinching. "I notice, though," said Wang-mu, "that after your vile slander against the noblest member of your family, you couldn't stand to leave me believing that it was true. So you do have loyalty to someone, even if he's dead."

"You just don't take a hint, do you?" said Quara.

"And I notice that you still keep talking to me, even though you despise me and try to offend me."

"If you were a fish, you'd be a remora, you just clamp on and suck for dear life, don't you!"

"Because at any point you could just walk out of here and you wouldn't have to hear my pathetic attempts at making friends with you," said Wang-mu. "But you don't go."

"You are unbelievable," said Quara. She unstrapped herself from her chair, got up, and went out the open door.

Wang-mu watched her go. Peter was right. Humans were still the most alien of alien species. Still the most dangerous, the most unreasonable, the least predictable.

Even so, Wang-mu dared to make a couple of predictions to herself.

First, she was confident that the research team would someday establish communications with the descoladores.

The second prediction was much more iffy. More like a hope. Maybe even just a wish. That someday Quara would tell Wang-mu the truth. That someday the hidden wound that Quara bore would be healed. That someday they might be friends.

But not today. There was no hurry. Wang-mu would try to help Quara because she was so obviously in need, and because the people who had been around her the longest were clearly too sick of her to help. But helping Quara was not the only thing or even the most important thing she

had to accomplish. Marrying Peter and starting a life with him-- that was a much higher priority. And getting something to eat, a drink of water, and a place to pee-- those were the highest priorities of all at this precise moment in her life.

I guess that means I'm human, thought Wang-mu. Not a god. Maybe just a beast after all. Part raman. Part varelse. But more raman than varelse, at least on her good days. Peter, too, just like her. Both of them part of the same flawed species, determined to join together to make a couple of more members of that species. Peter and I together will call forth some aiua to come in from Outside and take control of a tiny body that our bodies have made, and we'll see that child be varelse on some days and raman on others. On some days we'll be good parents and some days we'll be wretched failures. Some days we'll be desperately sad and some days we'll be so happy we can hardly contain it. I can live with that.

Chapter 17 -- "THE ROAD GOES ON WITHOUT HIM NOW"

"I once heard a tale of a man who split himself in two. The one part never changed at all; the other grew and grew. The changeless part was always true, The growing part was always new, And I wondered, when the tale was through, Which part was me, and which was you."

-- from The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Valentine arose on the morning of Ender's funeral full of bleak reflection. She had come here to this world of Lusitania in order to be with him again and help him in his work; it had hurt Jakt, she knew, that she wanted so badly to be part of Ender's life again, yet her husband had given up the world of his childhood to come with her. So much sacrifice. And now Ender was gone.

Gone and not gone. Sleeping in her house was the man that she knew had Ender's aiua in him. Ender's aiua, and the face of her brother Peter. Somewhere inside him were Ender's memories. But he hadn't touched them yet, except unconsciously from time to time. Indeed, he was virtually hiding in her house in order not to rekindle those memories.

"What if I see Novinha? He loved her, didn't he?" Peter had asked almost as soon as he arrived. "He felt this awful sense of responsibility to her. And in a sense, I worry that I'm somehow married to her."

"Interesting question of identity, isn't it?" Valentine had answered. But it wasn't just an interesting question to Peter. He was terrified of getting caught up in Ender's life. Afraid, too, of living a life wracked with guilt as Ender's had been. "Abandonment of family," he had said. To which Valentine had replied, "The man who married Novinha died. We watched him die. She isn't looking for some

young husband who doesn't want her, Peter. Her life is full of grief enough without that. Marry Wang-mu, leave this place, go on, be a new self. Be Ender's true son, have the life he might have had if the demands of others hadn't tainted it from the start."

Whether he fully accepted her advice or not, Valentine couldn't guess. He remained hidden in the house, avoiding even those visitors who might trigger memories. Olhado came, and Grego, and Ela, each in turn, to express their condolences to Valentine on the death of her brother, but Peter never came into the room. Wang-mu did, however, this sweet young girl who nevertheless had a kind of steel in her that Valentine quite liked. Wang-mu played the gracious friend of the bereaved, keeping the conversation going as each of these children of Ender's wife talked about how Ender had saved their family, blessed their lives when they had thought themselves beyond the reach of all blessing.

And in the corner of the room, Plikt sat, absorbing, listening, fueling the speech that she had lived her whole life for.

Oh, Ender, the jackals have gnawed at your life for three thousand years. And now your friends will have their turn. In the end, will the toothmarks on your bones be all that different?

Today all would come to a close. Others might divide time differently, but to Valentine the Age of Ender Wiggin had come to a close. The age that began with one xenocide attempted had now ended with other xenocides prevented or, at least, postponed. Human beings might now be able to live with other peoples in peace, working out a shared destiny on dozens of colony worlds. Valentine would write the history of this, as she had written a history on every world that she and Ender had visited together. She would write, not a kind of oracle or scripture, the way Ender had done with his three books, *The Hive Queen*, *The Hegemon*, and *The Life of Human*; rather her book would be scholarly, with sources cited. She aspired to be, not Paul or Moses, but Thucydides. Though she wrote all under the name Demosthenes, her legacy from those childhood days when she and Peter, the first Peter, the dark and dangerous and magnificent Peter, had used their words to change the world. Demosthenes would publish a book chronicling the history of human involvement on Lusitania, and in that book would be much about Ender-- how he brought the cocoon of the Hive Queen here, how he became a part of the family most pivotal in dealings with the pequeninos. But it would not be a book about Ender. It would be a book about utlanning and framling, raman and varelse. Ender, who was a stranger in every land, belonging nowhere, serving everywhere, until he chose this world as his home, not just because there was a family that needed him, but also because in this place he did not have to be entirely a member of the human race. He could belong to the tribe of the pequenino, to the hive of the queen. He could be part of something larger than mere humanity.

And though there was no child with Ender's name as father on its birth certificate, he had become a father here. Of Novinha's children. Of Novinha herself, in a way. Of a young copy of Valentine herself. Of Jane, the first spawn of a mating between races, who now was a bright and beautiful creature who lived in mothertrees, in digital webs, in the phlotic twinings of the ansibles, and in a body that had once been Ender's and which, in a way, had once been Valentine's, for she remembered looking into mirrors and seeing that face and calling it herself.

And he was father of this new man, Peter, this strong and whole man. For he was not the Peter who had first come out of the starship. He was not the cynical, nasty, barbed young boy who strutted with arrogance and seethed with rage. He had become whole. There was the cool of ancient wisdom in him, even as he burned with the hot sweet fire of youth. He had a woman who was his equal in wit and virtue and vigor by his side. He had a normal lifetime of a man before him. Ender's truest son would make of this life, if not something as profoundly world-changing as Ender's life had been, then something happier. Ender would have wanted neither more nor less for him. Changing the world is good for those who want their names in books. But being happy, that is for those who write their names in the lives of others, and hold the hearts of others as the treasure most dear.

Valentine and Jakt and their children gathered on the porch of their house. Wang-mu was waiting there alone. "Will you take me with you?" asked the girl. Valentine offered her an arm. What is the name of her relationship to me? Niece-in-law-to-be? Friend would be a better word.

Plikt's speaking of Ender's death was eloquent and piercing. She had learned well from the master speaker. She wasted no time on inconsequential. She spoke at once of his great crime, explaining what Ender thought he was doing at the time, and what he thought of it after he knew each layer of truth that was revealed to him. "That was Ender's life," said Plikt, "unpeeling the onion of truth. Only unlike most of us, he knew that there was no golden kernel inside. There were only the layers of illusion and misunderstanding. What mattered was to know all the errors, all the self-serving explanations, all the mistakes, all the twisted observations, and then, not to find, but to make a kernel of truth. To light a candle of truth where there was no truth to be found. That was Ender's gift to us, to free us from the illusion that any one explanation will ever contain the final answer for all time, for all hearers. There is always, always more to learn."

Plikt went on then, recounting incidents and memories, anecdotes and pithy sayings; the gathered people laughed and cried and laughed again, and fell silent many times to connect these stories with their own lives. How like Ender I am! they sometimes thought, and then, Thank God my life is not like that!

Valentine, though, knew stories that would not be told here because Plikt did not know them, or at least could not see them through the eyes of memory. They weren't important stories. They revealed no inner truth. They were the flotsam and jetsam of shared years together. Conversations, quarrels, funny and tender moments on dozens of worlds or on the starships in between. And at the root of them all, the memories of childhood. The baby in Valentine's mother's arms. Father tossing him into the air. His early words, his babbling. None of that goo-goo stuff for baby Ender! He needed more syllables to speak: Deedle-deedle. Wagada wagada. Why am I remembering his baby talk?

The sweet-faced baby, eager for life. Baby tears from the pain of falling down. Laughter at the simplest things-- laughter because of a song, because of seeing a beloved face, because life was pure and good for him then, and nothing had caused him pain. He was surrounded by love and hope. The hands that touched him were strong and tender; he could trust them all. Oh, Ender, thought Valentine. How I wish you could have kept on living such a life of joy. But no one can. Language comes to us, and with it lies and threats, cruelty and disappointment. You walk, and

those steps lead you outside the shelter of your home. To keep the joy of childhood you would have to die as a child, or live as one, never becoming a man, never growing. So I can grieve for the lost child, and yet not regret the good man braced with pain and riven with guilt, who yet was kind to me and to many others, and whom I loved, and whom I also almost knew. Almost, almost knew.

Valentine let her tears of memory flow as Plikt's words washed over her, touching her now and then, but also not touching her because she knew far more about Ender than anyone here, and had lost more by losing him. Even more than Novinha, who sat near the front, her children gathered near her. Valentine watched as Miro put his arm around his mother even as he held to Jane on the other side of him. Valentine noticed also how Ela clung to and one time kissed Olhado's hand, and how Grego, weeping, leaned his head into stern Quara's shoulder, and how Quara reached out her arm to hold him close and comfort him. They loved Ender too, and knew him too; but in their grief, they leaned upon each other, a family that had strength to share because Ender had been part of them and healed them, or at least opened up the door of healing. Novinha would survive and perhaps grow past her anger at the cruel tricks life had played on her. Losing Ender was not the worst thing that happened to her; in some ways it was the best, because she had let him go.

Valentine looked at the pequeninos, who sat, some of them among the humans, some of them apart. To them this was a doubly holy place, where Ender's few remains were to be buried. Between the trees of Rooter and of Human, where Ender had shed a pequenino's blood to seal the pact between the species. There were many friends among pequeninos and humans now, though many fears and enmities remained as well, but the bridges had been built, in no small part because of Ender's book, which gave the pequeninos hope that some human, someday, would understand them; hope that sustained them until, with Ender, it became the truth.

And one expressionless hiveworker sat at a remote distance, neither human nor pequenino near her. She was nothing but a pair of eyes there. If the Hive Queen grieved for Ender, she kept it to herself. She would always be mysterious, but Ender had loved her, too; for three thousand years he had been her only friend, her protector. In a sense, Ender could count her among his children, too, among the adopted children who thrived under his protection.

In only three-quarters of an hour, Plikt was done. She ended simply:

"Even though Ender's aiaa lives on, as all aiaas live on undying, the man we knew is gone from us. His body is gone, and whatever parts of his life and works we take with us, they aren't him any longer, they are ourselves, they are the Ender-within-us just as we also have other friends and teachers, fathers and mothers, lovers and children and siblings and even strangers within us, looking out at the world through our eyes and helping us determine what it all might mean. I see Ender in you looking out at me. You see Ender in me looking out at you. And yet not one of us is truly him; we are each our own self, all of us strangers on our own road. We walked awhile on that road with Ender Wiggin. He showed us things we might not otherwise have seen. But the road goes on without him now. In the end, he was no more than any other man. But no less, either."

And then it was over. No prayer-- the prayers had all been said before she spoke, for the bishop had no intention of letting this unreligious ritual of Speaking be a part of the services of Holy Mother Church. The weeping had been done as well, the grief purged. They rose from their places

on the ground, the older ones stiffly, the children with exuberance, running and shouting to make up for the long confinement. It was good to hear laughter and shouting. That was also a good way to say good-bye to Ender Wiggin.

Valentine kissed Jakt and her children, embraced Wang-mu, then made her way alone through the crush of citizens. So many of the humans of Milagre had fled to other colonies; but now, with their planet saved, many of them chose not to stay on the new worlds. Lusitania was their home. They weren't the pioneering kind. Many others, though, had come back solely for this ceremony. Jane would return them to their farms and houses on virgin worlds. It would take a generation or two to fill the empty houses in Milagre.

On the porch Peter waited for her. She smiled at him. "I think you have an appointment now," said Valentine.

They walked together out of Milagre and into the new-growth forest that still could not utterly hide the evidence of recent fire. They walked until they came to a bright and shining tree. They arrived almost at the same time that the others, walking from the funeral site, arrived. Jane came to the glowing mothertree and touched it-- touched a part of herself, or at least a dear sister. Then Peter took his place beside Wang-mu, and Miro stood with Jane, and the priest married the two couples under the mothertree, with pequeninos looking on, and Valentine as the only human witness of the ceremony. No one else even knew the ceremony was taking place; it would not do, they had decided, to distract from Ender's funeral or Plikt's speaking. Time enough to announce the marriages later on.

When the ceremony was done, the priest left, with pequeninos as his guide to take him back through the wood. Valentine embraced the newly married couples, Jane and Miro, Peter and Wang-mu, spoke to them for a moment one by one, murmured words of congratulations and farewell, and then stood back and watched.

Jane closed her eyes, smiled, and then all four of them were gone. Only the mothertree remained in the middle of the clearing, bathed in light, heavy with fruit, festooned with blossoms, a perpetual celebrant of the ancient mystery of life.

ENDER'S SHADOW

by Orson Scott Card

FOREWORD

This book is, strictly speaking, not a sequel, because it begins about where *Ender's Game* begins, and also ends, very nearly, at the same place. In fact, it is another telling of the same tale, with many of the same characters and settings, only from the perspective of another character. It's hard to know what to call it. A companion novel? A parallel novel? Perhaps a "parallax," if I can move that scientific term into literature.

Ideally, this novel should work as well for readers who have never read *Ender's Game* as for those who have read it several times. Because it is not a sequel, there is nothing you need to know from the novel *Ender's Game* that is not contained here. And yet, if I have achieved my literary goal, these two books complement and fulfill each other. Whichever one you read first, the other novel should still work on its own merits.

For many years, I have gratefully watched as *Ender's Game* has grown in popularity, especially among school-age readers. Though it was never intended as a young-adult novel, it has been embraced by many in that age group and by many teachers who find ways to use the book in their classrooms.

I have never found it surprising that the existing sequels -- *Speaker for the Dead*, *Xenocide*, and *Children of the Mind* -- never appealed as strongly to those younger readers. The obvious reason is that *Ender's Game* is centered around a child, while the sequels are about adults; perhaps more important, *Ender's Game* is, at least on the surface, a heroic, adventurous novel, while the sequels are a completely different kind of fiction, slower paced, more contemplative and idea-centered, and dealing with themes of less immediate import to younger readers.

Recently, however, I have come to realize that the 3,000-year gap between *Ender's Game* and its sequels leaves plenty of room for other sequels that are more closely tied to the original. In fact, in one sense *Ender's Game* has no sequels, for the other three books make one continuous story in themselves, while *Ender's Game* stands alone.

For a brief time I flirted seriously with the idea of opening up the *Ender's Game* universe to other writers, and went so far as to invite a writer whose work I greatly admire, Neal Shusterman, to consider working with me to create novels about Ender Wiggin's companions in Battle School. As we talked, it became clear that the most obvious character to begin with would be Bean, the child-soldier whom Ender treated as he had been treated by his adult teachers.

And then something else happened. The more we talked, the more jealous I became that Neal might be the one to write such a book, and not me. It finally dawned on me that, far from being finished with writing about "kids in space," as I cynically described the project, I actually had more

to say, having actually learned something in the intervening dozen years since Ender's Game first appeared in 1985. And so, while still hoping that Neal and I can work together on something, I deftly swiped the project back.

I soon found that it's harder than it looks, to tell the same story twice, but differently. I was hindered by the fact that even though the viewpoint characters were different, the author was the same, with the same core beliefs about the world. I was helped by the fact that in the intervening years, I have learned a few things, and was able to bring different concerns and a deeper understanding to the project. Both books come from the same mind, but not the same; they draw on the same memories of childhood, but from a different perspective. For the reader, the parallax is created by Ender and Bean, standing a little ways apart as they move through the same events. For the writer, the parallax was created by a dozen years in which my older children grew up, and younger ones were born, and the world changed around me, and I learned a few things about human nature and about art that I had not known before.

Now you hold this book in your hands. Whether the literary experiment succeeds for you is entirely up to you to judge. For me it was worth dipping again into the same well, for the water was greatly changed this time, and if it has not been turned exactly into wine, at least it has a different flavor because of the different vessel that it was carried in, and I hope that you will enjoy it as much, or even more.

-- Greensboro, North Carolina, January 1999

PART ONE -- URCHIN

CHAPTER 1 -- POKE

"You think you've found somebody, so suddenly my program gets the ax?"

"It's not about this kid that Graff found. It's about the low quality of what you've been finding."

"We knew it was long odds. But the kids I'm working with are actually fighting a war just to stay alive."

"Your kids are so malnourished that they suffer serious mental degradation before you even begin testing them. Most of them haven't formed any normal human bonds, they're so messed up they can't get through a day without finding something they can steal, break, or disrupt."

"They also represent possibility, as all children do."

"That's just the kind of sentimentality that discredits your whole project in the eyes of the I.F."

Poke kept her eyes open all the time. The younger children were supposed to be on watch, too, and sometimes they could be quite observant, but they just didn't notice all the things they needed to notice, and that meant that Poke could only depend on herself to see danger.

There was plenty of danger to watch for. The cops, for instance. They didn't show up often, but when they did, they seemed especially bent on clearing the streets of children. They would flail about them with their magnetic whips, landing cruel stinging blows on even the smallest children, haranguing them as vermin, thieves, pestilence, a plague on the fair city of Rotterdam. It was Poke's job to notice when a disturbance in the distance suggested that the cops might be running a sweep. Then she would give the alarm whistle and the little ones would rush to their hiding places till the danger was past.

But the cops didn't come by that often. The real danger was much more immediate -- big kids. Poke, at age nine, was the matriarch of her little crew (not that any of them knew for sure that she was a girl), but that cut no ice with the eleven- and twelve- and thirteen-year-old boys and girls who bullied their way around the streets. The adult-size beggars and thieves and whores of the street paid no attention to the little kids except to kick them out of the way. But the older children, who were among the kicked, turned around and preyed on the younger ones. Any time Poke's crew found something to eat -- especially if they located a dependable source of garbage or an easy mark for a coin or a bit of food -- they had to watch jealously and hide their winnings, for the bullies liked nothing better than to take away whatever scraps of food the little ones might have. Stealing from younger children was much safer than stealing from shops or passersby. And they enjoyed it,

Poke could see that. They liked how the little kids cowered and obeyed and whimpered and gave them whatever they demanded.

So when the scrawny little two-year-old took up a perch on a garbage can across the street, Poke, being observant, saw him at once. The kid was on the edge of starvation. No, the kid was starving. Thin arms and legs, joints that looked ridiculously oversized, a distended belly. And if hunger didn't kill him soon, the onset of autumn would, because his clothing was thin and there wasn't much of it even at that.

Normally she wouldn't have paid him more than passing attention. But this one had eyes. He was still looking around with intelligence. None of that stupor of the walking dead, no longer searching for food or even caring to find a comfortable place to lie while breathing their last taste of the stinking air of Rotterdam. After all, death would not be such a change for them. Everyone knew that Rotterdam was, if not the capital, then the main seaport of Hell. The only difference between Rotterdam and death was that with Rotterdam, the damnation wasn't eternal.

This little boy -- what was he doing? Not looking for food. He wasn't eyeing the pedestrians. Which was just as well -- there was no chance that anyone would leave anything for a child that small. Anything he might get would be taken away by any other child, so why should he bother? If he wanted to survive, he should be following older scavengers and licking food wrappers behind them, getting the last sheen of sugar or dusting of flour clinging to the packaging, whatever the first comer hadn't licked off.

There was nothing for this child out here on the street, not unless he got taken in by a crew, and Poke wouldn't have him. He'd be nothing but a drain, and her kids were already having a hard enough time without adding another useless mouth.

He's going to ask, she thought. He's going to whine and beg. But that only works on the rich people. I've got my crew to think of. He's not one of them, so I don't care about him. Even if he is small. He's nothing to me.

A couple of twelve-year-old hookers who didn't usually work this strip rounded a corner, heading toward Poke's base. She gave a low whistle. The kids immediately drifted apart, staying on the street but trying not to look like a crew.

It didn't help. The hookers knew already that Poke was a crew boss, and sure enough, they caught her by the arms and slammed her against a wall and demanded their "permission" fee. Poke knew better than to claim she had nothing to share -- she always tried to keep a reserve in order to placate hungry bullies. These hookers, Poke could see why they were hungry. They didn't look like what the pedophiles wanted, when they came cruising through. They were too gaunt, too old-looking. So until they grew bodies and started attracting the slightly-less-perverted trade, they had to resort to scavenging. It made Poke's blood boil, to have them steal from her and her crew, but it was smarter to pay them off. If they beat her up, she couldn't look out for her crew now, could she? So she took them to one of her stashes and came up with a little bakery bag that still had half a pastry in it.

It was stale, since she'd been holding it for a couple of days for just such an occasion, but the two hookers grabbed it, tore open the bag, and one of them bit off more than half before offering the remainder to her friend. Or rather, her former friend, for of such predatory acts are feuds born. The two of them started fighting, screaming at each other, slapping, raking at each other with clawed hands. Poke watched closely, hoping that they'd drop the remaining fragment of pastry, but no such luck. It went into the mouth of the same girl who had already eaten the first bite -- and it was that first girl who won the fight too, sending the other one running for refuge.

Poke turned around, and there was the little boy right behind her. She nearly tripped over him. Angry as she was at having had to give up food to those street-whores, she gave him a knee and knocked him to the ground. "Don't stand behind people if you don't want to land on your butt," she snarled.

He simply got up and looked at her, expectant, demanding.

"No, you little bastard, you're not getting nothing from me," said Poke. "I'm not taking one bean out of the mouths of my crew, you aren't *worth* a bean."

Her crew was starting to reassemble, now that the bullies had passed.

"Why you give your food to them?" said the boy. "You need that food."

"Oh, excuse me!" said Poke. She raised her voice, so her crew could hear her. "I guess you ought to be the crew boss here, is that it? You being so big, you got no trouble keeping the food."

"Not me," said the boy. "I'm not worth a bean, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. Maybe *you* ought to remember and shut up."

Her crew laughed.

But the little boy didn't. "You got to get your own bully," he said.

"I don't *get* bullies, I get rid of them," Poke answered. She didn't like the way he kept talking, standing up to her. In a minute she was going to have to hurt him.

"You give food to bullies every day. Give that to *one* bully and get him to keep the others away from you."

"You think I never thought of that, stupid?" she said. "Only once he's bought, how I keep him? He won't fight for us."

"If he won't, then kill him," said the boy.

That made Poke mad, the stupid impossibility of it, the power of the idea that she knew she could never lay hands on. She gave him a knee again, and this time kicked him when he went down. "Maybe I start by killing you."

"I'm not worth a bean, remember?" said the boy. "You kill one bully, get another to fight for you, he want your food, he scared of you too."

She didn't know what to say to such a preposterous idea.

"They eating you up," said the boy. "Eating you up. So you got to kill one. Get him down, everybody as small as me. Stones crack any size head."

"You make me sick," she said.

"Cause you didn't think of it," he said.

He was flirting with death, talking to her that way. If she injured him at all, he'd be finished, he must know that.

But then, he had death living with him inside his flimsy little shirt already. Hard to see how it would matter if death came any closer.

Poke looked around at her crew. She couldn't read their faces.

"I don't need no baby telling me to kill what we can't kill."

"Little kid come up behind him, you shove, he fall over," said the boy. "Already got you some big stones, bricks. Hit him in the head. When you see brains you done."

"He no good to me dead," she said. "I want my own bully, he keep us safe, I don't want no dead one."

The boy grinned. "So now you like my idea," he said.

"Can't trust no bully," she answered.

"He watch out for you at the charity kitchen," said the boy. "You get in at the kitchen." He kept looking her in the eye, but he was talking for the others to hear. "He get you *all* in at the kitchen."

"Little kid get into the kitchen, the big kids, they beat him," said Sergeant. He was eight, and mostly acted like he thought he was Poke's second-in-command, though truth was she didn't have a second.

"You get you a bully, he make them go away."

"How he stop two bullies? Three bullies?" asked Sergeant.

"Like I said," the boy answered. "You push him down, he not so big. You get your rocks. You be ready. Be not you a soldier? Don't they call you Sergeant?"

"Stop talking to him, Sarge," said Poke. "I don't know why any of us is talking to some two-year-old."

"I'm four," said the boy.

"What your name?" asked Poke.

"Nobody ever said no name for me," he said.

"You mean you so stupid you can't remember your own name?"

"Nobody ever said no name," he said again. Still he looked her in the eye, lying there on the ground, the crew around him.

"Ain't worth a bean," she said.

"Am so," he said.

"Yeah," said Sergeant. "One damn bean."

"So now you got a name," said Poke. "You go back and sit on that garbage can, I think about what you said."

"I need something to eat," said Bean.

"If I get me a bully, if what you said works, then maybe I give you something."

"I need something now," said Bean.

She knew it was true.

She reached into her pocket and took out six peanuts she had been saving. He sat up and took just one from her hand, put it in his mouth and slowly chewed.

"Take them all," she said impatiently.

He held out his little hand. It was weak. He couldn't make a fist. "Can't hold them all," he said. "Don't hold so good."

Damn. She was wasting perfectly good peanuts on a kid who was going to die anyway.

But she was going to try his idea. It was audacious, but it was the first plan she'd ever heard that offered any hope of making things better, of changing something about their miserable life without her having to put on girl clothes and going into business. And since it was his idea, the crew had to see that she treated him fair. That's how you stay crew boss, they always see you be fair.

So she kept holding her hand out while he ate all six peanuts, one at a time.

After he swallowed the last one, he looked her in the eye for another long moment, and then said, "You better be ready to kill him."

"I want him alive."

"Be ready to kill him if he ain't the right one." With that, Bean toddled back across the street to his garbage can and laboriously climbed on top again to watch.

"You ain't no four years old!" Sergeant shouted over to him.

"I'm four but I'm just little," he shouted back.

Poke hushed Sergeant up and they went looking for stones and bricks and cinderblocks. If they were going to have a little war, they'd best be armed.

Bean didn't like his new name, but it was a name, and having a name meant that somebody else knew who he was and needed something to call him, and that was a good thing. So were the six peanuts. His mouth hardly knew what to do with them. Chewing hurt.

So did watching as Poke screwed up the plan he gave her. Bean didn't choose her because she was the smartest crew boss in Rotterdam. Quite the opposite. Her crew barely survived because her judgment wasn't that good. And she was too compassionate. Didn't have the brains to make sure she got enough food herself to look well fed, so while her own crew knew she was nice and liked her, to strangers she didn't look prosperous. Didn't look good at her job.

But if she really was good at her job, she would never have listened to him. He never would have got close. Or if she did listen, and did like his idea, she would have got rid of him. That's the way it worked on the street. Nice kids died. Poke was almost too nice to stay alive. That's what Bean was counting on. But that's what he now feared.

All this time he invested in watching people while his body ate itself up, it would be wasted if she couldn't bring it off. Not that Bean hadn't wasted a lot of time himself. At first when he watched the way kids did things on the street, the way they were stealing from each other, at each other's throats, in each other's pockets, selling every part of themselves that they could sell, he saw how things could be better if somebody had any brains, but he didn't trust his own insight. He was sure there must be something else that he just didn't get. He struggled to learn more -- of everything. To learn to read so he'd know what the signs said on trucks and stores and wagons and bins. To learn

enough Dutch and enough I.F. Common to understand everything that was said around him. It didn't help that hunger constantly distracted him. He probably could have found more to eat if he hadn't spent so much time studying the people. But finally he realized: He already understood it. He had understood it from the start. There was no secret that Bean just didn't get yet because he was only little. The reason all these kids handled everything so stupidly was because they were stupid.

They were stupid and he was smart. So why was he starving to death while these kids were still alive? That was when he decided to act. That was when he picked Poke as his crew boss. And now he sat on a garbage can watching her blow it.

She chose the wrong bully, that's the first thing she did. She needed a guy who made it on size alone, intimidating people. She needed somebody big and dumb, brutal but controllable. Instead, she thinks she needs somebody *small*. No, stupid! Stupid! Bean wanted to scream at her as she saw her target coming, a bully who called himself Achilles after the comics hero. He was little and mean and smart and quick, but he had a gimp leg. So she thought she could take him down more easily. Stupid! The idea isn't just to take him down -- you can take *anybody* down the first time because they won't expect it. You need somebody who will *stay* down.

But he said nothing. Couldn't get her mad at him. See what happens. See what Achilles is like when he's beat. She'll see -- it won't work and she'll have to kill him and hide the body and try again with another bully before word gets out that there's a crew of little kids taking down bullies.

So up comes Achilles, swaggering -- or maybe that was just the rolling gait that his bent leg forced on him -- and Poke makes an exaggerated show of cowering and trying to get away. Bad job, thought Bean. Achilles gets it already. Something's wrong. You were supposed to act like you normally do! Stupid! So Achilles looks around a lot more. Wary. She tells him she's got something stashed -- that part's normal -- and she leads him into the trap in the alley. But look, he's holding back. Being careful. It isn't going to work.

But it does work, because of the gimp leg. Achilles can see the trap being sprung but he can't get away, a couple of little kids pile into the backs of his legs while Poke and Sergeant push him from the front and down he goes. Then there's a couple of bricks hitting his body and his bad leg and they're thrown hard -- the little kids get it, they do their job, even if Poke is stupid -- and yeah, that's good, Achilles *is* scared, he thinks he's going to die.

Bean was off his perch by now. Down the alley, watching, closer. Hard to see past the crowd. He pushes his way in, and the little kids -- who are all bigger than he is -- recognize him, they know he earned a view of this, they let him in. He stands right at Achilles' head. Poke stands above him, holding a big cinderblock, and she's talking.

"You get us into the food line at the shelter."

"Sure, right, I will, I promise."

Don't believe him. Look at his eyes, checking for weakness.

"You get more food this way, too, Achilles. You get my crew. We get enough to eat, we have more strength, we bring more to you. You need a crew. The other bullies shove you out of the way -- we've seen them! -- but with us, you don't got to take no shit. See how we do it? An army, that's what we are."

OK, now he was getting it. It *was* a good idea, and he wasn't stupid, so it made sense to him.

"If this is so smart, Poke, how come you didn't do this before now?"

She had nothing to say to that. Instead, she glanced at Bean.

Just a momentary glance, but Achilles saw it. And Bean knew what he was thinking. It was so obvious.

"Kill him," said Bean.

"Don't be stupid," said Poke. "He's *in*."

"That's right," said Achilles. "I'm in. It's a good idea."

"Kill him," said Bean. "If you don't kill him now, he's going to kill *you*."

"You let this little walking turd get away with talking shit like this?" said Achilles.

"It's your life or his," said Bean. "Kill him and take the next guy."

"The next guy won't have my bad leg," said Achilles. "The next guy won't think he needs you. I know I do. I'm in. I'm the one you want. It makes sense."

Maybe Bean's warning made her more cautious. She didn't cave in quite yet. "You won't decide later that you're embarrassed to have a bunch of little kids in your crew?"

"It's *your* crew, not mine," said Achilles.

Liar, thought Bean. Don't you see that he's lying to you?

"What this is to me," said Achilles, "this is my family. These are my kid brothers and sisters. I got to look after my family, don't I?"

Bean saw at once that Achilles had won. Powerful bully, and he had called these kids his sisters, his brothers. Bean could see the hunger in their eyes. Not the regular hunger, for food, but the real hunger, the deep hunger, for family, for love, for belonging. They got a little of that by being in Poke's crew. But Achilles was promising more. He had just beaten Poke's best offer. Now it was too late to kill him.

Too late, but for a moment it looked as if Poke was so stupid she was going to go ahead and kill him after all. She raised the cinderblock higher, to crash it down.

"No," said Bean. "You can't. He's family now."

She lowered the cinderblock to her waist. Slowly she turned to look at Bean. "You get the hell out of here," she said. "You no part of my crew. You get *nothing* here."

"No," said Achilles. "You better go ahead and kill me, you plan to treat him that way."

Oh, that sounded brave. But Bean knew Achilles wasn't brave. Just smart. He had already won. It meant nothing that he was lying there on the ground and Poke still had the cinderblock. It was his crew now. Poke was finished. It would be a while before anybody but Bean and Achilles understood that, but the test of authority was here and now, and Achilles was going to win it.

"This little kid," said Achilles, "he may not be part of your crew, but he's part of my family. You don't go telling my brother to get lost."

Poke hesitated. A moment. A moment longer.

Long enough.

Achilles sat up. He rubbed his bruises, he checked out his contusions. He looked in joking admiration to the little kids who had bricked him. "Damn, you bad!" They laughed -- nervously, at first. Would he hurt them because they hurt him? "Don't worry," he said. "You showed me what you can do. We have to do this to more than a couple of bullies, you'll see. I had to know you could do it right. Good job. What's your name?"

One by one he learned their names. Learned them and remembered them, or when he missed one he'd make a big deal about it, apologize, visibly work at remembering. Fifteen minutes later, they loved him.

If he could do this, thought Bean, if he's this good at making people love him, why didn't he do it before?

Because these fools always look up for power. People above you, they never want to share power with you. Why you look to them? They give you nothing. People below you, you give them hope, you give them respect, *they* give you power, cause they don't think they have any, so they don't mind giving it up.

Achilles got to his feet, a little shaky, his bad leg more sore than usual. Everybody stood back, gave him some space. He could leave now, if he wanted. Get away, never come back. Or go get some more bullies, come back and punish the crew. But he stood there, then smiled, reached into his pocket, took out the most incredible thing. A bunch of raisins. A whole handful of them. They looked at his hand as if it bore the mark of a nail in the palm.

"Little brothers and sisters first," he said. "Littlest first." He looked at Bean. "You."

"Not him!" said the next littlest. "We don't even know him."

"Bean was the one wanted us to kill you," said another.

"Bean," said Achilles. "Bean, you were just looking out for my family, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Bean.

"You want a raisin?"

Bean nodded.

"You first. You the one brought us all together, OK?"

Either Achilles would kill him or he wouldn't. At this moment, all that mattered was the raisin. Bean took it. Put it in his mouth. Did not even bite down on it. Just let his saliva soak it, bringing out the flavor of it.

"You know," said Achilles, "no matter how long you hold it in your mouth, it never turns back into a grape."

"What's a grape?"

Achilles laughed at him, still not chewing. Then he gave out raisins to the other kids. Poke had never shared out so many raisins, because she had never had so many to share. But the little kids wouldn't understand that. They'd think, Poke gave us garbage, and Achilles gave us raisins. That's because they were stupid.

CHAPTER 2 -- KITCHEN

"I know you've already looked through this area, and you're probably almost done with Rotterdam, but something's been happening lately, since you visited, that ... oh, I don't know if it's really anything, I shouldn't have called."

"Tell me, I'm listening."

"There's always been fighting in the line. We try to stop them, but we only have a few volunteers, and they're needed to keep order inside the dining room, that and serve the food. So we know that a lot of kids who should get a turn can't even get in the line, because they're pushed out. And if we do manage to stop the bullies and let one of the little ones in, then they get beaten up afterward. We never see them again. It's ugly."

"Survival of the fittest."

"Of the cruelest. Civilization is supposed to be the opposite of that."

"You're civilized. They're not."

"Anyway, it's changed. All of a sudden. just in the past few days. I don't know why. But I just -- you said that anything unusual -- and whoever's behind it -- I mean, can civilization suddenly evolve all over again, in the middle of a jungle of children?"

"That's the only place it ever evolves. I'm through in Delft. There was nothing for us here. I already have enough blue plates."

Bean kept to the background during the weeks that followed. He had nothing to offer now -- they already had his best idea. And he knew that gratitude wouldn't last long. He wasn't big and he didn't eat much, but if he was constantly underfoot, annoying people and chattering at them, it would soon become not only fun but popular to deny him food in hopes that he'd die or go away.

Even so, he often felt Achilles' eyes on him. He noticed this without fear. If Achilles killed him, so be it. He had been a few days from death anyway. It would just mean his plan didn't work so well after all, but since it was his only plan, it didn't matter if it turned out not to have been good. If Achilles remembered how Bean urged Poke to kill him -- and of course he did remember -- and if Achilles was planning how and when he would die, there was nothing Bean could do to prevent it.

Sucking up wouldn't help. That would just look like weakness, and Bean had seen for a long time how bullies -- and Achilles was still a bully at heart -- thrived on the terror of other children, how they treated people even worse when they showed their weakness. Nor would offering more clever ideas, first because Bean didn't have any, and second because Achilles would think it was an affront to his authority. And the other kids would resent it if Bean kept acting like he thought he was the only one with a brain. They already resented him for having thought of this plan that had changed their lives.

For the change was immediate. The very first morning, Achilles had Sergeant go stand in the line at Helga's Kitchen on Aert Van Nes Straat, because, he said, as long as we're going to get the crap beaten out of us anyway, we might as well try for the best free food in Rotterdam in case we get to eat before we die. He talked like that, but he had made them practice their moves till the last light of day the night before, so they worked together better and they didn't give themselves away so soon, the way they did when they were going after him. The practice gave them confidence. Achilles kept saying, "They'll expect this," and "They'll try that," and because he was a bully himself, they trusted him in a way they had never trusted Poke.

Poke, being stupid, kept trying to act as if she was in charge, as if she had only delegated their training to Achilles. Bean admired the way that Achilles did not argue with her, and did not change his plans or instructions in any way because of what she said. If she urged him to do what he was

already doing, he'd keep doing it. There was no show of defiance. No struggle for power. Achilles acted as if he had already won, and because the other kids followed him, he had.

The line formed in front of Helga's early, and Achilles watched carefully as bullies who arrived later inserted themselves in line in a kind of hierarchy -- the bullies knew which ones got pride of place. Bean tried to understand the principle Achilles used to pick which bully Sergeant should pick a fight with. It wasn't the weakest, but that was smart, since beating the weakest bully would only set them up for more fights every day. Nor was it the strongest. As Sergeant walked across the street, Bean tried to see what it was about the target bully that made Achilles pick him. And then Bean realized -- this was the strongest bully who had no friends with him.

The target was big and he looked mean, so beating him would look like an important victory. But he talked to no one, greeted no one. He was out of his territory, and several of the other bullies were casting resentful glances at him, sizing him up. There might have been a fight here today even if Achilles hadn't picked this soup line, this stranger.

Sergeant was cool as you please, slipping into place directly in front of the target. For a moment, the target just stood there looking at him, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Surely this little kid would realize his deadly mistake and run away. But Sergeant didn't even act as if he noticed the target was there.

"Hey!" said the target. He shoved Sergeant hard, and from the angle of the push, Sergeant should have been propelled away from the line. But, as Achilles had told him, he planted a foot right away and launched himself forward, hitting the bully in front of the target in line, even though that was not the direction in which the target had pushed him.

The bully in front turned around and snarled at Sergeant, who pleaded, "He pushed me."

"He hit you himself," said the target.

"Do I look that stupid?" said Sergeant.

The bully-in-front sized up the target. A stranger. Tough, but not unbeatable. "Watch yourself, skinny boy."

That was a dire insult among bullies, since it implied incompetence and weakness.

"Watch your own self."

During this exchange, Achilles led a picked group of younger kids toward Sergeant, who was risking life and limb by staying right up between the two bullies. Just before reaching them, two of the younger kids darted through the line to the other side, taking up posts against the wall just beyond the target's range of vision. Then Achilles started screaming.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you turd-stained piece of toilet paper! I send my boy to hold my place in line and you *shove* him? You shove him into my *friend* here?"

Of course they weren't friends at all -- Achilles was the lowest-status bully in this part of Rotterdam and he always took his place as the last of the bullies in line. But the target didn't know that, and he wouldn't have time to find out. For by the time the target was turned to face Achilles, the boys behind him were already leaping against his calves. There was no waiting for the usual exchange of shoves and brags before the fight began. Achilles began it and ended it with brutal swiftness. He pushed hard just as the younger boys hit, and the target hit the cobbled street hard. He lay there dazed, blinking. But already two other little kids were handing big loose cobblestones to Achilles, who smashed them down, one, two, on the target's chest. Bean could hear the ribs as they popped like twigs.

Achilles pulled him by his shirt and flopped him right back down on the street. He groaned, struggled to move, groaned again, lay still.

The others in line had backed away from the fight. This was a violation of protocol. When bullies fought each other, they took it into the alleys, and they didn't try for serious injury, they fought until supremacy was clear and it was over. This was a new thing, using cobblestones, breaking bones. It scared them, not because Achilles was so fearsome to look at, but because he had done the forbidden thing, and he had done it right out in the open.

At once Achilles signaled Poke to bring the rest of the crew and fill in the gap in the line. Meanwhile, Achilles strutted up and down the line, ranting at the top of his voice. "You can disrespect me, I don't care, I'm just a cripple, I'm just a guy with a gimp leg! But don't you go shoving my family! Don't you go shoving one of my children out of line! You hear me? Because if you do that some truck's going to come down this street and knock you down and break your bones, just like happened to this little pinprick, and next time maybe your head's going to be what breaks till your brains fall out on the street. You got to watch out for speeding trucks like the one that knocked down this fart-for-brains right here in front of my soup kitchen!"

There it was, the challenge. *My* kitchen. And Achilles didn't hold back, didn't show a spark of timidity about it. He kept the rant going, limping up and down the line, staring each bully in the face, daring him to argue. Shadowing his movements on the other side of the line were the two younger boys who had helped take down the stranger, and Sergeant strutted at Achilles's side, looking happy and smug. They reeked of confidence, while the other bullies kept glancing over their shoulders to see what those leg-grabbers behind them were doing.

And it wasn't just talk and brag, either. When one of the bullies started looking belligerent, Achilles went right up into his face. However, as he had planned beforehand, he didn't actually go after the belligerent one -- he was ready for trouble, asking for it. Instead, the boys launched themselves at the bully directly after him in line. Just as they leapt, Achilles turned and shoved the new target, screaming, "What do you think is so damn funny!" He had another cobblestone in his hands at once, standing over the fallen one, but he did not strike. "Go to the end of the line, you moron! You're lucky I'm letting you eat in my kitchen!"

It completely deflated the belligerent one, for the bully Achilles knocked down and obviously could have smashed was the one next *lower* in status. So the belligerent one hadn't been

threatened or harmed, and yet Achilles had scored a victory right in his face and he hadn't been a part of it.

The door to the soup kitchen opened. At once Achilles was with the woman who opened it, smiling, greeting her like an old friend. "Thank you for feeding us today," he said. "I'm eating last today. Thank you for bringing in my friends. Thank you for feeding my family."

The woman at the door knew how the street worked. She knew Achilles, too, and that something very strange was going on here. Achilles always ate last of the bigger boys, and rather shamefacedly. But his new patronizing attitude hardly had time to get annoying before the first of Poke's crew came to the door. "My family," Achilles announced proudly, passing each of the little kids into the hall. "You take good care of my children."

Even Poke he called his child. If she noticed the humiliation of it, though, she didn't show it. All she cared about was the miracle of getting into the soup kitchen. The plan had worked.

And whether she thought of it as her plan or Bean's didn't matter to Bean in the least, at least not till he had the first soup in his mouth. He drank it as slowly as he could, but it was still gone so fast that he could hardly believe it. Was this all? And how had he managed to spill so much of the precious stuff on his shirt?

Quickly he stuffed his bread inside his clothing and headed for the door. Stashing the bread and leaving, that was Achilles' idea and it was a good one. Some of the bullies inside the kitchen were bound to plan retribution. The sight of little kids eating would be galling to them. They'd get used to it soon enough, Achilles promised, but this first day it was important that all the little kids get out while the bullies were still eating.

When Bean got to the door, the line was still coming in, and Achilles stood by the door, chatting with the woman about the tragic accident there in the line. Paramedics must have been summoned to carry the injured boy away -- he was no longer groaning in the street. "It could have been one of the little kids," he said. "We need a policeman out here to watch the traffic. That driver would never have been so careless if there was a cop here."

The woman agreed. "It could have been awful. They said half his ribs were broken and his lung was punctured." She looked mournful, her hands fretting.

"This line forms up when it's still dark. It's dangerous. Can't we have a light out here? I've got my children to think about," said Achilles. "Don't you want my little kids to be safe? Or am I the only one who cares about them?"

The woman murmured something about money and how the soup kitchen didn't have much of a budget.

Poke was counting children at the door while Sergeant ushered them out into the street.

Bean, seeing that Achilles was trying to get the adults to protect them in line, decided the time was tight for him to be useful. Because this woman was compassionate and Bean was by far the smallest child, he knew he had the most power over her. He came up to her, tugged on her woollen skirt. "Thank you for watching over us," he said. "It's the first time I ever got into a real kitchen. Papa Achilles told us that you would keep us safe so we little ones could eat here every day."

"Oh, you poor thing! Oh, look at you." Tears streamed down the woman's face. "Oh, oh, you poor darling." She embraced him.

Achilles looked on, beaming. "I got to watch out for them," he said quietly. "I got to keep them safe."

Then he led his family -- it was no longer in any sense Poke's crew -- away from Helga's kitchen, all marching in a line. Till they rounded the corner of a building and then they ran like hell, joining hands and putting as much distance between them and Helga's kitchen as they could. For the rest of the day they were going to have to lie low. In twos and threes the bullies would be looking for them.

But they *could* lie low, because they didn't need to forage for food today. The soup already gave them more calories than they normally got, and they had the bread.

Of course, the first tax on that bread belonged to Achilles, who had eaten no soup. Each child reverently offered his bread to their new papa, and he took a bite from each one and slowly chewed it and swallowed it before reaching for the next offered bread. It was quite a lengthy ritual. Achilles took a mouthful of every piece of bread except two: Poke's and Bean's.

"Thanks," said Poke.

She was so stupid, she thought it was a gesture of respect. Bean knew better. By not eating their bread, Achilles was putting them outside the family. We are dead, thought Bean.

That's why Bean hung back, why he held his tongue and remained unobtrusive during the next few weeks. That was also why he endeavored never to be alone. Always he was within arm's reach of one of the other kids.

But he didn't linger near Poke. That was a picture he didn't want to get locked in anyone's memory, him tagging along with Poke.

From the second morning, Helga's soup kitchen had an adult outside watching, and a new light fixture on the third day. By the end of a week the adult guardian was a cop. Even so, Achilles never brought his group out of hiding until the adult was there, and then he would march the whole family right to the front of the line, and loudly thank the bully in first position for helping him look out for his children by saving them a place in line.

It was hard on all of them, though, seeing how the bullies looked at them. They had to be on their best behavior while the doorkeeper was watching, but murder was on their minds.

And it didn't get better; the bullies didn't "get used to it," despite Achilles' bland assurances that they would. So even though Bean was determined to be unobtrusive, he knew that something had to be done to turn the bullies away from their hatred, and Achilles, who thought the war was over and victory achieved, wasn't going to do it.

So as Bean took his place in line one morning, he deliberately hung back to be last of the family. Usually Poke brought up the rear -- it was her way of trying to pretend that she was somehow involved in ushering the little ones in. But this time Bean deliberately got in place behind her, with the hate-filled stare of the bully who should have had first position burning on his head.

Right at the door, where the woman was standing with Achilles, both of them looking proud of his family, Bean turned to face the bully behind him and asked, in his loudest voice, "Where's *your* children? How come you don't bring *your* children to the kitchen?"

The bully would have snarled something vicious, but the woman at the door was watching with raised eyebrows. "You look after little children, too?" she asked. It was obvious she was delighted about the idea and wanted the answer to be yes. And stupid as this bully was, he knew that it was good to please adults who gave out food. So he said, "Of course I do."

"Well, you can bring them, you know. Just like Papa Achilles here. We're always glad to see the little children."

Again Bean piped up, "They let people with little children come inside *first*!"

"You know, that's such a good idea," said the woman. "I think we'll make that a rule. Now, let's move along, we're holding up the hungry children."

Bean did not even glance at Achilles as he went inside.

Later, after breakfast, as they were performing the ritual of giving bread to Achilles, Bean made it a point to offer his bread yet again, though there was danger in reminding everyone that Achilles never took a share from him. Today, though, he had to see how Achilles regarded him, for being so bold and intrusive.

"If they all bring little kids, they'll run out of soup faster," said Achilles coldly. His eyes said nothing at all -- but that, too, was a message.

"If they all become papas," said Bean, "they won't be trying to kill us."

At that, Achilles' eyes came to life a little. He reached down and took the bread from Bean's hand. He bit down on the crust, tore away a huge piece of it. More than half. He jammed it into his mouth and chewed it slowly, then handed the remnant of the bread back to Bean.

It left Bean hungry that day, but it was worth it. It didn't mean that Achilles wasn't going to kill him someday, but at least he wasn't separating him from the rest of the family anymore. And that remnant of bread was far more food than he used to get in a day. Or a week, for that matter.

He was filling out. Muscles grew in his arms and legs again. He didn't get exhausted just crossing a street. He could keep up easily now, when the others jogged along. They all had more energy. They were healthy, compared to street urchins who didn't have a papa. Everyone could see it. The other bullies would have no trouble recruiting families of their own.

Sister Carlotta was a recruiter for the International Fleet's training program for children. It had caused a lot of criticism in her order, and finally she won the right to do it by pointedly mentioning the Earth Defense Treaty, which was a veiled threat. If she reported the order for obstructing her work on behalf of the I.F., the order could lose its tax-exempt and draft-exempt status. She knew, however, that when the war ended and the treaty expired, she would no doubt be a nun in search of a home, for there would be no place for her among the Sisters of St. Nicholas.

But her mission in life, she knew, was to care for little children, and the way she saw it, if the Buggers won the next round of the war, all the little children of the Earth would die. Surely God did not mean that to happen -- but in her judgment, at least, God did not want his servants to sit around waiting for God to work miracles to save them. He wanted his servants to labor as best they could to bring about righteousness. So it was her business, as a Sister of St. Nicholas, to use her training in child development in order to serve the war effort. As long as the I.F. thought it worthwhile to recruit extraordinarily gifted children to train them for command roles in the battles to come, then she would help them by finding the children that would otherwise be overlooked. They would never pay anyone to do something as fruitless as scouring the filthy streets of every overcrowded city in the world, searching among the malnourished savage children who begged and stole and starved there; for the chance of finding a child with the intelligence and ability and character to make a go of it in Battle School was remote.

To God, however, all things were possible. Did he not say that the weak would be made strong, and the strong weak? Was Jesus not born to a humble carpenter and his bride in the country province of Galilee? The brilliance of children born to privilege and bounty, or even to bare sufficiency, would hardly show forth the miraculous power of God. And it was the miracle she was searching for. God had made humankind in his own image, male and female he created them. No Buggers from another planet were going to blow down what God had created.

Over the years, though, her enthusiasm, if not her faith, had flagged a little. Not one child had done better than a marginal success on the tests.

Those children were indeed taken from the streets and trained, but it wasn't Battle School. They weren't on the course that might lead them to save the world. So she began to think that her real work was a different kind of miracle -- giving the children hope, finding even a few to be lifted out of the morass, to be given special attention by the local authorities. She made it a point to indicate the most promising children, and then follow up on them with email to the authorities. Some of her

early successes had already graduated from college; they said they owed their lives to Sister Carlotta, but she knew they owed their lives to God.

Then came the call from Helga Braun in Rotterdam, telling her of certain changes in the children who came to her charity kitchen. Civilization, she had called it. The children, all by themselves, were becoming civilized.

Sister Carlotta came at once, to see a thing which sounded like a miracle. And indeed, when she beheld it with her own eyes, she could hardly believe it. The line for breakfast was now flooded with little children. Instead of the bigger ones shoving them out of the way or intimidating them into not even bothering to try, they were shepherding them, protecting them, making sure each got his share. Helga had panicked at first, fearful that she would run out of food -- but she found that when potential benefactors saw how these children were acting, donations increased. There was always plenty now -- not to mention an increase in volunteers helping.

"I was at the point of despair," she told Sister Carlotta. "On the day when they told me that a truck had hit one of the boys and broken his ribs. Of course that was a lie, but there he lay, right in the line. They didn't even try to conceal him from me. I was going to give up. I was going to leave the children to God and move in with my oldest boy in Frankfurt, where the government is not required by treaty to admit every refugee from any part of the globe."

"I'm glad you didn't," said Sister Carlotta. "You can't leave them to God, when God has left them to us."

"Well, that's the funny thing. Perhaps that fight in the line woke up these children to the horror of the life they were living, for that very day one of the big boys -- but the weakest of them, with a bad leg, they call him Achilles -- well, I suppose *I* gave him that name years ago, because Achilles had a weak heel, you know -- Achilles, anyway -- he showed up in the line with a group of little children. He as much as asked me for protection, warning me that what happened to that poor boy with the broken ribs -- he was the one I call Ulysses, because he wanders from kitchen to kitchen -- he's still in hospital, his ribs were completely smashed in, can you believe the brutality? -- Achilles, anyway, he warned me that the same thing might happen to his little ones, so I made the special effort, I came early to watch over the line, and badgered the police to finally give me a man, off-duty volunteers at first, on part pay, but now regulars -- you'd think I would have been watching over the line all along, but don't you see? It didn't make any difference because they didn't do their intimidation in the line, they did it where I couldn't see, so no matter how I watched over them, it was only the bigger, meaner boys who ended up in the line, and yes, I know they're God's children too and I fed them and tried to preach the gospel to them as they ate, but I was losing heart, they were so heartless themselves, so devoid of compassion, but Achilles, anyway, he had taken on a whole group of them, including the littlest child I ever saw on the streets, it just broke my heart, they call him Bean, so small, he looked to be two years old, though I've learned since that he thinks he's four, and he *talks* like he's ten at least, very precocious, I suppose that's why he lived long enough to get under Achilles' protection, but he was skin and bone, people say that when somebody's skinny, but in the case of this little Bean, it was true, I didn't know how he had muscles enough to walk, to *stand*, his arms and legs were as thin as an ant -- oh, isn't that awful? To compare him to the *Buggers*? Or I should say, the Formics, since they're saying now that

Buggers is a bad word in English, even though I.F. Common is *not* English, even though it began that way, don't you think?"

"So, Helga, you're telling me it began with this Achilles."

"Do call me Hazie. We're friends now, aren't we?" She gripped Sister Carlotta's hand. "You must meet this boy. Courage! Vision! Test him, Sister Carlotta. He is a leader of men! He is a civilizer!"

Sister Carlotta did not point out that civilizers often didn't make good soldiers. It was enough that the boy was interesting, and she had missed him the first time around. It was a reminder to her that she must be thorough.

In the dark of early morning, Sister Carlotta arrived at the door where the line had already formed. Helga beckoned to her, then pointed ostentatiously at a rather good-looking young man surrounded by smaller children. Only when she got closer and saw him take a couple of steps did she realize just how bad his right leg was. She tried to diagnose the condition. Was it an early case of rickets? A clubfoot, left uncorrected? A break that healed wrong?

It hardly mattered. Battle School would not take him with such an injury.

Then she saw the adoration in the eyes of the children, the way they called him Papa and looked to him for approval. Few adult men were good fathers. This boy of -- what, eleven? twelve? -- had already learned to be an extraordinarily good father. Protector, provider, king, god to his little ones. Even as ye do it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me. Christ had a special place deep in his heart for this boy Achilles. So she would test him, and maybe the leg could be corrected; or, failing that, she could surely find a place for him in some good school in one of the cities of the Netherlands -- pardon, the International Territory -- that was not completely overwhelmed by the desperate poverty of refugees.

He refused.

"I can't leave my children," he said.

"But surely one of the others can look after them."

A girl who dressed as a boy spoke up. "I can!"

But it was obvious she could not -- she was too small herself. Achilles was right. His children depended on him, and to leave them would be irresponsible. The reason she was here was because he was civilized; civilized men do not leave their children.

"Then I will come to you," she said. "After you eat, take me where you spend your days, and let me teach you all in a little school. Only for a few days, but that would be good, wouldn't it?"

It *would* be good. It had been a long time since Sister Carlotta had actually taught a group of children. And never had she been given such a class as this. Just when her work had begun to seem

futile even to her, God gave her such a chance. It might even be a miracle. Wasn't it the business of Christ to make the lame walk? If Achilles did well on the tests, then surely God would let the leg also be fixed, would let it be within the reach of medicine.

"School's good," said Achilles. "None of these little ones can read."

Sister Carlotta knew, of course, that if Achilles could read, he certainly couldn't do it well.

But for some reason, perhaps some almost unnoticeable movement, when Achilles said that none of the little ones could read, the smallest of them all, the one called Bean, caught her eye. She looked at him, into eyes with sparks in them like distant campfires in the darkest night, and she knew that *he* knew how to read. She knew, without knowing how, that it was not Achilles at all, that it was this little one that God had brought her here to find.

She shook off the feeling. It was Achilles who was the civilizer, doing the work of Christ. It was the leader that the I.F. would want, not the weakest and smallest of the disciples.

Bean stayed as quiet as possible during the school sessions, never speaking up and never giving an answer even when Sister Carlotta tried to insist. He knew that it wouldn't be good for him to let anyone know that he could already read and do numbers, nor that he could understand every language spoken in the street, picking up new languages the way other children picked up stones. Whatever Sister Carlotta was doing, whatever gifts she had to bestow, if it ever seemed to the other children that Bean was trying to show them up, trying to get ahead of them, he knew that he would not be back for another day of school. And even though she mostly taught things he already knew how to do, in her conversation there were many hints of a wider world, of great knowledge and wisdom. No adult had ever taken the time to speak to them like this, and he luxuriated in the sound of high language well spoken. When she taught it was in I.F. Common, of course, that being the language of the street, but since many of the children had also learned Dutch and some were even native Dutch speakers, she would often explain hard points in that language. When she was frustrated though, and muttered under her breath, that was in Spanish, the language of the merchants of Jonker Frans Straat, and he tried to piece together the meanings of new words from her muttering. Her knowledge was a banquet, and if he remained quiet enough, he would be able to stay and feast.

School had only been going for a week, however, when he made a mistake. She passed out papers to them, and they had writing on them. Bean read his paper at once. It was a "Pre-Test" and the instructions said to circle the right answers to each question. So he began circling answers and was halfway down the page when he realized that the entire group had fallen silent.

They were all looking at him, because Sister Carlotta was looking at him.

"What are you doing, Bean?" she asked. "I haven't even told you what to do yet. Please give me your paper."

Stupid, inattentive, careless -- if you die for this, Bean, you deserve it.

He handed her the paper.

She looked at it, then looked back at him very closely. "Finish it," she said.

He took the paper back from her hand. His pencil hovered over the page. He pretended to be struggling with the answer.

"You did the first fifteen in about a minute and a half," said Sister Carlotta. "Please don't expect me to believe that you're suddenly having a hard time with the next question." Her voice was dry and sarcastic.

"I can't do it," he said. "I was just playing anyway."

"Don't lie to me," said Carlotta. "Do the rest."

He gave up and did them all. It didn't take long. They were easy. He handed her the paper.

She glanced over it and said nothing. "I hope the rest of you will wait until I finish the instructions and read you the questions. If you try to guess at what the hard words are, you'll get all the answers wrong."

Then she proceeded to read each question and all the possible answers out loud. Only then could the other children set their marks on the papers.

Sister Carlotta didn't say another thing to call attention to Bean after that, but the damage was done. As soon as school was over, Sergeant came over to Bean. "So you can read," he said.

Bean shrugged.

"You been lying to us," said Sergeant.

"Never said I couldn't."

"Showed us all up. How come you didn't teach us?"

Because I was trying to survive, Bean said silently. Because I didn't want to remind Achilles that I was the smart one who thought up the original plan that got him this family. If he remembers that, he'll also remember who it was who told Poke to kill him.

The only answer he actually gave was a shrug.

"Don't like it when somebody holds out on us."

Sergeant nudged him with a foot.

Bean did not have to be given a map. He got up and jogged away from the group. School was out for him. Maybe breakfast, too. He'd have to wait till morning to find that out.

He spent the afternoon alone on the streets. He had to be careful. As the smallest and least important of Achilles' family, he might be overlooked. But it was more likely that those who hated Achilles would have taken special notice of Bean as one of the most memorable. They might take it into their heads that killing Bean or beating him to paste and leaving him would make a dandy warning to Achilles that he was still resented, even though life was better for everybody.

Bean knew there were plenty of bullies who felt that way. Especially the ones who weren't able to maintain a family, because they kept being too mean with the little children. The little ones learned quickly that when a papa got too nasty, they could punish him by leaving him alone at breakfast and attaching themselves to some other family. They would eat before him. They would have someone else's protection from him. He would eat last. If they ran out of food, he would get nothing, and Helga wouldn't even mind, because he wasn't a papa, he wasn't watching out for little ones. So those bullies, those marginal ones, they hated the way things worked these days, and they didn't forget that it was Achilles who had changed it all. Nor could they go to some other kitchen -- the word had spread among the adults who gave out food, and now all the kitchens had a rule that groups with little children got to be first in line. If you couldn't hold on to a family, you could get pretty hungry. And nobody looked up to you.

Still, Bean couldn't resist trying to get close enough to some of the other families to hear their talk. Find out how the other groups worked.

The answer was easy to learn: They didn't work all that well. Achilles really was a good leader. That sharing of bread -- none of the other groups did that. But there was a lot of punishing, the bully smacking kids who didn't do what he wanted. Taking their bread away from them because they didn't do something, or didn't do it quickly enough.

Poke had chosen right, after all. By dumb luck, or maybe she wasn't all that stupid. Because she had picked, not just the weakest bully, the easiest to beat, but also the smartest, the one who understood how to win and hold the loyalty of others. All Achilles had ever needed was the chance.

Except that Achilles still didn't share her bread, and now she was beginning to realize that this was a bad thing, not a good one. Bean could see it in her face when she watched the others do the ritual of sharing with Achilles. Because he got soup now -- Helga brought it to him at the door -- he took much smaller pieces, and instead of biting them off he tore them and ate them with a smile. Poke never got that smile from him. Achilles was never going to forgive her, and Bean could see that she was beginning to feel the pain of that. For she loved Achilles now, too, the way the other children did, and the way he kept her apart from the others was a kind of cruelty.

Maybe that's enough for him, thought Bean. Maybe that's his whole vengeance.

Bean happened to be curled up behind a newsstand when several bullies began a conversation near him. "He's full of brag about how Achilles is going to pay for what he did."

"Oh, right, Ulysses is going to punish him, right."

"Well, maybe not directly."

"Achilles and his stupid family will just take him apart. And this time they won't aim for his chest. He said so, didn't he? Break open his head and put his brains on the street, that's what Achilles'll do."

"He's still just a cripple."

"Achilles gets away with everything. Give it up."

"I'm hoping Ulysses does it. Kills him, flat out. And then none of us take in any of his bastards. You got that? Nobody takes them in. Let them all die. Put them all in the river."

The talk went on that way until the boys drifted away from the newsstand.

Then Bean got up and went in search of Achilles.

CHAPTER 3 -- PAYBACK

"I think I have someone for you."

"You've thought that before."

"He's a born leader. But he does not meet your physical specifications."

"Then you'll pardon me if I don't waste time on him."

"If he passes your exacting intellectual and personality requirements, it is quite possible that for a minuscule portion of the brass button or toilet paper budget of the I. F., his physical limitations might be repaired."

"I never knew nuns could be sarcastic."

"I can't reach you with a ruler. Sarcasm is my last resort."

"Let me see the tests."

"I'll let you see the boy. And while we're at it, I'll let you see another."

"Also physically limited?"

"Small. Young. But so was the Wiggin boy, I hear. And this one -- somehow on the streets he taught himself to read."

"Ah, Sister Carlotta, you help me fill the empty hours of my life."

"Keeping you out of mischief is how I serve God."

Bean went straight to Achilles with what he heard. It was too dangerous, to have Ulysses out of the hospital and word going around that he meant to get even for his humiliation.

"I thought that was all behind us," said Poke sadly. "The fighting I mean."

"Ulysses has been in bed for all this time," said Achilles. "Even if he knows about the changes, he hasn't had time to get how it works yet."

"So we stick together," said Sergeant. "Keep you safe."

"It might be safer for all," said Achilles, "if I disappear for a few days. To keep you safe."

"Then how will we get in to eat?" asked one of the younger ones. "They'll never let us in without you."

"Follow Poke," said Achilles. "Helga at the door will let you in just the same."

"What if Ulysses gets you?" asked one of the young ones. He rubbed the tears out of his eyes, lest he be shamed.

"Then I'll be dead," said Achilles. "I don't think he'll be content to put me in the hospital."

The child broke down crying, which set another to wailing, and soon it was a choir of boo-hoos, with Achilles shaking his head and laughing. "I'm not going to die. You'll be safe if I'm out of the way, and I'll come back after Ulysses has time to cool down and get used to the system."

Bean watched and listened in silence. He didn't think Achilles was handling it right, but he had given the warning and his responsibility was over. For Achilles to go into hiding was begging for trouble -- it would be taken as a sign of weakness.

Achilles slipped away that night to go somewhere that he couldn't tell them so that nobody could accidentally let it slip. Bean toyed with the idea of following him to see what he really did, but realized he would be more useful with the main group. After all, Poke would be their leader now, and Poke was only an ordinary leader. In other words, stupid. She needed Bean, even if she didn't know it.

That night Bean tried to keep watch, for what he did not know. At last he did sleep, and dreamed of school, only it wasn't the sidewalk or alley school with Sister Carlotta, it was a real school, with tables and chairs. But in the dream Bean couldn't sit at a desk. Instead he hovered in the air over it, and when he wanted to he flew anywhere in the room. Up to the ceiling. Into a crevice in the wall, into a secret dark place, flying upward and upward as it got warmer and warmer and ...

He woke in darkness. A cold breeze stirred. He needed to pee. He also wanted to fly. Having the dream end almost made him cry out with the pain of it. He couldn't remember ever dreaming of flying before. Why did he have to be little, with these stubby legs to carry him from place to place?

When he was flying he could look down at everyone and see the tops of their silly heads. He could pee or poop on them like a bird. He wouldn't have to be afraid of them because if they got mad he could fly away and they could never catch him.

Of course, if I could fly, everyone else could fly too and I'd still be the smallest and slowest and they'd poop and pee on me anyway.

There was no going back to sleep. Bean could feel that in himself. He was too frightened, and he didn't know why. He got up and went into the alley to pee.

Poke was already there. She looked up and saw him.

"Leave me alone for a minute," she said.

"No," he said.

"Don't give me any crap, little boy," she said.

"I know you squat to pee," he said, "and I'm not looking anyway." Glaring, she waited until he turned his back to urinate against the wall. "I guess if you were going to tell about me you already would have," she said.

"They all know you're a girl, Poke. When you're not there, Papa Achilles talks about you as 'she' and 'her.'"

"He's not my papa."

"So I figured," said Bean. He waited, facing the wall.

"You can turn around now." She was up and fastening her pants again.

"I'm scared of something, Poke," said Bean.

"What?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know what you're scared of?"

"That's why it's so scary."

She gave a soft, sharp laugh. "Bean, all that means is that you're four years old. Little kids see shapes in the night. Or they don't see shapes. Either way they're scared."

"Not me," said Bean. "When I'm scared, it's because something's wrong."

"Ulysses is looking to hurt Achilles, that's what."

"That wouldn't make you sad, would it?"

She glared at him. "We're eating better than ever. Everybody's happy. It was your plan. And I never cared about being the boss."

"But you hate him," said Bean.

She hesitated. "It feels like he's always laughing at me."

"How do you know what little kids are scared of?"

"Cause I used to be one," said Poke. "And I remember."

"Ulysses isn't going to hurt Achilles," said Bean.

"I know that," said Poke.

"Because you're planning to find Achilles and protect him."

"I'm planning to stay right here and watch out for the children."

"Or else maybe you're planning to find Ulysses first and kill him."

"How? He's bigger than me. By a lot."

"You didn't come out here to pee," said Bean. "Or else your bladder's the size of a gumball."

"You *listened*?"

Bean shrugged. "You wouldn't let me watch."

"You think too much, but you don't know enough to make sense of what's going on."

"I think Achilles was lying to us about what he's going to do," said Bean, "and I think you're lying to me right now."

"Get used to it," said Poke. "The world is full of liars."

"Ulysses doesn't care who he kills," said Bean. "He'd be just as happy to kill you as Achilles."

Poke shook her head impatiently. "Ulysses is nothing. He isn't going to hurt anybody. He's all brag."

"So why are you up?" asked Bean.

Poke shrugged.

"*You're* going to try to kill Achilles, aren't you," said Bean. "And make it look like Ulysses did it."

She rolled her eyes. "Did you drink a big glass of stupid juice tonight?"

"I'm smart enough to know you're lying!"

"Go back to sleep," she said. "Go back to the other children."

He regarded her for a while, and then obeyed.

Or rather, seemed to obey. He went back into the crawl space where they slept these days, but immediately crept out the back way and clambered up crates, drums, low walls, high walls, and finally got up onto a low-hanging roof. He walked to the edge in time to see Poke slip out of the alley into the street. She was going somewhere. To meet someone.

Bean slid down a pipe onto a rainbarrel, and scurried along Korte Hoog Straat after her. He tried to be quiet, but she wasn't trying, and there were other noises of the city, so she never heard his footfalls. He clung to the shadows of walls, but didn't dodge around too much. It was pretty straightforward, following her -- she only turned twice. Headed for the river. Meeting someone.

Bean had two guesses. It was either Ulysses or Achilles. Who else did she know, that wasn't already asleep in the nest? But then, why meet either of them? To plead with Ulysses for Achilles' life? To heroically offer herself in his place? Or to try to persuade Achilles to come back and face down Ulysses instead of hiding? No, these were all things that Bean might have thought of doing -- but Poke didn't think that far ahead.

Poke stopped in the middle of an open space on the dock at Scheepmakershaven and looked around. Then she saw what she was looking for. Bean strained to see. Someone waiting in a deep shadow. Bean climbed up on a big packing crate, trying to get a better view. He heard the two voices -- both children -- but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Whoever it was, he was taller than Poke. But that could be either Achilles or Ulysses.

The boy wrapped his arms around Poke and kissed her.

This was really weird. Bean had seen grownups do that plenty of times, but what would kids do it for? Poke was nine years old. Of course there were whores that age, but everybody knew that the johns who bought them were perverts.

Bean had to get closer, to hear what they were saying. He dropped down the back of the packing crate and slowly walked into the shadow of a kiosk. They, as if to oblige him, turned to face him; in the deep shadow he was invisible, at least if he kept still. He couldn't see them any better than they could see him, but he could hear snatches of their conversation now.

"You promised," Poke was saying. The guy mumbled in return.

A boat passing on the river scanned a spotlight across the riverside and showed the face of the boy Poke was with. It was Achilles.

Bean didn't want to see any more. To think he had once believed Achilles would someday kill Poke. This thing between girls and boys was something he just didn't get. In the midst of hate, this happens. Just when Bean was beginning to make sense of the world.

He slipped away and ran up Posthoornstraat.

But he did not head back to their nest in the crawlspace, not yet. For even though he had all the answers, his heart was still jumping; something is wrong, it was saying to him, something is wrong.

And then he remembered that Poke wasn't the only one hiding something from him. Achilles had also been lying. Hiding something. Some plan. Was it just this meeting with Poke? Then why all this business about hiding from Ulysses? To take Poke as his girl, he didn't have to hide to do that. He could do that right out in the open. Some bullies did that, the older ones. They usually didn't take nine-year-olds, though. Was that what Achilles was hiding?

"You promised," Poke said to Achilles there on the dock.

What did Achilles promise? That was why Poke came to him -- to pay him for his promise. But what could Achilles be promising her that he wasn't already giving her as part of his family? Achilles didn't have anything.

So he must have been promising not to do something. Not to kill her? Then that would be too stupid even for Poke, to go off alone with Achilles.

Not to kill me, thought Bean. That's the promise. Not to kill me.

Only I'm not the one in danger, or not the most danger. I might have said to kill him, but Poke was the one who knocked him down, who stood over him. That picture must still be in Achilles' mind, all the time he must remember it, must dream about it, him lying on the ground, a nine-year-old girl

standing over him with a cinderblock, threatening to kill him. A cripple like him, somehow he had made it into the ranks of the bullies. So he was tough -- but always mocked by the boys with two good legs, the lowest-status bully. And the lowest moment of his life had to be then, when a nine-year-old girl knocked him down and a bunch of little kids stood over him.

Poke, he blames you most. You're the one he has to smash in order to wipe out the agony of that memory.

Now it was clear. Everything Achilles had said today was a lie. He wasn't hiding from Ulysses. He would face Ulysses down -- probably still would, tomorrow. But when he faced Ulysses, Achilles would have a much bigger grievance. You killed Poke! He would scream the accusation. Ulysses would look so stupid and weak, denying it after all the bragging he'd done about how he'd get even. He might even admit to killing her, just for the brag of it. And then Achilles would strike at Ulysses and nobody would blame him for killing the boy. It wouldn't be mere self-defense, it would be defense of his family.

Achilles was just too damn smart. And patient. Waiting to kill Poke until there was somebody else who could be blamed for it.

Bean ran back to warn her. As fast as his little legs would move, the longest strides he could take. He ran forever.

There was nobody there on the dock where Poke had met Achilles.

Bean looked around helplessly. He thought of calling out, but that would be stupid. Just because it was Poke that Achilles hated most didn't mean that he had forgiven Bean, even if he did let Bean give him bread.

Or maybe I've gone crazy over nothing. He was hugging her, wasn't he? She came willingly, didn't she? There are things between boys and girls that I just don't understand. Achilles is a provider, a protector, not a murderer. It's my mind that works that way, my mind that thinks of killing someone who is helpless, just because he might pose a danger later. Achilles is the good one. I'm the bad one, the criminal.

Achilles is the one who knows how to love. I'm the one who doesn't.

Bean walked to the edge of the dock and looked across the channel. The water was covered with a low-flowing mist. On the far bank, the lights of Boompjes Straat twinkled like Sinterklaas Day. The waves lapped like tiny kisses against the pilings.

He looked down into the river at his feet. Something was bobbing in the water, bumped up against the wharf.

Bean looked at it for a while, uncomprehending. But then he understood that he had known all along what it was, he just didn't want to believe it. It was Poke. She was dead. It was just as Bean had feared. Everybody on the street would believe that Ulysses was guilty of the murder, even if

nothing could be proved. Bean had been right about everything. Whatever it was that passed between boys and girls, it didn't have the power to block hatred, vengeance for humiliation.

And as Bean stood there, looking down into the water, he realized: I either have to tell what happened, right now, this minute, to everybody, or I have to decide never to tell anybody, because if Achilles gets any hint that I saw what I saw tonight, he'll kill me and not give it a second thought. Achilles would simply say: Ulysses strikes again. Then he can pretend to be avenging two deaths, not one, when he kills Ulysses.

No, all Bean could do was keep silence. Pretend that he hadn't seen Poke's body floating in the river, her upturned face clearly recognizable in the moonlight.

She was stupid. Stupid not to see through Achilles' plans, stupid to trust him in any way, stupid not to listen to me. As stupid as I was, to walk away instead of calling out a warning, maybe saving her life by giving her a witness that Achilles could not hope to catch and therefore could not silence.

She was the reason Bean was alive. She was the one who gave him a name. She was the one who listened to his plan. And now she had died for it, and he could have saved her. Sure, he told her at the start to kill Achilles, but in the end she had been right to choose him -- he was the only one of the bullies who could have figured it all out and brought it off with such style. But Bean had also been right. Achilles was a champion liar, and when he decided that Poke would die, he began building up the lies that would surround the murder -- lies that would get Poke off by herself where he could kill her without witnesses; lies to alibi himself in the eyes of the younger kids.

I trusted him, thought Bean. I knew what he was from the start, and yet I trusted him.

Aw, Poke, you poor, stupid, kind, decent girl. You saved me and I let you down.

It's not *just* my fault. *She's* the one who went off alone with him.

Alone with him, trying to save my life? What a mistake, Poke, to think of anyone but yourself!

Am I going to die from her mistakes, too?

No. I'll die from my own damn mistakes.

Not tonight, though. Achilles had not set any plan in motion to get Bean off by himself. But from now on, when he lay awake at night, unable to drift off, he would think about how Achilles was just waiting. Biding his time. Till the day when Bean, too, would find himself in the river.

Sister Carlotta tried to be sensitive to the pain these children were suffering, so soon after one of their own was strangled and thrown in the river. But Poke's death was all the more reason to push forward on the testing. Achilles had not been found yet -- with this Ulysses boy having already

struck once, it was unlikely that Achilles would come out of hiding for some time. So Sister Carlotta had no choice but to proceed with Bean.

At first the boy was distracted, and did poorly. Sister Carlotta could not understand how he could fail even the elementary parts of the test, when he was so bright he had taught himself to read on the street. It had to be the death of Poke. So she interrupted the test and talked to him about death, about how Poke was caught up in spirit into the presence of God and the saints, who would care for her and make her happier than she had ever been in life. He did not seem interested. If anything, he did worse as they began the next phase of the test.

Well, if compassion didn't work, sternness might.

"Don't you understand what this test is for, Bean?" she asked.

"No," he said. The tone of his voice added the unmistakable idea "and I don't care."

"All you know about is the life of the street. But the streets of Rotterdam are only a part of a great city, and Rotterdam is only one city in a world of thousands of such cities. The whole human race, Bean, that's what this test is about. Because the Formics --"

"The Buggers," said Bean. Like most street urchins, he sneered at euphemism.

"They will be back, scouring the Earth, killing every living soul. This test is to see if you are one of the children who will be taken to Battle School and trained to be a commander of the forces that will try to stop them. This test is about saving the world, Bean."

For the first time since the test began, Bean turned his full attention to her. "Where is Battle School?"

"In an orbiting platform in space," she said. "If you do well enough on this test, you get to be a spaceman!"

There was no childlike eagerness in his face. Only hard calculation.

"I've been doing real bad so far, haven't I," he said.

"The test results so far show that you're too stupid to walk and breathe at the same time."

"Can I start over?"

"I have another version of the tests, yes," said Sister Carlotta.

"Do it."

As she brought out the alternate set, she smiled at him, tried to relax him again. "So you want to be a spaceman, is that it? Or is it the idea of being part of the International Fleet?"

He ignored her.

This time through the test, he finished everything, even though the tests were designed not to be finished in the allotted time. His scores were not perfect, but they were close. So close that nobody would believe the results.

So she gave him yet another battery of tests, this one designed for older children -- the standard tests, in fact, that six-year-olds took when being considered for Battle School at the normal age. He did not do as well on these; there were too many experiences he had not had yet, to be able to understand the content of some of the questions. But he still did remarkably well. Better than any student she had ever tested.

And to think she had thought it was Achilles who had the real potential. This little one, this infant, really -- he was astonishing. No one would believe she had found him on the streets, living at the starvation level.

A suspicion crept into her mind, and when the second test ended and she recorded the scores and set them aside, she leaned back in her chair and smiled at bleary-eyed little Bean and asked him, "Whose idea was it, this family thing that the street children have come up with?"

"Achilles' idea," said Bean.

Sister Carlotta waited.

"His idea to call it a family, anyway," said Bean.

She still waited. Pride would bring more to the surface, if she gave him time.

"But having a bully protect the little ones, that was my plan," said Bean. "I told it to Poke and she thought about it and decided to try it and she only made one mistake."

"What mistake was that?"

"She chose the wrong bully to protect us."

"You mean because he couldn't protect her from Ulysses?"

Bean laughed bitterly as tears slid down his cheeks.

"Ulysses is off somewhere bragging about what he's going to do."

Sister Carlotta knew but did not want to know. "Do you know who killed her, then?"

"I told her to kill him. I told her he was the wrong one. I saw it in his face, lying there on the ground, that he would never forgive her. But he's cold. He waited so long. But he never took bread

from her. That should have told her. She shouldn't have gone off alone with him." He began crying in earnest now. "I think she was protecting *me*. Because I told her to kill him that first day. I think she was trying to get him not to kill me."

Sister Carlotta tried to keep emotion out of her voice. "Do you believe you might be in danger from Achilles?"

"I am now that I told you," he said. And then, after a moment's thought. "I was already. He doesn't forgive. He pays back, always."

"You realize that this isn't the way Achilles seems to me, or to Hazie. Helga, that is. To us, he seems -- civilized."

Bean looked at her like she was crazy. "Isn't that what it *means* to be civilized? That you can *wait* to get what you want?"

"You want to get out of Rotterdam and go to Battle School so you can get away from Achilles."

Bean nodded.

"What about the other children. Do you think they're in danger from him?"

"No," said Bean. "He's their papa."

"But not yours. Even though he took bread from you."

"He hugged her and kissed her," said Bean. "I saw them on the dock, and she let him kiss her and then she said something about how he promised, and so I left, but then I realized and I ran back and it couldn't have been long, just running for maybe six blocks, and she was dead with her eye stabbed out, floating in the water, bumping up against the dock. He can kiss you and kill you, if he hates you enough."

Sister Carlotta drummed her fingers on the desk. "What a quandary."

"What's a quandary?"

"I was going to test Achilles, too. I think he could get into Battle School."

Bean's whole body tightened. "Then don't send me. Him or me."

"Do you really think ..." Her voice trailed off. "You think he'd try to kill you there?"

"*Try?*" His voice was scornful. "Achilles doesn't just *try*."

Sister Carlotta knew that the trait Bean was speaking of, that ruthless determination, was one of the things that they looked for in Battle School. It might make Achilles more attractive to them than Bean. And they could channel such murderous violence up there. Put it to good use.

But civilizing the bullies of the street had not been Achilles' idea. It had been Bean who thought of it. Incredible, for a child so young to conceive of it and bring it about. This child was the prize, not the one who lived for cold vengeance. But one thing was certain. It would be wrong of her to take them both. Though she could certainly take the other one and get him into a school here on Earth, get him off the street. Surely Achilles would become truly civilized then, where the desperation of the street no longer drove children to do such hideous things to each other.

Then she realized what nonsense she had been thinking. It wasn't the desperation of the street that drove Achilles to murder Poke. It was pride. It was Cain, who thought that being shamed was reason enough to take his brother's life. It was Judas, who did not shrink to kiss before killing. What was she thinking, to treat evil as if it were a mere mechanical product of deprivation? All the children of the street suffered fear and hunger, helplessness and desperation. But they didn't all become cold-blooded, calculating murderers.

If, that is, Bean was right.

But she had no doubt that Bean was telling her the truth. If Bean was lying, she would give up on herself as a judge of children's character. Now that she thought about it, Achilles was slick. A flatterer. Everything he said was calculated to impress. But Bean said little, and spoke plainly when he did speak. And he was young, and his fear and grief here in this room were real.

Of course, he also had urged that a child be killed.

But only because he posed a danger to others. It wasn't pride.

How can I judge? Isn't Christ supposed to be the judge of quick and dead? Why is this in my hands, when I am not fit to do it?

"Would you like to stay here, Bean, while I transmit your test results to the people who make the decisions about Battle School? You'll be safe here."

He looked down at his hands, nodded, then laid his head on his anus and sobbed.

Achilles came back to the nest that morning. "I couldn't stay away," he said. "Too much could go wrong." He took them to breakfast, just like always. But Poke and Bean weren't there.

Then Sergeant did his rounds, listening here and there, talking to other kids, talking to an adult here and there, finding out what was happening, anything that might be useful. It was along the Wijnhaven dock that he heard some of the longshoremen talking about the body found in the river that morning. A little girl. Sergeant found out where her body was being held till the authorities

arrived. He didn't shy away, he walked right up to the body under a tarpaulin, and without asking permission from any of the others standing there, he pulled it back and looked at her.

"What are you doing, boy!"

"Her name is Poke," he said.

"You know her? Do you know who might have killed her?"

"A boy named Ulysses, that's who killed her," said Sergeant. Then he dropped the tarp and his rounds were over. Achilles had to know that his fears had been justified, that Ulysses was taking out anybody he could from the family.

"We've got no choice but to kill him," said Sergeant.

"There's been enough bloodshed," said Achilles. "But I'm afraid you're right."

Some of the younger children were crying. One of them explained, "Poke fed me when I was going to die."

"Shut up," said Sergeant. "We're eating better now than we ever did when Poke was boss."

Achilles put a hand on Sergeant's arm, to still him. "Poke did the best a crew boss could do. And she's the one who got me into the family. So in a way, anything I get for you, she got for you."

Everyone nodded solemnly at that.

A kid asked, "You think Ulysses got Bean, too?"

"Big loss if he did," said Sergeant.

"Any loss to my family is a big loss," said Achilles. "But there'll be no more. Ulysses will either leave the city, now, or he's dead. Put the word out, Sergeant. Let it be known on the street that the challenge stands. Ulysses doesn't eat in any kitchen in town, until he faces me. That's what he decided for himself, when he chose to put a knife in Poke's eye."

Sergeant saluted him and took off at a run. The picture of businesslike obedience.

Except that as he ran, he, too, was crying. For he had not told anyone how Poke died, how her eye was a bloody wound. Maybe Achilles knew some other way, maybe he had already heard but didn't mention it till Sergeant came back with the news. Maybe maybe. Sergeant knew the truth. Ulysses didn't raise his hand against anybody. Achilles did it. Just as Bean warned in the beginning. Achilles would never forgive Poke for beating him. He killed her now because Ulysses would get blamed for it. And then sat there talking about how good she was and how they should all be grateful to her and everything Achilles got for them, it was really Poke who got it.

So Bean was right all along. About everything. Achilles might be a good papa to the family, but he was also a killer, and he never forgives.

Poke knew that, though. Bean warned her, and she knew it, but she chose Achilles for their papa anyway. Chose him and then died for it. She was like Jesus that Helga preached about in her kitchen while they ate. She died for her people. And Achilles, he was like God. He made people pay for their sins no matter what they did.

The important thing is, stay on the good side of God. That's what Helga teaches, isn't it? Stay right with God.

I'll stay right with Achilles. I'll honor my papa, that's for sure, so I can stay alive until I'm old enough to go out on my own.

As for Bean, well, he was smart, but not smart enough to stay alive, and if you're not smart enough to stay alive, then you're better off dead.

By the time Sergeant got to his first corner to spread the word about Achilles's ban on Ulysses from any kitchen in town, he was through crying. Grief was done. This was about survival now. Even though Sergeant knew Ulysses hadn't killed anybody, he meant to, and it was still important for the family's safety that he die. Poke's death provided a good excuse to demand that the rest of the papas stand back and let Achilles deal with him. When it was all over, Achilles would be the leader among all the papas of Rotterdam. And Sergeant would stand beside him, knowing the secret of his vengeance and telling no one, because that's how Sergeant, that's how the family, that's how all the urchins of Rotterdam would survive.

CHAPTER 4 -- MEMORIES

"I was mistaken about the first one. He tests well, but his character is not well suited to Battle School."

"I don't see that on the tests you've shown me."

"He's very sharp. He gives the right answers, but they aren't true."

"And what test did you use to determine this?"

"He committed murder."

"Well, that is a drawback. And the other one? What am I supposed to do with so young a child? A fish this small I would generally throw back into the stream."

"Teach him. Feed him. He'll grow."

"He doesn't even have a name."

"Yes he does."

"Bean? That isn't a name, it's a joke."

"It won't be when he's done with it."

"Keep him until he's five. Make of him what you can and show me your results then."

"I have other children to find."

"No, Sister Carlotta, you don't. In all your years of searching, this one is the best you've found. And there isn't time to find another. Bring this one up to snuff, and all your work will be worth it, as far as the I.F. is concerned."

"You frighten me, when you say there isn't time."

"I don't see why. Christians have been expecting the imminent end of the world for millennia."

"But it keeps not ending."

"So far, so good."

At first all Bean cared about was the food. There was enough of it. He ate everything they put before him. He ate until he was full -- that most miraculous of words, which till now had had no meaning for him. He ate until he was stuffed. He ate until he was sick. He ate so often that he had bowel movements every day, sometimes twice a day. He laughed about it to Sister Carlotta. "All I do is eat and poop!" he said.

"Like any beast of the forest," said the nun. "It's time for you to begin to earn that food."

She was already teaching him, of course, daily lessons in reading and arithmetic, bringing him "up to level," though what level she had in mind, she never specified. She also gave him time to draw, and there were sessions where she had him sit there and try to remember every detail about his earliest memories. The clean place in particular fascinated her. But there were limits to memory. He was very small then, and had very little language. Everything was a mystery. He did remember climbing over the railing around his bed and falling to the floor. He didn't walk well at the time. Crawling was easier, but he liked walking because that's what the big people did. He clung to objects and leaned on walls and made good progress on two feet, only crawling when he had to cross an open space.

"You must have been eight or nine months old," Sister Carlotta said. "Most people don't remember that far back."

"I remember that everybody was upset. That's why I climbed out of bed. All the children were in trouble."

"All the children?"

"The little ones like me. And the bigger ones. Some of the grownups came in and looked at us and cried."

"Why?"

"Bad things, that's all. I knew it was a bad thing coming and I knew it would happen to all of us who were in the beds. So I climbed out. I wasn't the first. I don't know what happened to the others. I heard the grownups yelling and getting all upset when they found the empty beds. I hid from them. They didn't find me. Maybe they found the others, maybe they didn't. All I know is when I came out all the beds were empty and the room was very dark except a lighted sign that said *exit*."

"You could read then?" She sounded skeptical.

"When I *could* read, I remembered that those were the letters on the sign," said Bean. "They were the only letters I saw back then. Of course I remembered them."

"So you were alone and the beds were empty and the room was dark."

"They came back. I heard them talking. I didn't understand most of the words. I hid again. And this time when I came out, even the beds were gone. Instead, there were desks and cabinets. An office. And no, I didn't know what an office was then, either, but now I do know what an office is and I remember that's what the rooms had all become. Offices. People came in during the day and worked there, only a few at first but my hiding place turned out not to be so good, when people were working there. And I was hungry."

"Where did you hide?"

"Come on, you know. Don't you?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't ask."

"You saw the way I acted when you showed me the toilet."

"You hid inside the toilet?"

"The tank on the back. It was hard to get the lid up. And it wasn't comfortable in there. I didn't know what it was for. But people started using it and the water rose and fell and the pieces moved and it scared me. And like I said, I was hungry. Plenty to drink, except that I peed in it myself. My diaper was so waterlogged it fell off my butt. I was naked."

"Bean, do you understand what you're telling me? That you were doing all this before you were a year old?"

"You're the one who said how old I was," said Bean. "I didn't know about ages then. You told me to remember. The more I tell you, the more comes back to me. But if you don't believe me ..."

"I just ... I do believe you. But who were the other children? What was the place where you lived, that clean place? Who were those grownups? Why did they take away the other children? Something illegal was going on, that's certain."

"Whatever," said Bean. "I was just glad to get out of the toilet."

"But you were naked, you said. And you left the place?"

"No, I got found. I came out of the toilet and a grownup found me."

"What happened?"

"He took me home. That's how I got clothing. I called them clothings then."

"You were talking."

"Some."

"And this grownup took you home and bought you clothing."

"I think he was a janitor. I know more about jobs now and I think that's what he was. It was night when he worked, and he didn't wear a uniform like a guard."

"What happened?"

"That's when I first found out about legal and illegal. It wasn't legal for him to have a child. I heard him yelling at this woman about me and most of it I didn't understand, but at the end I knew he had lost and she had won, and he started talking to me about how I had to go away, and so I went."

"He just turned you loose in the streets?"

"No, I left. I think now he was going to have to give me to somebody else, and it sounded scary, so I left before he could do it. But I wasn't naked or hungry anymore. He was nice. After I left I bet he didn't have any more trouble."

"And that's when you started living on the streets."

"Sort of. A couple of places I found, they fed me. But every time, other kids, big ones, would see that I was getting fed and they'd come shouting and begging and the people would stop feeding me or the bigger kids would shove me out of the way or take the food right out of my hands. I was scared. One time a big kid got so mad at me for eating that he put a stick down my throat and made me throw up what I just ate, right on the street. He even tried to eat it but he couldn't, it made him try to throw up, too. That was the scariest time. I hid all the time after that. Hid. All the time."

"And starved."

"And watched," said Bean. "I ate some. Now and then. I didn't die."

"No, you didn't."

"I saw plenty who did. Lots of dead children. Big ones and little ones. I kept wondering how many of them were from the clean place."

"Did you recognize any of them?"

"No. Nobody looked like they ever lived in the clean place. Everybody looked hungry."

"Bean, thank you for telling me all this."

"You asked."

"Do you realize that there is no way you could have survived for three years as an infant?"

"I guess that means I'm dead."

"I just... I'm saying that God must have been watching over you."

"Yeah. Well, sure. So why didn't he watch over all those dead kids?"

"He took them to his heart and loved them."

"So then he *didn't* love me?"

"No, he loved you too, he --"

"Cause if he was watching so careful, he could have given me something to eat now and then."

"He brought me to you. He has some great purpose in mind for you, Bean. You may not know what it is, but God didn't keep you alive so miraculously for no reason."

Bean was tired of talking about this. She looked so happy when she talked about God, but he hadn't figured it out yet, what God even was. It was like, she wanted to give God credit for every good thing, but when it was bad, then she either didn't mention God or had some reason why it was

a good thing after all. As far as Bean could see, though, the dead kids would rather have been alive, just with more food. If God loved them so much, and he could do whatever he wanted, then why wasn't there more food for these kids? And if God just wanted them dead, why didn't he let them die sooner or not even be born at all, so they didn't have to go to so much trouble and get all excited about trying to be alive when he was just going to take them to his heart. None of it made any sense to Bean, and the more Sister Carlotta explained it, the less he understood it. Because if there was somebody in charge, then he ought to be fair, and if he wasn't fair, then why should Sister Carlotta be so happy that he was in charge?

But when he tried to say things like that to her, she got really upset and talked even more about God and used words he didn't know and it was better just to let her say what she wanted and not argue.

It was the reading that fascinated him. And the numbers. He loved that. Having paper and pencil so he could actually write things, that was really good.

And maps. She didn't teach him maps at first, but there were some on the walls and the shapes of them fascinated him. He would go up to them and read the little words written on them and one day he saw the name of the river and realized that the blue was rivers and even bigger blue areas were places with even more water than the river, and then he realized that some of the other words were the same names that had been written on the street signs and so he figured out that somehow this thing was a picture of Rotterdam, and then it all made sense. Rotterdam the way it would look to a bird, if the buildings were all invisible and the streets were all empty. He found where the nest was, and where Poke had died, and all kinds of other places.

When Sister Carlotta found out that he understood the map, she got very excited. She showed him maps where Rotterdam was just a little patch of lines, and one where it was just a dot, and one where it was too small even to be seen, but she knew where it would be. Bean had never realized the world was so big. Or that there were so many people.

But Sister Carlotta kept coming back to the Rotterdam map, trying to get him to remember where things from his earliest memories were. Nothing looked the same, though, on the map, so it wasn't easy, and it took a long time for him to figure out where some of the places were where people had fed him. He showed these to Sister and she made a mark right on the map, showing each place. And after a while he realized -- all those places were grouped in one area, but kind of strung out, as if they marked a path from where he found Poke leading back through time to ...

To the clean place.

Only that was too hard. He had been too scared, coming out of the clean place with the janitor. He didn't know where it was. And the truth was, as Sister Carlotta herself said, the janitor might have lived anywhere compared to the clean place. So all she was going to find by following Bean's path backward was maybe the janitor's flat, or at least where he lived three years ago. And even then, what would the janitor know?

He would know where the clean place was, that's what he'd know. And now Bean understood: It was very important to Sister Carlotta to find out where Bean came from.

To find out who he really was.

Only ... he already knew who he really was. He tried to say this to her. "I'm right here. This is who I really am. I'm not pretending."

"I know that," she said, laughing, and she hugged him, which was all right. It felt good. Back when she first started doing it, he didn't know what to do with his hands. She had to show him how to hug her back. He had seen some little kids -- the ones with mamas or papas -- doing that but he always thought they were holding on tight so they wouldn't drop off onto the street and get lost. He didn't know that you did it just because it felt good. Sister Carlotta's body had hard places and squishy places and it was very strange to hug her. He thought of Poke and Achilles hugging and kissing, but he didn't want to kiss Sister Carlotta and after he got used to what hugging was, he didn't really want to do that either. He let her hug him. But he didn't ever think of hugging her himself. It just didn't come into his mind.

He knew that sometimes she hugged him instead of explaining things to him, and he didn't like that. She didn't want to tell him why it mattered that she find the clean place, so she hugged him and said, "Oh, you dear thing," or "Oh, you poor boy." But that only meant that it was even more important than she was saying, and she thought he was too stupid or ignorant to understand if she tried to explain.

He kept trying to remember more and more, if he could, only now he didn't tell her everything because she didn't tell **him** everything and fair was fair. He would find the clean room himself. Without her. And then tell her if he decided it would be good for him to have her know. Because what if she found the wrong answer? Would she put him back on the street? Would she keep him from going to school in the sky? Because that's what she promised at first, only after the tests she said he did very well only he would **not** go in the sky until he was five and maybe not even then because it was not entirely her decision and that's when he knew that she didn't have the power to keep her own promises. So if she found out the wrong thing about him, she might not be able to keep **any** of her promises. Not even the one about keeping him safe from Achilles. That's why he had to find out on his own.

He studied the map. He pictured things in his mind. He talked to himself as he was falling asleep, talked and thought and remembered, trying to get the janitor's face back into his mind, and the room he lived in, and the stairs outside where the mean lady stood to scream at him.

And one day, when he thought he had remembered enough, Bean went to the toilet -- he liked the toilets, he liked to make them flush even though it scared him to see things disappear like that -- and instead of coming back to Sister Carlotta's teaching place, he went the other way down the corridor and went right out the door onto the street and no one tried to stop him.

That's when he realized his mistake, though. He had been so busy trying to remember the janitor's place that it never occurred to him that he had no idea where **this** place was on the map. And it

wasn't in a part of town that he knew. In fact, it hardly seemed like the same world. Instead of the street being full of people walking and pushing carts and riding bikes or skating to get from one place to another, the streets were almost empty, and there were cars parked everywhere. Not a single store, either. All houses and offices, or houses made into offices with little signs out front. The only building that was different was the very one he had just come out of. It was blocky and square and bigger than the others, but it had no sign out in front of it at all.

He knew where he was going, but he didn't know how to get there from here. And Sister Carlotta would start looking for him soon.

His first thought was to hide, but then he remembered that she knew all about his story of hiding in the clean place, so she would also think of hiding and she would look for him in a hiding place close to the big building.

So he ran. It surprised him how strong he was now. It felt like he could run as fast as a bird flying, and he didn't get tired, he could run forever. All the way to the corner and around it onto another street.

Then down another street, and another, until he would have been lost except he started out lost and when you start out completely lost, it's hard to get lost. As he walked and trotted and jogged and ran up and down streets and alleys, he realized that all he had to do was find a canal or a stream and it would lead him to the river or to a place that he recognized. So the first bridge that went over water, he saw which way the water flowed and chose streets that would keep him close. It wasn't as if he knew where he was yet, but at least he was following a plan.

It worked. He came to the river and walked along it until he recognized, off in the distance and partly around a bend in the river, Maasboulevard, which led to the place where Poke was killed.

The bend in the river -- he knew it from the map. He knew where all of Sister Carlotta's marks had been. He knew that he had to go through the place where he used to live on the streets in order to get past them and closer to the area where the janitor might have lived. And that wouldn't be easy, because he would be known there, and Sister Carlotta might even have the cops looking for him and they would look there because that's where all the street urchins were and they would expect him to become a street urchin again.

What they were forgetting was that Bean wasn't hungry anymore. And since he wasn't hungry, he wasn't in a hurry.

He walked the long way around. Far from the river, far from the busy part of town where the urchins were. Whenever the streets started looking crowded he would widen his circle and stay away from the busy places. He took the rest of that day and most of the next making such a wide circle that for a while he was not in Rotterdam anymore at all, and he saw some of the countryside, just like the pictures -- farmland and the roads built up higher than the land around them. Sister Carlotta had explained to him once that most of the farmland was lower than the level of the sea, and great dikes were the only thing keeping the sea from rushing back onto the land and covering it. But Bean knew that he would never get close to any of the big dikes. Not by walking, anyway.

He drifted back into town now, into the Schiebroek district, and late in the afternoon of the second day he recognized the name of Rindijk Straat and soon found a cross street whose name he knew, a language he didn't understand. Now he could read the sign above the restaurant and realized that it was Armenian and that's probably what the woman had been speaking.

Which way had he walked to come here? He had smelled the food when he was walking along ... here? He walked a little way up, a little way down the street, turning and turning to reorient himself.

"What are you doing here, fatso?"

It was two kids, maybe eight years old. Belligerent but not bullies. Probably part of a crew. No, part of a family, now that Achilles had changed everything. If the changes had spread to this part of town.

"I'm supposed to meet my papa here," said Bean.

"And who's your papa?"

Bean wasn't sure whether they took the word "papa" to mean his father or the papa of his "family." He took the chance, though, of saying "Achilles."

They scoffed at the idea. "He's way down by the river, why would he meet a fatso like you clear up here?"

But their derision was not important -- what mattered was that Achilles' reputation had spread this far through the city.

"I don't have to explain his business to you," said Bean. "And all the kids in Achilles' family are fat like me. That's how well we eat."

"Are they all short like you?"

"I used to be taller, but I asked too many questions," said Bean, pushing past them and walking across Rozenlaan toward the area where the janitor's flat seemed likeliest to be.

They didn't follow him. Such was the magic of Achilles' name -- or perhaps it was just Bean's utter confidence, paying them no notice as if he had nothing to fear from them.

Nothing looked familiar. He kept turning around and checking to see if he recognized things when looking in the direction he might have been going after leaving the janitor's flat. It didn't help. He wandered until it was dark, and kept wandering even then.

Until, quite by chance, he found himself standing at the foot of a street lamp, trying to read a sign, when a set of initials carved on the pole caught his attention. P [heart shape] DVM, it said. He had

no idea what it meant; he had never thought of it during all his attempts to remember; but he knew that he had seen it before. And not just once. He had seen it several times. The janitor's flat was very close.

He turned slowly, scanning the area, and there it was: A small apartment building with both an inside and an outside stairway.

The janitor lived on the top floor. Ground floor, first floor, second floor, third. Bean went to the mailboxes and tried to read the names, but they were set too high on the wall and the names were all faded, and some of the tags were missing entirely.

Not that he ever knew the janitor's name, truth to tell. There was no reason to think he would have recognized it even if he had been able to read it on the mailbox.

The outside stairway did not go all the way up to the top floor. It must have been built for a doctor's office on the first floor. And because it was dark, the door at the top of the stairs was locked.

There was nothing to do but wait. Either he would wait all night and get into the building through one entrance or another in the morning, or someone would come back in the night and Bean would slip through a door behind him.

He fell asleep and woke up, slept and woke again. He worried that a policeman would see him and shove him away, so when he woke the second time he abandoned all pretense of being on watch and crept under the stairs and curled up there for the night.

He was awakened by drunken laughter. It was still dark, and beginning to rain just a little -- not enough to start dripping off the stairs, though, so Bean was dry. He stuck his head out to see who was laughing. It was a man and a woman, both merry with alcohol, the man furtively pawing and poking and pinching, the woman fending him off with halfhearted slaps. "Can't you wait?" she said.

"No," he said.

"You're just going to fall asleep without doing anything," she said.

"Not this time," he said. Then he threw up.

She looked disgusted and walked on without him. He staggered after her. "I feel better now," he said. "It'll be better."

"The price just went up," she said coldly. "And you brush your teeth first. "

"Course I brush my teeth."

They were right at the front of the building now. Bean was waiting to slip in after them.

Then he realized that he didn't have to wait. The man was the janitor from all those years before.

Bean stepped out of the shadows. "Thanks for bringing him home," he said to the woman.

They both looked at him in surprise.

"Who are you?" asked the janitor.

Bean looked at the woman and rolled his eyes. "He's not *that* drunk, I hope," said Bean. To the janitor he said, "Mama will not be happy to see you come home like this again."

"Mama!" said the janitor. "Who the hell are you talking about?"

The woman gave the janitor a shove. He was so off balance that he lurched against the wall, then slid down it to land on his buttocks on the sidewalk. "I should have known," she said. "You bring me home to your *wife*?"

"I'm not married," said the janitor. "This kid isn't mine."

"I'm sure you're telling the truth on both points," said the woman. "But you better let him help you up the stairs anyway. Mama's waiting." She started to walk away.

"What about my forty guilders?" he asked plaintively, knowing the answer even as he asked.

She made an obscene gesture and walked on into the night.

"You little bastard," said the janitor.

"I had to talk to you alone," said Bean.

"Who the hell are you? Who's your mama?"

"That's what I'm here to find out," said Bean. "I'm the baby you found and brought home. Three years ago."

The man looked at him in stupefaction.

Suddenly a light went on, then another. Bean and the janitor were bathed in overlapping flashlight beams. Four policemen converged on them.

"Don't bother running, kid," said a cop. "Nor you, Mr. Fun Time."

Bean recognized Sister Carlotta's voice. "They aren't criminals," she said. "I just need to talk to them. Up in his apartment."

"You followed me?" Bean asked her.

"I knew you were searching for him," she said. "I didn't want to interfere until you found him. Just in case you think you were really smart, young man, we intercepted four street thugs and two known sex offenders who were after you."

Bean rolled his eyes. "You think I've forgotten how to deal with them?"

Sister Carlotta shrugged. "I didn't want this to be the first time you ever made a mistake in your life." She did have a sarcastic streak.

"So as I told you, there was nothing to learn from this Pablo de Noches. He's an immigrant who lives to pay for prostitutes. Just another of the worthless people who have gravitated here ever since the Netherlands became international territory."

Sister Carlotta had sat patiently, waiting for the inspector to wind down his I-told-you-so speech. But when he spoke of a man's worthlessness, she could not let the remark go unchallenged. "He took in that baby," she said. "And fed the child and cared for him."

The inspector waved off the objection. "We needed one more street urchin? Because that's all that people like this ever produce."

"You didn't learn **nothing** from him," Sister Carlotta said. "You learned the location where the boy was found."

"And the people renting the building during that time are untraceable. A company name that never existed. Nothing to go on. No way to track them down."

"But that nothing **is** something," said Sister Carlotta. "I tell you that these people had many children in this place, which they closed down in a hurry, with all the children but one taken away. You tell me that the company was a false name and can't be traced. So now, in your experience, doesn't that tell you a great deal about what was going on in that building?"

The inspector shrugged. "Of course. It was obviously an organ farm."

Tears came to Sister Carlotta's eyes. "And that is the only possibility?"

"A lot of defective babies are born to rich families," said the inspector. "There is an illegal market in infant and toddler organs. We close down the organ farms whenever we find out where they are. Perhaps we were getting close to this organ farm and they got wind of it and closed up shop. But there is no paper in the department on any organ farm that we actually found at that time. So perhaps they closed down for another reason. Still, nothing."

Patently, Sister Carlotta ignored his inability to realize how valuable this information was. "Where do the babies come from?"

The inspector looked at her blankly. As if he thought she was asking him to explain the facts of life.

"The organ farm," she said. "Where do they get the babies?"

The inspector shrugged. "Late-term abortions, usually. Some arrangement with the clinics, a kickback. That sort of thing."

"And that's the only source?"

"Well, I don't know. Kidnappings? I don't think that could be much of a factor, there aren't *that* many babies leaking through the security systems in the hospitals. People selling babies? It's been heard of, yes. Poor refugees arrive with eight children, and then a few years later they have only six, and they cry about the ones who died but who can prove anything? But nothing you can trace."

"The reason I'm asking," said Sister Carlotta, "is that this child is unusual. *Extremely* unusual."

"Three arms?" asked the inspector.

"Brilliant. Precocious. He escaped from this place before he was a year old. Before he could walk."

The inspector thought about that for a few moments. "He *crawled* away?"

"He hid in a toilet tank."

"He got the lid up before he was a year old?"

"He said it was hard to lift."

"No, it was probably cheap plastic, not porcelain. You know how these institutional plumbing fixtures are."

"You can see, though, why I want to know about the child's parentage. Some miraculous combination of parents."

The inspector shrugged. "Some children are born smart."

"But there is a hereditary component in this, inspector. A child like this must have ... remarkable parents. Parents likely to be prominent because of the brilliance of their own minds."

"Maybe. Maybe not," said the inspector. "I mean, some of these refugees, they might be brilliant, but they're caught up in desperate times. To save the other children, maybe they sell a baby. That's even a *smart* thing to do. It doesn't rule out refugees as the parents of this brilliant boy you have."
"

"I suppose that's possible," said Sister Carlotta.

"It's the most information you'll ever have. Because this Pablo de Noches, he knows nothing. He barely could tell me the name of the town he came from in Spain."

"He was drunk when he was questioned," said Sister Carlotta.

"We'll question him again when he's sober," said the inspector. "We'll let you know if we learn anything more. In the meantime, though, you'll have to make do with what I've already told you, because there isn't anything more."

"I know all I need to know for now," said Sister Carlotta. "Enough to know that this child truly is a miracle, raised up by God for some great purpose."

"I'm not Catholic," said the inspector.

"God loves you all the same," said Sister Carlotta cheerfully.

PART TWO -- LAUNCHY

CHAPTER 5 -- READY OR NOT

"Why are you giving me a five-year-old street urchin to tend?"

"You've seen the scores."

"Am I supposed to take those seriously?"

"Since the whole Battle School program is based on the reliability of our juvenile testing program, yes, I think you should take his scores seriously. I did a little research. No child has ever done better. Not even your star pupil."

"It's not the validity of the tests that I doubt. It's the tester."

"Sister Carlotta is a nun. You'll never find a more honest person.

"Honest people have been known to deceive themselves. To want so desperately, after all these years of searching, to find one -- just one -- child whose value will be worth all that work."

"And she's found him."

"Look at the way she found him. Her first report touts this Achilles child, and this -- this Bean, this Legume -- he's just an afterthought. Then Achilles is gone, not another mention of him -- did he die? Wasn't she trying to get a leg operation for him? -- and it's Haricot Vert who is now her candidate."

"'Bean' is the name he calls himself. Rather as your Andrew Wiggin calls himself 'Ender.'"

"He's not *my* Andrew Wiggin."

"And Bean is not Sister Carlotta's child, either. If she were inclined to fudge the scores or administer tests unfairly, she would have pushed other students into the program long before now, and we'd already know how unreliable she was. She has never done that. She washes out her most hopeful children herself, then finds some place for them on Earth or in a non-command program. I think you're merely annoyed because you've already decided to focus all your attention and energy on the Wiggin boy, and you don't want any distraction."

"When did I lie down on your couch?"

"If my analysis is wrong, do forgive me."

"Of course I'll give this little one a chance. Even if I don't for one second believe these scores."

"Not just a chance. Advance him. Test him. Challenge him. Don't let him languish."

"You underestimate our program. We advance and test and challenge all our students."

"But some are more equal than others."

"Some take better advantage of the program than others."

"I'll look forward to telling Sister Carlotta about your enthusiasm."

Sister Carlotta shed tears when she told Bean that it was time for him to leave. Bean shed none.

"I understand that you're afraid, Bean, but don't be," she said. "You'll be safe there, and there's so much to learn. The way you drink down knowledge, you'll be very happy there in no time. So you won't really miss me at all."

Bean blinked. What sign had he given that made her think he was afraid? Or that he would miss her?

He felt none of those things. When he first met her, he might have been prepared to feel something for her. She was kind. She fed him. She was keeping him safe, giving him a life.

But then he found Pablo the janitor, and there was Sister Carlotta, stopping Bean from talking to the man who had saved him long before she did. Nor would she tell him anything that Pablo had said, or anything she had learned about the clean place.

From that moment, trust was gone. Bean knew that whatever Sister Carlotta was doing, it wasn't for him. She was using him. He didn't know what for. It might even be something he would have chosen to do himself.

But she wasn't telling him the truth. She had secrets from him. The way Achilles kept secrets.

So during the months that she was his teacher, he had grown more and more distant from her. Everything she taught, he learned -- and much that she didn't teach as well. He took every test she gave him, and did well; but he showed her nothing he had learned that she hadn't taught him.

Of course life with Sister Carlotta was better than life on the street -- he had no intention of going back. But he did not trust her. He was on guard all the time. He was as careful as he had ever been back in Achilles's family. Those brief days at the beginning, when he wept in front of her, when he let go of himself and spoke freely -- that had been a mistake that he would not repeat. Life was better, but he wasn't safe, and this wasn't home.

Her tears were real enough, he knew. She really did love him, and would really miss him when he left. After all, he had been a perfect child, compliant, quick, obedient. To her, that meant he was "good." To him, it was only a way of keeping his access to food and learning. He wasn't stupid.

Why did she assume he was afraid? Because she was afraid *for* him. Therefore there might indeed be something to fear. He would be careful.

And why did she assume that he would miss her? Because she would miss him, and she could not imagine that what she was feeling, he might not feel as well. She had created an imaginary version of him. Like the games of Let's Pretend that she tried to play with him a couple of times. Harking back to her own childhood, no doubt, growing up in a house where there was always enough food. Bean didn't have to pretend things in order to exercise his imagination when he was on the street. Instead he had to imagine his plans for how to get food, for how to insinuate himself into a crew, for how to survive when he knew he seemed useless to everyone. He had to imagine how and when Achilles would decide to act against him for having advocated that Poke kill him. He had to imagine danger around every corner, a bully ready to seize every scrap of food. Oh, he had plenty of imagination. But he had no interest at all in playing Let's Pretend.

That was *her* game. She played it all the time. Let's pretend that Bean is a good little boy. Let's pretend that Bean is the son that this nun can never have for real. Let's pretend that when Bean leaves, he'll cry -- that he's not crying now because he's too afraid of this new school, this journey into space, to let his emotions show. Let's pretend that Bean loves me.

And when he understood this, he made a decision: It will do no harm to me if she believes all this. And she wants very much to believe it. So why not give it to her? After all, Poke let me stay with

the crew even though she didn't need me, because it would do no harm. It's the kind of thing Poke would do.

So Bean slid off his chair, walked around the table to Sister Carlotta, and put his arms as far around her as they would reach. She gathered him up onto her lap and held him tight, her tears flowing into his hair. He hoped her nose wasn't running. But he clung to her as long as she clung to him, letting go only when she let go of him. It was what she wanted from him, the only payment that she had ever asked of him. For all the meals, the lessons, the books, the language, for his future, he owed her no less than to join her in this game of Let's Pretend.

Then the moment passed. He slid off her lap. She dabbed at her eyes. Then she rose, took his hand, and led him out to the waiting soldiers, to the waiting car.

As he approached the car, the uniformed men loomed over him. It was not the grey uniform of the I.T. police, those kickers of children, those wielders of sticks. Rather it was the sky blue of the International Fleet that they wore, a cleaner look, and the people who gathered around to watch showed no fear, but rather admiration. This was the uniform of distant power, of safety for humanity, the uniform on which all hope depended. This was the service he was about to join.

But he was so small, and as they looked down at him he **was** afraid after all, and clung more tightly to Sister Carlotta's hand. Was he going to become one of them? Was he going to be a man in such a uniform, with such admiration directed at him? Then why was he afraid?

I'm afraid, Bean thought, because I don't see how I can ever be so tall.

One of the soldiers bent down to him, to lift him into the car. Bean glared up at him, defying him to dare such a thing. "I can do it," he said.

The soldier nodded slightly, and stood upright again. Bean hooked his leg up onto the running board of the car and hoisted himself in. It was high off the ground, and the seat he held to was slick and offered scant purchase to his hands. But he made it, and positioned himself in the middle of the back seat, the only position where he could see between the front seats and have some idea of where the car would be going.

One of the soldiers got into the driver's seat. Bean expected the other to get into the back seat beside Bean, and anticipated an argument about whether Bean could sit in the middle or not. Instead, he got into the front on the other side. Bean was alone in back.

He looked out the side window at Sister Carlotta. She was still dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She gave him a little wave. He waved back. She sobbed a little. The car glided forward along the magnetic track in the road. Soon they were outside the city, gliding through the countryside at a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour. Ahead was the Amsterdam airport, one of only three in Europe that could launch one of the shuttles that could fly into orbit. Bean was through with Rotterdam. For the time being, at least, he was through with Earth.

Since Bean had never flown on an airplane, he did not understand how different the shuttle was, though that seemed to be all that the other boys could talk about at first. I thought it would be bigger. Doesn't it take off straight up? That was the old shuttle, stupid. There aren't any tray tables! That's cause in null-G you can't set anything down anyway, bonehead.

To Bean, the sky was the sky, and all he'd ever cared about was whether it was going to rain or snow or blow or burn. Going up into space did not seem any more strange to him than going up to the clouds.

What fascinated him were the other children. Boys, most of them, and all older than him. Definitely all larger. Some of them looked at him oddly, and behind him he heard one whisper, "Is he a kid or a doll?" But snide remarks about his size and his age were nothing new to him. In fact, what surprised him was that there was only the one remark, and it was whispered.

The kids themselves fascinated him. They were all so fat, so soft. Their bodies were like pillows, their cheeks full, their hair thick, their clothes well fitted. Bean knew, of course, that he had more fat on him now than at any time since he left the clean place, but he didn't see himself, he only saw them, and couldn't help comparing them to the kids on the street. Sergeant could take any of them apart. Achilles could ... well, no use thinking about Achilles.

Bean tried to imagine them lining up outside a charity kitchen. Or scrounging for candy wrappers to lick. What a joke. They had never missed a meal in their lives. Bean wanted to punch them all so hard in the stomach that they would puke up everything they ate that day. Let them feel some pain there in their gut, that gnawing hunger. And then let them feel it again the next day, and the next hour, morning and night, waking and sleeping, the constant weakness fluttering just inside your throat, the faintness behind your eyes, the headache, the dizziness, the swelling of your joints, the distension of your belly, the thinning of your muscles until you barely have strength to stand. These children had never looked death in the face and then chosen to live anyway. They were confident. They were unwary.

These children are no match for me.

And, with just as much certainty: I will never catch up to them. They'll always be bigger, stronger, quicker, healthier. Happier. They talked to each other boastfully, spoke wistfully of home, mocked the children who had failed to qualify to come with them, pretended to have inside knowledge about how things really were in Battle School. Bean said nothing. Just listened, watched them maneuver, some of them determined to assert their place in the hierarchy, others quieter because they knew their place would be lower down; a handful relaxed, unworried, because they had never had to worry about the pecking order, having been always at the top of it. A part of Bean wanted to engage in the contest and win it, clawing his way to the top of the hill. Another part of him disdained the whole group of them. What would it mean, really, to be top dog in this mangy pack?

Then he glanced down at his small hands, and at the hands of the boy sitting next to him.

I really do look like a doll compared to the rest of them.

Some of the kids were complaining about how hungry they were. There was a strict rule against eating for twenty-four hours before the shuttle flight, and most of these kids had never gone so long without eating. For Bean, twenty-four hours without food was barely noticeable. In his crew, you didn't worry about hunger until the second week.

The shuttle took off, just like any airplane, though it had a long, long runway to get it up to speed, it was so heavy. Bean was surprised at the motion of the plane, the way it charged forward yet seemed to hold still, the way it rocked a little and sometimes bumped, as if it were rolling over irregularities in an invisible road.

When they got up to a high altitude, they rendezvoused with two fuel planes, in order to take on the rest of the rocket fuel needed to achieve escape velocity. The plane could never have lifted off the ground with that much fuel on board.

During the refueling, a man emerged from the control cabin and stood at the front of the rows of seats. His sky blue uniform was crisp and perfect, and his smile looked every bit as starched and pressed and unstainable as his clothes.

"My dear darling little children," he said. "Some of you apparently can't read yet. Your seat harnesses are to remain in place throughout the entire flight. Why are so many of them unfastened? Are you going somewhere?"

Lots of little clicks answered him like scattered applause.

"And let me also warn you that no matter how annoying or enticing some other child might be, keep your hands to yourself. You should keep in mind that the children around you scored every bit as high as you did on every test you took, and some of them scored higher."

Bean thought: That's impossible. Somebody here had to have the highest score.

A boy across the aisle apparently had the same thought. "Right," he said sarcastically.

"I was making a point, but I'm willing to digress," said the man. "Please, share with us the thought that so enthralled you that you could not contain it silently within you."

The boy knew he had made a mistake, but decided to tough it out. "Somebody here has the highest score."

The man continued looking at him, as if inviting him to continue.

Inviting him to dig himself a deeper grave, thought Bean.

"I mean, you said that everybody scored as high as everybody else, and some scored higher, and that's just obviously not true."

The man waited some more.

"That's all I had to say."

"Feel better?" said the man.

The boy sullenly kept his silence.

Without disturbing his perfect smile, the man's tone changed, and instead of bright sarcasm, there was now a sharp whiff of menace. "I asked you a question, boy."

"No, I don't feel better."

"What's your name?" asked the man.

"Nero."

A couple of children who knew a little bit about history laughed at the name. Bean knew about the emperor Nero. He did not laugh, however. He knew that a child named Bean was wise not to laugh at other kids' names. Besides, a name like that could be a real burden to bear. It said something about the boy's strength or at least his defiance that he didn't give some nickname.

Or maybe Nero was his nickname.

"Just ... Nero?" asked the man.

"Nero Boulanger."

"French? Or just hungry?"

Bean did not get the joke. Was Boulanger a name that had something to do with food?

"Algerian."

"Nero, you are an example to all the children on this shuttle. Because most of them are so foolish, they think it is better to keep their stupidest thoughts to themselves. You, however, understand the profound truth that you must reveal your stupidity openly. To hold your stupidity inside you is to embrace it, to cling to it, to protect it. But when you expose your stupidity, you give yourself the chance to have it caught, corrected, and replaced with wisdom. Be brave, all of you, like Nero Boulanger, and when you have a thought of such surpassing ignorance that you think it's actually smart, make sure to make some noise, to let your mental limitations squeak out some whimpering fart of a thought, so that you have a chance to learn."

Nero grumbled something.

"Listen -- another flatulence, but this time even less articulate than before. Tell us, Nero. Speak up. You are teaching us all by the example of your courage, however half-assed it might be."

A couple of students laughed.

"And listen -- your fart has drawn out other farts, from people equally stupid, for they think they are somehow superior to you, and that they could not just as easily have been chosen to be examples of superior intellect."

There would be no more laughter.

Bean felt a kind of dread, for he knew that somehow, this verbal sparring, or rather this one-sided verbal assault, this torture, this public exposure, was going to find some twisted path that led to him. He did not know how he sensed this, for the uniformed man had not so much as glanced at Bean, and Bean had made no sound, had done nothing to call attention to himself. Yet he knew that he, not Nero, would end up receiving the cruelest thrust from this man's dagger.

Then Bean realized why he was sure it would turn against him. This had turned into a nasty little argument about whether someone had higher test scores than anyone else on the shuttle. And Bean had assumed, for no reason whatsoever, that he was the child with the highest scores.

Now that he had seen his own belief, he knew it was absurd. These children were all older and had grown up with far more advantages. He had had only Sister Carlotta as a teacher -- Sister Carlotta and, of course, the street, though few of the things he learned *there* had shown up on the tests. There was no way that Bean had the highest score.

Yet he still knew, with absolute certainty, that this discussion was full of danger for him.

"I told you to speak up, Nero. I'm waiting."

"I still don't see how anything I said was stupid," said Nero.

"First, it was stupid because I have all the authority here, and you have none, so I have the power to make your life miserable, and you have no power to protect yourself. So how much intelligence does it take just to keep your mouth shut and avoid calling attention to yourself? What could be a more obvious decision to make when confronted with such a lopsided distribution of power?"

Nero withered in his seat.

"Second, you seemed to be listening to me, not to find out useful information, but to try to catch me in a logical fallacy. This tells us all that you are used to being smarter than your teachers, and that you listen to them in order to catch them making mistakes and prove how smart you are to the other students. This is such a pointless, stupid way of listening to teachers that it is clear you are going to waste months of our time before you finally catch on that the only transaction that matters is a transfer of useful information from adults who possess it to children who do not, and that catching mistakes is a criminal misuse of time."

Bean silently disagreed. The criminal misuse of time was pointing out the mistakes. Catching them -- noticing them -- that was essential. If you did not in your own mind distinguish between useful and erroneous information, then you were not *learning* at all, you were merely replacing ignorance with false belief, which was no improvement.

The part of the man's statement that was true, however, was about the uselessness of speaking up. If I know that the teacher is wrong, and say nothing, then I remain the only one who knows, and that gives me an advantage over those who believe the teacher.

"Third," said the man, "my statement only seems to be self-contradictory and impossible because you did not think beneath the surface of the situation. In fact it is not necessarily true that one person has the highest scores of everyone on this shuttle. That's because there were many tests, physical, mental, social, and psychological, and many ways to define 'highest' as well, since there are many ways to be physically or socially or psychologically fit for command. Children who tested highest on stamina may not have tested highest on strength; children who tested highest on memory may not have tested highest on anticipatory analysis. Children with remarkable social skills might be weaker in delay of gratification. Are you beginning to grasp the shallowness of your thinking that led you to your stupid and useless conclusion?"

Nero nodded.

"Let us hear the sound of your flatulence again, Nero. Be just as loud in acknowledging your errors as you were in making them."

"I was wrong."

There was not a boy on that shuttle who would not have avowed a preference for death to being in Nero's place at that moment. And yet Bean felt a kind of envy as well, though he did not understand why he would envy the victim of such torture.

"And yet," said the man, "you happen to be less wrong on this particular shuttle flight than you would have been in any other shuttle filled with launchies heading for Battle School. And do you know why?"

He did not choose to speak.

"Does anyone know why? Can anyone guess? I am inviting speculation."

No one accepted the invitation.

"Then let me choose a volunteer. There is a child here named -- improbable as it might sound -- 'Bean.' Would that child please speak?"

Here it comes, thought Bean. He was filled with dread; but he was also filled with excitement, because this was what he wanted, though he did not know why. Look at me. Talk to me, you with the power, you with the authority.

"I'm here, sir," said Bean.

The man made a show of looking and looking, unable to see where Bean was. Of course it was a sham -- he knew exactly where Bean was sitting before he ever spoke. "I can't see where your voice came from. Would you raise a hand?"

Bean immediately raised his hand. He realized, to his shame, that his hand did not even reach to the top of the high-backed seat.

"I still can't see you," said the man, though of course he could. "I give you permission to unstrap and stand on your seat."

Bean immediately complied, peeling off the harness and bounding to his feet. He was barely taller than the back of the seat in front of him.

"Ah, there you are," said the man. "Bean, would you be so kind as to speculate about why, in this shuttle, Nero comes closer to being correct than on any other?"

"Maybe somebody here scored highest on a lot of tests."

"Not just a lot of tests, Bean. All the tests of intellect. All the psychological tests. All the tests pertinent to command. Every one of them. Higher than anyone else on this shuttle."

"So I was right," said the newly defiant Nero.

"No you were not," said the man. "Because that remarkable child, the one who scored highest on all the tests related to command, happens to have scored the very lowest on the physical tests. And do you know why?"

No one answered.

"Bean, as long as you're standing, can you speculate about why this one child might have scored lowest on the physical tests?"

Bean knew how he had been set up. And he refused to try to hide from the obvious answer. He would say it, even though the question was designed to make the others detest him for answering it. After all, they would detest him anyway, no matter who said the answer.

"Maybe he scored lowest on the physical tests because he's very, very small."

Groans from many boys showed their disgust at his answer. At the arrogance and vanity that it suggested. But the man in uniform only nodded gravely.

"As should be expected from a boy of such remarkable ability, you are exactly correct. Only this boy's unusually small stature prevented Nero from being correct about there being one child with higher scores than everybody else." He turned to Nero. "So close to not being a complete fool," he said. "And yet ... even if you had been right, it would only have been by accident. A broken clock is right two times a day. Sit down now, Bean, and put on your harness. The refueling is over and we're about to boost."

Bean sat down. He could feel the hostility of the other children. There was nothing he could do about that right now, and he wasn't sure that it was a disadvantage, anyway. What mattered was the much more puzzling question: Why did the man set him up like that? If the point was to get the kids competing with each other, they could have passed around a list with everyone's scores on all the tests, so they all could see where they stood. Instead, Bean had been singled out. He was already the smallest, and knew from experience that he was therefore a target for every mean-spirited impulse in a bully's heart. So why did they draw this big circle around him and all these arrows pointing at him, practically demanding that he be the main target of everyone's fear and hate?

Draw your targets, aim your darts. I'm going to do well enough in this school that someday I'll be the one with the authority, and then it won't matter who likes *me*. What will matter is who *I* like.

"As you may remember," said the man, "before the first fart from the mouthhole of Nero Bakerboy here, I was starting to make a point. I was telling you that even though some child here may seem like a prime target for your pathetic need to assert supremacy in a situation where you are unsure of being recognized for the hero that you want people to think you are, you must control yourself, and refrain from poking or pinching, jabbing or hitting, or even making snidely provocative remarks or sniggering like warthogs just because you think somebody is an easy target. And the reason why you should refrain from doing this is because you don't know who in this group is going to end up being *your* commander in the future, the admiral when you're a mere captain. And if you think for one moment that they will forget how you treated them now, today, then you really are a fool. If they're good commanders, they'll use you effectively in combat no matter how they despise you. But they don't have to be helpful to you in advancing your career. They don't have to nurture you and bring you along. They don't have to be kind and forgiving. Just think about that. The people you see around you will someday be giving you orders that will decide whether you live or die. I'd suggest you work on earning their respect, not trying to put them down so you can show off like some schoolyard punk."

The man turned his icy smile on Bean one more time.

"And I'll bet that Bean, here, is already planning to be the admiral who gives you all orders someday. He's even planning how he'll order *me* to stand solitary watch on some asteroid observatory till my bones melt from osteoporosis and I ooze around the station like an amoeba."

Bean hadn't given a moment's thought to some future contest between him and this particular officer. He had no desire for vengeance. He wasn't Achilles. Achilles was stupid. And this officer

was stupid for thinking that Bean would think that way. No doubt, however, the man thought Bean would be grateful because he had just warned the others not to pick on him. But Bean had been picked on by tougher bastards than these could possibly be; this officer's "protection" was not needed, and it made the gulf between Bean and the other children wider than before. If Bean could have lost a couple of tussles, he would have been humanized, accepted perhaps. But now there would be no tussles. No easy way to build bridges.

That was the reason for the annoyance that the man apparently saw on Bean's face. "I've got a word for you, Bean. I don't care what you do to me. Because there's only one enemy that matters. The Buggers. And if you can grow up to be the admiral who can give us victory over the Buggers and keep Earth safe for humanity, then make me eat my own guts, ass-first, and I'll still say, Thank you, sir. The Buggers are the enemy. Not Nero. Not Bean. Not even me. So keep your hands off each other."

He grinned again, mirthlessly.

"Besides, the last time somebody tried picking on another kid, he ended up flying through the shuttle in null-G and got his arm broken. It's one of the laws of strategy. Until you know that you're tougher than the enemy, you maneuver, you don't commit to battle. Consider that your first lesson in Battle School."

First lesson? No wonder they used this guy to tend children on the shuttle flights instead of having him teach. If you followed *that* little piece of wisdom, you'd be paralyzed against a vigorous enemy. Sometimes you *have* to commit to a fight even when you're weak. You *don't* wait till you *know* you're tougher. You *make* yourself tougher by whatever means you can, and then you strike by surprise, you sneak up, you backstab, you blindside, you cheat, you lie, you do whatever it takes to make sure that you come out on top.

This guy might be real tough as the only adult on a shuttle full of kids, but if he were a kid on the streets of Rotterdam, he'd "maneuver" himself into starvation in a month. If he wasn't killed before that just for talking like he thought his piss was perfume.

The man turned to head back to the control cabin.

Bean called out to him.

"What's your name?"

The man turned and fixed him with a withering stare. "Already drafting the orders to have my balls ground to powder, Bean?"

Bean didn't answer. Just looked him in the eye.

"I'm Captain Dimak. Anything else you want to know?"

Might as well find out now as later. "Do you teach at Battle School?"

"Yes," he said. "Coming down to pick up shuttle-loads of little boys and girls is how we get Earthside leave. Just as with you, my being on this shuttle means my vacation is over."

The refueling planes peeled away and rose above them. No, it was their own craft that was sinking. And the tail was sinking lower than the nose of the shuttle.

Metal covers came down over the windows. It felt like they were falling faster, faster ... until, with a bone-shaking roar, the rockets fired and the shuttle began to rise again, higher, faster, faster, until Bean felt like he was going to be pushed right through the back of his chair. It seemed to go on forever, unchanging.

Then ... silence.

Silence, and then a wave of panic. They were falling again, but this time there was no downward direction, just nausea and fear.

Bean closed his eyes. It didn't help. He opened them again, tried to reorient himself. No direction provided equilibrium. But he had schooled himself on the street not to succumb to nausea -- a lot of the food he had to eat had already gone a little bad, and he couldn't afford to throw it up. So he went into his anti-nausea routine -- deep breaths, distracting himself by concentrating on wiggling his toes. And, after a surprisingly short time, he was used to the null-G. As long as he didn't expect any direction to be down, he was fine.

The other kids didn't have his routine, or perhaps they were more susceptible to the sudden, relentless loss of balance. Now the reason for the prohibition against eating before the launch became clear. There was plenty of retching going on, but with nothing to throw up, there was no mess, no smell.

Dimak came back into the shuttle cabin, this time standing on the ceiling. Very cute, thought Bean. Another lecture began, this time about how to get rid of planetside assumptions about directions and gravity. Could these kids possibly be so stupid they needed to be told such obvious stuff?

Bean occupied the time of the lecture by seeing how much pressure it took to move himself around within his loosely-fitting harness. Everybody else was big enough that the harnesses fit snugly and prevented movement. Bean alone had room for a little maneuvering. He made the most of it. By the time they arrived at Battle School, he was determined to have at least a little skill at movement in null-G. He figured that in space, his survival might someday depend on knowing just how much force it would take to move his body, and then how much force it would take to stop. Knowing it in his mind wasn't half so important as knowing it with his body. Analyzing things was fine, but good reflexes could save your life.

"Normally your reports on a launch group are brief. A few troublemakers, an incident report, or -- best of all -- nothing."

"You're free to disregard any portion of my report, sir."

"Sir? My, but aren't we the prickly martinet today."

"What part of my report did you think was excessive?"

"I think this report is a love song."

"I realize that it might seem like sucking up, to use with every launch the technique you used with Ender Wiggin --"

"You use it with every launch?"

"As you noticed yourself, sir, it has interesting results. It causes an immediate sorting out."

"A sorting out into categories that might not otherwise exist. Nevertheless, I accept the compliment implied by your action. But seven pages about Bean -- really, did you actually learn that much from a response that was primarily silent compliance?"

"That is just my point, sir. It was not compliance at all. It was -- I was performing the experiment, but it felt as though his were the big eye looking down the microscope, and I were the specimen on the slide."

"So he unnerved you."

"He would unnerve anyone. He's cold, sir. And yet"

"And yet hot. Yes, I read your report. Every scintillating page of it."

"Yes sir."

"I think you know that it is considered good advice for us not to get crushes on our students."

"Sir?"

"In this case, however, I am delighted that you are so interested in Bean. Because, you see, I am not. I already have the boy I think gives us our best chance. Yet there is considerable pressure, because of Bean's damnable faked-up test scores, to give him special attention. Very well, he shall have it. And you shall give it to him."

"But sir ..."

"Perhaps you are unable to distinguish an order from an invitation."

"I'm only concerned that ... I think he already has a low opinion of me."

"Good. Then he'll underestimate you. Unless you think his low opinion might be correct."

"Compared to him, sir, we might all be a little dim."

"Close attention is your assignment. Try not to worship him."

All that Bean had on his mind was survival, that first day in Battle School. No one would help him -- that had been made clear by Dimak's little charade in the shuttle. They were setting him up to be surrounded by ... what? Rivals at best, enemies at worst. So it was the street again. Well, that was fine. Bean had survived on the street. And would have kept on surviving, even if Sister Carlotta hadn't found him. Even Pablo -- Bean might have made it even without Pablo the janitor finding him in the toilet of the clean place.

So he watched. He listened. Everything the others learned, he had to learn just as well, maybe better. And on top of that, he had to learn what the others were oblivious to -- the workings of the group, the systems of the Battle School. How teachers got on with each other. Where the power was. Who was afraid of whom. Every group had its bosses, its suckups, its rebels, its sheep. Every group had its strong bonds and its weak ones, friendships and hypocrisies. Lies within lies within lies. And Bean had to find them all, as quickly as possible, in order to learn the spaces in which he could survive.

They were taken to their barracks, given beds, lockers, little portable desks that were much more sophisticated than the one he had used when studying with Sister Carlotta. Some of the kids immediately began to play with them, trying to program them or exploring the games built into them, but Bean had no interest in that. The computer system of Battle School was not a person; mastering it might be helpful in the long run, but for today it was irrelevant. What Bean needed to find out was all outside the launchy barracks.

Which is where, soon enough, they went. They arrived in the "morning" according to space time -- which, to the annoyance of many in Europe and Asia, meant Florida time, since the earliest stations had been controlled from there. For the kids, having launched from Europe, it was late afternoon, and that meant they would have a serious time-lag problem. Dimak explained that the cure for this was to get vigorous physical exercise and then take a short nap -- no more than three hours -- in the early afternoon, following which they would again have plenty of physical exercise so they could fall asleep that night at the regular bedtime for students.

They piled out to form a line in the corridor. "Green Brown Green," said Dimak, and showed them how those lines on the corridor walls would always lead them back to their barracks. Bean found himself jostled out of line several times, and ended up right at the back. He didn't care -- mere jostling drew no blood and left no bruise, and last in line was the best place from which to observe.

Other kids passed them in the corridor, sometimes individuals, sometimes pairs or trios, most with brightly-colored uniforms in many different designs. Once they passed an entire group dressed alike and wearing helmets and carrying extravagant sidearms, jogging along with an intensity of purpose that Bean found intriguing. They're a crew, he thought. And they're heading off for a fight.

They weren't too intense to notice the new kids walking along the corridor, looking up at them in awe. Immediately there were catcalls. "Launchies!" "Fresh meat!" "Who make cocç [coco] in the hall and don't clean it up!" "They even smell stupid!" But it was all harmless banter, older kids asserting their supremacy. It meant nothing more than that. No real hostility. In fact it was almost affectionate. They remembered being launchies themselves.

Some of the launchies ahead of Bean in line were resentful and called back some vague, pathetic insults, which only caused more hooting and derision from the older kids. Bean had seen older, bigger kids who hated younger ones because they were competition for food, and drove them away, not caring if they caused the little ones to die. He had felt real blows, meant to hurt. He had seen cruelty, exploitation, molestation, murder. These other kids didn't know love when they saw it.

What Bean wanted to know was how that crew was organized, who led it, how he was chosen, what the crew was *for*. The fact that they had their own uniform meant that it had official status. So that meant that the adults were ultimately in control -- the opposite of the way crews were organized in Rotterdam, where adults tried to break them up, where newspapers wrote about them as criminal conspiracies instead of pathetic little leagues for survival.

That, really, was the key. Everything the children did here was shaped by adults. In Rotterdam, the adults were either hostile, unconcerned, or, like Helga with her charity kitchen, ultimately powerless. So the children could shape their own society without interference. Everything was based on survival -- on getting enough food without getting killed or injured or sick. Here, there were cooks and doctors, clothing and beds. Power wasn't about access to food-it was about getting the approval of adults.

That's what those uniforms meant. Adults chose them, and children wore them because adults somehow made it worth their while.

So the key to everything was understanding the teachers.

All this passed through Bean's mind, not so much verbally as with a clear and almost instantaneous understanding that within that crew there was no power at all, compared to the power of the teachers, before the uniformed catcallers reached him. When they saw Bean, so much smaller than any of the other kids, they broke out laughing, hooting, howling. "That one isn't big enough to be a turd!" "I can't believe he can walk!" "Did'ums wose um's mama?" "Is it even human?"

Bean tuned them out immediately. But he could feel the enjoyment of the kids ahead of him in line. They had been humiliated in the shuttle; now it was Bean's turn to be mocked. They loved it. And so did Bean-because it meant that he was seen as less of a rival. By diminishing him, the passing soldiers had made him just that much safer from ...

From what? What was the danger here?

For there would be danger. That he knew. There was always danger. And since the teachers had all the power, the danger would come from them. But Dimak had started things out by turning the other kids against him. So the children themselves were the weapons of choice. Bean had to get to know the other kids, not because they themselves were going to be his problem, but because their weaknesses, their desires could be used against him by the teachers. And, to protect himself, Bean would have to work to undercut their hold on the other children. The only safety here was to subvert the teachers' influence. And yet that was the greatest danger -- if he was caught doing it.

They palmed in on a wall-mounted pad, then slid down a pole -- the first time Bean had ever done it with a smooth shaft. In Rotterdam, all his sliding had been on rainspouts, signposts, and lightpoles. They ended up in a section of Battle School with higher gravity. Bean did not realize how light they must have been on the barracks level until he felt how heavy he was down in the gym.

"This is just a little heavier than Earth normal gravity," said Dimak. "You have to spend at least a half-hour a day here, or your bones start to dissolve. And you have to spend the time exercising, so you keep at peak endurance. And that's the key -- endurance exercise, not bulking up. You're too small for your bodies to endure that kind of training, and it fights you here. Stamina, that's what we want."

The words meant almost nothing to the kids, but soon the trainer had made it clear. Lots of running on treadmills, riding on cycles, stair-stepping, pushups, situps, chinups, backups, but no weights. Some weight equipment was there, but it was all for the use of teachers. "Your heartrate is monitored from the moment you enter here," said the trainer. "If you don't have your heartrate elevated within five minutes of arrival and you don't keep it elevated for the next twenty-five minutes, it goes on your record and I see it on my control board here."

"I get a report on it too," said Dimak. "And you go on the pig list for everyone to see you've been lazy."

Pig list. So that's the tool they used -- shaming them in front of the others. Stupid. As if Bean cared.

It was the monitoring board that Bean was interested in. How could they possibly monitor their heartrates and know what they were doing, automatically, from the moment they arrived? He almost asked the question, until he realized the only possible answer: The uniform. It was in the clothing. Some system of sensors. It probably told them a lot more than heartrate. For one thing, they could certainly track every kid wherever he was in the station, all the time. There must be hundreds and hundreds of kids here, and there would be computers reporting the whereabouts, the heartrates, and who could guess what other information about them. Was there a room somewhere with teachers watching every step they took?

Or maybe it wasn't the clothes. After all, they had to palm in before coming down here, presumably to identify themselves. So maybe there were special sensors in this room.

Time to find out. Bean raised his hand. "Sir," he said.

"Yes?" The trainer did a doubletake on seeing Bean's size, and a smile played around the corners of his mouth. He glanced at Dimak. Dimak did not crack a smile or show any understanding of what the trainer was thinking.

"Is the heartrate monitor in our clothing? If we take off any part of our clothes while we're exercising, does it --"

"You are not authorized to be out of uniform in the gym," said the trainer. "The room is kept cold on purpose so that you will not need to remove clothing. You will be monitored at all times."

Not really an answer, but it told him what he needed to know. The monitoring depended on the clothes. Maybe there was an identifier in the clothing and by palming in, they told the gym sensors which kid was wearing which set of clothing. That would make sense.

So clothing was probably anonymous from the time you put on a clean set until you palmed in somewhere. That was important -- it meant that it might be possible to be untagged without being naked. Naked, Bean figured, would probably be conspicuous around here.

They all exercised and the trainer told them which of them were not up to the right heartrate and which of them were pushing too hard and would fatigue themselves too soon. Bean quickly got an idea of the level he had to work at, and then forgot about it. He'd remember by reflex, now that he knew.

It was mealtime, then. They were alone in the mess hall -- as fresh arrivals, they were on a separate schedule that day. The food was good and there was a lot of it. Bean was stunned when some of the kids looked at their portion and complained about how little there was. It was a feast! Bean couldn't finish it. The whiners were informed by the cooks that the quantities were all adapted to their individual dietary needs -- each kid's portion size came up on a computer display when he palmed in upon entering the mess hall.

So you don't eat without your palm on a pad. Important to know.

Bean soon found out that his size was going to get official attention. When he brought his half-finished tray to the disposal unit, an electronic chiming sound brought the on-duty nutritionist to speak to him. "It's your first day, so we aren't going to be rigid about it. But your portions are scientifically calibrated to meet your dietary needs, and in the future you will finish every bit of what you are served."

Bean looked at him without a word. He had already made his decision. If his exercise program made him hungrier, then he'd eat more. But if they were expecting him to gorge himself, they could

forget it. It would be a simple enough matter to dump excess food onto the trays of the whiners. They'd be happy with it, and Bean would eat only as much as his body wanted. He remembered hunger very well, but he had lived with Sister Carlotta for many months, and he knew to trust his own appetite. For a while he had let her goad him into eating more than he actually was hungry for. The result had been a sense of loginess, a harder time sleeping and a harder time staying awake. He went back to eating only as much as his body wanted, letting his hunger be his guide, and it kept him sharp and quick. That was the only nutritionist he trusted. Let the whiners get sluggish.

Dimak stood after several of them had finished eating. "When you're through, go back to the barracks. If you think you can find it. If you have any doubt, wait for me and I'll bring the last group back myself."

The corridors were empty when Bean went out into the corridor. The other kids palmed the wall and their green-brown-green strip turned on. Bean watched them go. One of them turned back. "Aren't you coming?" Bean said nothing. There was nothing to say. He was obviously standing still. It was a stupid question. The kid turned around and jogged on down the corridor toward the barracks.

Bean went the other way. No stripes on the wall. He knew that there was no better time to explore than now. If he was caught out of the area he was supposed to be in, they'd believe him if he claimed to have got lost.

The corridor sloped up both behind him and in front of him. To his eyes it looked like he was always going uphill, and when he looked back, it was uphill to go back the way he had come. Strange. But Dimak had already explained that the station was a huge wheel, spinning in space so that centrifugal force would replace gravity. That meant the main corridor on each level was a big circle, so you'd always come back to where you started, and "down" was always toward the outside of the circle. Bean made the mental adjustment. It was dizzying at first, to picture himself on his side as he walked along, but then he mentally changed the orientation so that he imagined the station as a wheel on a cart, with him at the bottom of it no matter how much it turned. That put the people above him upside down, but he didn't care. Wherever he was was the bottom, and that way down stayed down and up stayed up.

The launchies were on the mess hall level, but the older kids must not be, because after the mess halls and the kitchens, there were only classrooms and unmarked doors with palmpads high enough that they were clearly not meant for children to enter. Other kids could probably reach those pads, but not even by jumping could Bean hope to palm one. It didn't matter. They wouldn't respond to any child's handprint, except to bring some adult to find out what the kid thought he was doing, trying to enter a room where he had no business.

By long habit -- or was it instinct? -- Bean regarded such barriers as only temporary blocks. He knew how to climb over walls in Rotterdam, how to get up on roofs. Short as he was, he still found ways to get wherever he needed to go. Those doors would not stop him if he decided he needed to get beyond them. He had no idea right now how he'd do it, but he had no doubt that he would find a way. So he wasn't annoyed. He simply tucked the information away, waiting until he thought of some way to use it.

Every few meters there was a pole for downward passage or a ladderway for going up. To get down the pole to the gym, he had had to palm a pad. But there seemed to be no pad on most of these. Which made sense. Most poles and ladderways would merely let you pass between floors -- no, they called them decks; this was the International Fleet and so everything pretended to be a ship -- while only one pole led down to the gym, to which they needed to control access so that it didn't get overcrowded with people coming when they weren't scheduled. As soon as he had made sense of it, Bean didn't have to think of it anymore. He scrambled up a ladder.

The next floor up had to be the barracks level for the older kids. Doors were more widely spaced, and each door had an insignia on it. Using the colors of some uniform -- no doubt based on their stripe colors, though he doubted the older kids ever had to palm the wall to find their way around -- there was also the silhouette of an animal. Some of them he didn't recognize, but he recognized a couple of birds, some cats, a dog, a lion. Whatever was in use symbolically on signs in Rotterdam. No pigeon. No fly. Only noble animals, or animals noted for courage. The dog silhouette looked like some kind of hunting animal, very thin around the hips. Not a mongrel.

So this is where the crews meet, and they have animal symbols, which means they probably call themselves by animal names. Cat Crew. Or maybe Lion Crew. And probably not Crew. Bean would soon learn what they called themselves. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the colors and insignia on the crew that passed and mocked him in the corridor earlier. He could see the shape in his mind, but didn't see it on any of the doors he passed. It didn't matter -- not worth traveling the whole corridor in search of it, when that would only increase his risk of getting caught.

Up again. More barracks, more classrooms. How many kids in a barracks? This place was bigger than he thought.

A soft chime sounded. Immediately, several doors opened and kids began to pour out into the corridor. A changeover time.

At first Bean felt more secure among the big kids, because he thought he could get lost in the crowd, the way he always did in Rotterdam. But that habit was useless here. This wasn't a random crowd of people on their own errands. These might be kids but they were military. They knew where everybody was supposed to be, and Bean, in his launchy uniform, was way out of place. Almost at once a couple of older kids stopped him.

"You don't belong on this deck," said one. At once several others stopped to look at Bean as if he were an object washed into the street by a storm.

"Look at the size of this one."

"Poor kid gots to sniff everybody's butt, neh?"

"Eh!"

"You're out of area, launchy."

Bean said nothing, just looked at each one as he spoke. Or she.

"What are your colors?" asked a girl.

Bean said nothing. Best excuse would be that he didn't remember, so he couldn't very well name them now.

"He's so small he could walk between my legs without touching my --"

"Oh. shut up, Dink, that's what you said when Ender --"

"Yeah, Ender, right."

"You don't think this is the kid they --"

"Was Ender **this** small when he arrived?"

"-- been saying, he another Ender?"

"Right, like this one's going to shoot to the top of the standings."

"It wasn't Ender's fault that Bonzo wouldn't let him fire his weapon."

"But it's a fluke, that's all I'm saying --"

"This the one they talking about? One like Ender? Top scores?"

"Just get him down to the launchy level."

"Come with me," said the girl, taking him firmly by the hand.

Bean came along meekly.

"My name is Petra Arkanian," she said.

Bean said nothing.

"Come on, you may be little and you may be scared, but they don't let you in here if you're deaf or stupid."

Bean shrugged.

"Tell me your name before I break your stubby little fingers."

"Bean," he said.

"That's not a name, that's a lousy meal."

He said nothing.

"You don't fool me," she said. "This mute thing, it's just a cover. You came up here on purpose."

He kept his silence but it stabbed at him, that she had figured him out so easily.

"Kids for this school, they're chosen because they're smart and they've got initiative. So of course you wanted to explore. The thing is, they expect it. They probably know you're doing it. So there's no point in hiding it. What are they going to do, give you some big bad piggy points?"

So that's what the older kids thought about the pig list.

"This stubborn silence thing, it'll just piss people off. I'd forget about it if I were you. Maybe it worked with Mommy and Daddy, but it just makes you look stubborn and ridiculous because anything that matters, you're going to tell anyway, so why not just talk?"

"OK," said Bean.

Now that he was complying, she didn't crow about it. The lecture worked, so the lecture was over. "Colors?" she asked.

"Green brown green."

"Those launchy colors sound like something you'd find in a dirty toilet, don't you think?"

So she was just another one of the stupid kids who thought it was cute to make fun of launchies.

"It's like they designed everything to get the older kids to make fun of the younger ones."

Or maybe she wasn't. Maybe she was just talking. She was a talker. There weren't a lot of talkers on the streets. Not among the kids, anyway. Plenty of them among the drunks.

"The system around here is screwed. It's like they want us to act like little kids. Not that that's going to bother you. Hell, you're already doing some dumb lost-little-kid act."

"Not now," he said.

"Just remember this. No matter what you do, the teachers know about it and they already have some stupid theory about what this means about your personality or whatever. They always find a way to use it against you, if they want to, so you might as well not try. No doubt it's already in your report that you took this little jaunt when you were supposed to be having beddy-bye time and that probably tells them that you respond to insecurity by seeking to be alone while exploring the limits of your new environment." She used a fancy voice for the last part.

And maybe she had more voices to show off to him, but he wasn't going to stick around to find out. Apparently she was a take-charge person and didn't have anybody to take charge of until he came along. He wasn't interested in becoming her project. It was all right being Sister Carlotta's project because she could get him out of the street and into Battle School. But what did this Petra Arkanian have to offer him?

He slid down a pole, stopped in front of the first opening, pushed out into the corridor, ran to the next ladderway, and scooted up two decks before emerging into another corridor and running full out. She was probably right in what she said, but one thing was certain -- he was not going to have her hold his hand all the way back to green-brown-green. The last thing he needed, if he was going to hold his own in this place, was to show up with some older kid holding his hand.

Bean was four decks above the mess level where he was supposed to be right now. There were kids moving through here, but nowhere near as many as the deck below. Most of the doors were unmarked, but a few stood open, including one wide arch that opened into a game room.

Bean had seen computer games in some of the bars in Rotterdam, but only from a distance, through the doors and between the legs of men and women going in and out in their endless search for oblivion. He had never seen a child playing a computer game, except on the vids in store windows. Here it was real, with only a few players catching quick games between classes so that each game's sounds stood out. A few kids playing solo games, and then four of them playing a four-sided space game with a holographic display. Bean stood back far enough not to intrude in their sightlines and watched them play. Each of them controlled a squadron of four tiny ships, with the goal of either wiping out all the other fleets or capturing -- but not destroying -- each player's slow-moving mothership. He learned the rules and the terminology by listening to the four boys chatter as they played.

The game ended by attrition, not by any cleverness -- the last boy simply happened to be the least stupid in his use of his ships. Bean watched as they reset the game. No one put in a coin. The games here were free.

Bean watched another game. It was just as quick as the first, as each boy committed his ships clumsily, forgetting about whichever one was not actively engaged. It was as if they thought of their force as one active ship and three reserves.

Maybe the controls didn't allow anything different. Bean moved closer. No, it was possible to set the course for one, flip to control another ship, and another, then return to the first ship to change its course at any time.

How did these boys get into Battle School if this was all they could think of? Bean had never played a computer game before, but he saw at once that any competent player could quickly win if this was the best competition available.

"Hey, dwarf, want to play?"

One of them had noticed him. Of course the others did, too.

"Yes," said Bean.

"Well Bugger that," said the one who invited him. "Who do you think you are, Ender Wiggin?"

They laughed and then all four of them walked away from the game, heading for their next class. The room was empty. Class time.

Ender Wiggin. The kids in the corridor talked about him, too. Something about Bean made these kids think of Ender Wiggin. Sometimes with admiration, sometimes with resentment. This Ender must have beaten some older kids at a computer game or something. And he was at the top of the standings, that's what somebody said. Standings in what?

The kids in the same uniform, running like one crew, heading for a fight -- that was the central fact of life here. There was one core game that everyone played. They lived in barracks according to what team they were on. Every kid's standings were reported so everybody else knew them. And whatever the game was, the adults ran it.

So this was the shape of life here. And this Ender Wiggin, whoever he was, he was at the top of it all, he led the standings.

Bean reminded people of him.

That made him a little proud, yes, but it also annoyed him. It was safer not to be noticed. But because this other small kid had done brilliantly, everybody who saw Bean thought of Ender and that made Bean memorable. That would limit his freedom considerably. There was no way to disappear here, as he had been able to disappear in crowds in Rotterdam.

Well, who cared? He couldn't be hurt now, not really. No matter what happened, as long as he was here at Battle School he would never be hungry. He'd always have shelter. He had made it to heaven. All he had to do was the minimum required to not get sent home early. So who cared if people noticed him or not? It made no difference. Let them worry about their standings. Bean had already won the battle for survival, and after that, no other competition mattered.

But even as he had that thought, he knew it wasn't true. Because he did care. It wasn't enough just to survive. It never had been. Deeper than his need for food had been his hunger for order, for finding out how things worked, getting a grasp on the world around him. When he was starving, of course he used what he learned in order to get himself into Poke's crew and get her crew enough food that there would be enough to trickle some down to him at the bottom of the pecking order. But even when Achilles had turned them into his family and they had something to eat every day, Bean hadn't stopped being alert, trying to understand the changes, the dynamics in the group. Even with Sister Carlotta, he had spent a lot of effort trying to understand why and how she had the power to do for him what she was doing, and the basis on which she had chosen him. He had to know. He had to have the picture of everything in his mind.

Here, too. He could have gone back to the barracks and napped. Instead, he risked getting in trouble just to find out things that no doubt he would have learned in the ordinary course of events.

Why did I come up here? What was I looking for?

The key. The world was full of locked doors, and he had to get his hands on every key.

He stood still and listened. The room was nearly silent. But there was white noise, background rumble and hiss that made it so sounds didn't carry throughout the entire station.

With his eyes closed, he located the source of the faint rushing sound. Eyes open, he then walked to where the vent was. An out-flowing vent with slightly warmer air making a very slight breeze. The rushing sound was not the hiss of air here at the vent, but rather a much louder, more distant sound of the machinery that pumped air throughout the Battle School.

Sister Carlotta had told him that in space, there was no air, so wherever people lived, they had to keep their ships and stations closed tight, holding in every bit of air. And they also had to keep changing the air, because the oxygen, she said, got used up and had to be replenished. That's what this air system was about. It must go everywhere through the ship.

Bean sat before the vent screen, feeling around the edges. There were no visible screws or nails holding it on. He got his fingernails under the rim and carefully slid his fingers around it, prying it out a little, then a little more. His fingers now fit under the edges. He pulled straight forward. The vent came free, and Bean toppled over backward.

Only for a moment. He set aside the screen and tried to see into the vent. The vent duct was only about fifteen centimeters deep from front to back. The top was solid, but the bottom was open, leading down into the duct system.

Bean sized up the vent opening just the way he had, years before, stood on the seat of a toilet and studied the inside of the toilet tank, deciding whether he could fit in it. And the conclusion was the same -- it would be cramped, it would be painful, but he could do it.

He reached an arm inside and down. He couldn't feel the bottom. But with arms as short as his, that didn't mean much. There was no way to tell by looking which way the duct went when it got down to the floor level. Bean could imagine a duct leading under the floor, but that felt wrong to him. Sister Carlotta had said that every scrap of material used to build the station had to be hauled up from Earth or the manufacturing plants on the moon. They wouldn't have big gaps between the decks and the ceilings below because that would be wasted space into which precious air would have to be pumped without anyone breathing it. No, the ductwork would be in the outside walls. It was probably no more than fifteen centimeters deep anywhere.

He closed his eyes and imagined an air system. Machinery making a warm wind blow through the narrow ducts, flowing into every room, carrying fresh breathable air everywhere.

No, that wouldn't work. There had to be a place where the air was getting sucked in and drawn back. And if the air blew in at the outside walls, then the intake would be ... in the corridors.

Bean got up and ran to the door of the game room. Sure enough, the corridor's ceiling was at least twenty centimeters lower than the ceiling inside the room. But no vents. Just light fixtures.

He stepped back into the room and looked up. All along the top of the wall that bordered on the corridor there was a narrow vent that looked more decorative than practical. The opening was about three centimeters. Not even Bean could fit through the intake system.

He ran back to the open vent and took off his shoes. No reason to get hung up because his feet were so much bigger than they needed to be.

He faced the vent and swung his feet down into the opening. Then he wriggled until his legs were entirely down the hole and his buttocks rested on the rim of the vent. His feet still hadn't found bottom. Not a good sign. What if the vent dropped straight down into the machinery?

He wriggled back out, then went in the other way. It was harder and more painful, but now his arms were more usable, giving him a good grip on the floor as he slid chest-deep into the hole.

His feet touched bottom.

Using his toes, he probed. Yes, the ductwork ran to the left and the right, along the outside wall of the room. And the opening was tall enough that he could slide down into it, then wriggle -- always on his side -- along from room to room.

That was all he needed to know at present. He gave a little jump so his anus reached farther out onto the floor, meaning to use friction to let him pull himself up. Instead, he just slid back down into the vent.

Oh, this was excellent. Someone would come looking for him, eventually, or he'd be found by the next batch of kids who came in to play games, but he did not want to be found like this. More to the point, the ductwork would only give him an alternate route through the station if he could climb out of the vents. He had a mental image of somebody opening a vent and seeing his skull looking out at them, his dead body completely dried up in the warm wind of the air ducts where he starved to death or died of thirst trying to get out of the vents.

As long as he was just standing there, though, he might as well find out if he could cover the vent opening from the inside.

He reached over and, with difficulty, got a finger on the screen and was able to pull it toward him. Once he got a hand solidly on it, it wasn't hard at all to get it over the opening. He could even pull it in, tightly enough that it probably wouldn't be noticeably different to casual observers on the other side. With the vent closed, though, he had to keep his head turned to one side. There wasn't room enough for him to turn it. So once he got in the duct system, his head would either stay turned to the left or to the right. Great.

He pushed the vent back out, but carefully, so that it didn't fall to the floor. Now it was time to climb out in earnest.

After a couple more failures, he finally realized that the screen was exactly the tool he needed. Laying it down on the floor in front of the vent, he hooked his fingers under the far end. Pulling back on the screen provided him with the leverage to lift his body far enough to get his chest over the rim of the vent opening. It hurt, to hang the weight of his body on such a sharp edge, but now he could get up on his elbows and then on his hands, lifting his whole body up through the opening and back into the room.

He thought carefully through the sequence of muscles he had used and then thought about the equipment in the gym. Yes, he could strengthen those muscles.

He put the vent screen back into place. Then he pulled up his shirt and looked at the red marks on his skin where the rim of the vent opening had scraped him mercilessly. There was some blood. Interesting. How would he explain it, if anyone asked? He'd have to see if he could reinjure the same spot by climbing around on the bunks later.

He jogged out of the game room and down the corridor to the nearest pole, then dropped to the mess hall level. All the way, he wondered why he had felt such urgency about getting into the ducts. Whenever he got like that in the past, doing some task without knowing why it even mattered, it had turned out that there was a danger that he had sensed but that hadn't yet risen to his conscious mind. What was the danger here?

Then he realized -- in Rotterdam, out on the street, he had always made sure he knew a back way out of everything, an alternate path to get from one place to another. If he was running from someone, he never dodged into a cul-de-sac to hide unless he knew another way out. In truth, he never really hid at all -- he evaded pursuit by keeping on the move, always. No matter how awful the danger following him might be, he could not hold still. It felt terrible to be cornered. It hurt.

It hurt and was wet and cold and he was hungry and there wasn't enough air to breathe and people walked by and if they just lifted the lid they would find him and he had no way to run if they did that, he just had to sit there waiting for them to pass without noticing him. If they used the toilet and flushed it, the equipment wouldn't work right because the whole weight of his body was pressing down on the float. A lot of the water had spilled out of the tank when he climbed in. They'd notice something was wrong and they'd find him.

It was the worst experience of his life, and he couldn't stand the idea of ever hiding like that again. It wasn't the small space that bothered him, or that it was wet, or that he was hungry or alone. It was the fact that the only way out was into the arms of his pursuers.

Now that he understood that about himself, he could relax. He hadn't found the ductwork because he sensed some danger that hadn't yet risen to his conscious mind. He found the ductwork because he remembered how bad it felt to hide in the toilet tank as a toddler. So whatever danger there might be, he hadn't sensed it yet. It was just a childhood memory coming to the surface. Sister

Carlotta had told him that a lot of human behavior was really acting out our responses to dangers long past. It hadn't sounded sensible to Bean at the time, but he didn't argue, and now he could see that she was right.

And how could he know there would never be a time when that narrow, dangerous highway through the ductwork might not be exactly the route he needed to save his life?

He never did palm the wall to light up green-brown-green. He knew exactly where his barracks was. How could he not? He had been there before, and knew every step between the barracks and every other place he had visited in the station.

And when he got there, Dimak had not yet returned with the slow eaters. His whole exploration hadn't taken more than twenty minutes, including his conversation with Petra and watching two quick computer games during the class break.

He awkwardly hoisted himself up from the lower bunk, dangling for a while from his chest on the rim of the second bunk. Long enough that it hurt in pretty much the same spot he had injured climbing out of the vent. "What are you doing?" asked one of the launchies near him.

Since the truth wouldn't be understood, he answered truthfully. "Injuring my chest," he said.

"I'm trying to sleep," said the other boy. "You're supposed to sleep, too."

"Naptime," said another boy. "I feel like I'm some stupid four-year-old."

Bean wondered vaguely what these boys' lives had been like, when taking a nap made them think of being four years old.

Sister Carlotta stood beside Pablo de Noches, looking at the toilet tank. "Old-fashioned kind," said Pablo. "Norteamericano. Very popular for a while back when the Netherlands first became international."

She lifted the lid on the toilet tank. Very light. Plastic.

As they came out of the lavatory, the office manager who had been showing them around looked at her curiously. "There's not any kind of danger from using the toilets, is there?" she asked.

"No," said Sister Carlotta. "I just had to see it, that's all. It's Fleet business. I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about our visit here."

Of course, that almost guaranteed that she would talk about nothing else. But Sister Carlotta counted on it sounding like nothing more than strange gossip.

Whoever had run an organ farm in this building would not want to be discovered, and there was a lot of money in such evil businesses. That was how the devil rewarded his friends -- lots of money, up to the moment he betrayed them and left them to face the agony of hell alone.

Outside the building, she spoke again to Pablo. "He really hid in there?"

"He was very tiny," said Pablo de Noches. "He was crawling when I found him, but he was soaking wet up to his shoulder on one side, and his chest. I thought he peed himself, but he said no. Then he showed me the toilet. And he was red here, here, where he pressed against the mechanism."

"He was talking," she said.

"Not a lot. A few words. So tiny. I could not believe a child so small could talk."

"How long was he in there?"

Pablo shrugged. "Shriveled up skin like old lady. All over. Cold. I was thinking, he will die. Not warm water like a swimming pool. Cold. He shivered all night."

"I can't understand why he *didn't* die," said Sister Carlotta.

Pablo smiled. "No hay nada que Dios no puede hacer."

"True," she answered. "But that doesn't mean we can't figure out *how* God works his miracles. Or why."

Pablo shrugged. "God does what he does. I do my work and live, the best man I can be."

She squeezed his arm. "You took in a lost child and saved him from people who meant to kill him. God saw you do that and he loves you."

Pablo said nothing, but Sister Carlotta could guess what he was thinking -- how many sins, exactly, were washed away by that good act, and would it be enough to keep him out of hell?

"Good deeds do not wash away sins," said Sister Carlotta. "Solo el redentor puede limpiar su alma."

Pablo shrugged. Theology was not his skill.

"You don't do good deeds for yourself," said Sister Carlotta. "You do them because God is in you, and for those moments you are his hands and his feet, his eyes and his lips."

"I thought God was the baby. Jesus say, if you do it to this little one, you do it to me."

Sister Carlotta laughed. "God will sort out all the fine points in his own due time. It is enough that we try to serve him."

"He was so small," said Pablo. "But God was in him."

She bade him goodbye as he got out of the taxi in front of his apartment building.

Why did I have to see that toilet with my own eyes? My work with Bean is done. He left on the shuttle yesterday. Why can't I leave the matter alone?

Because he should have been dead, that's why. And after starving on the streets for all those years, even if he lived he was so malnourished he should have suffered serious mental damage. He should have been permanently retarded.

That was why she could not abandon the question of Bean's origin. Because maybe he **was** damaged. Maybe he **is** retarded. Maybe he started out so smart that he could lose half his intellect and still be the miraculous boy he is.

She thought of how St. Matthew kept saying that all the things that happened in Jesus' childhood, his mother treasured them in her heart. Bean is not Jesus, and I am not the Holy Mother. But he is a boy, and I have loved him as my son. What he did, no child of that age could do.

No child of less than a year, not yet walking by himself, could have such clear understanding of his danger that he would know to do the things that Bean did. Children that age often climbed out of their cribs, but they did not hide in a toilet tank for hours and then come out alive and ask for help. I can call it a miracle all I want, but I have to understand it. They use the dregs of the Earth in those organ farms. Bean has such extraordinary gifts that he could only have come from extraordinary parents.

And yet for all her research during the months that Bean lived with her, she had never found a single kidnapping that could possibly have been Bean. No abducted child. Not even an accident from which someone might have taken a surviving infant whose body was therefore never found. That wasn't proof -- not every baby that disappeared left a trace of his life in the newspapers, and not every newspaper was archived and available for a search on the nets. But Bean had to be the child of parents so brilliant that the world took note of them -- didn't he? Could a mind like his come from ordinary parents? Was that the miracle from which all other miracles flowed?

No matter how much Sister Carlotta tried to believe it, she could not. Bean was not what he seemed to be. He was in Battle School now, and there was a good chance he would end up someday as the commander of a great fleet. But what did anyone know about him? Was it possible that he was not a natural human being at all? That his extraordinary intelligence had been given him, not by God, but by someone or something else?

There was the question: If not God, then who could make such a child?

Sister Carlotta buried her face in her hands. Where did such thoughts come from? After all these years of searching, why did she have to keep doubting the one great success she had?

We have seen the beast of Revelation, she said silently. The Bugger, the Formic monster bringing destruction to the Earth, just as prophesied. We have seen the beast, and long ago Mazer Rackham and the human fleet, on the brink of defeat, slew that great dragon. But it will come again, and St. John the Revelator said that when it did, there would be a prophet who came with him.

No, no. Bean is good, a good-hearted boy. He is not any kind of devil, not the servant of the beast, just a boy of great gifts that God may have raised up to bless this world in the hour of its greatest peril. I know him as a mother knows her child. I am not wrong.

Yet when she got back to her room, she set her computer to work, searching now for something new. For reports from or about scientists who had been working, at least five years ago, on projects involving alterations in human DNA.

And while the search program was querying all the great indexes on the nets and sorting their replies into useful categories, Sister Carlotta went to the neat little pile of folded clothing waiting to be washed. She would not wash it after all. She put it in a plastic bag along with Bean's sheets and pillowcase, and sealed the bag. Bean had worn this clothing, slept on this bedding. His skin was in it, small bits of it. A few hairs. Maybe enough DNA for a serious analysis.

He was a miracle, yes, but she would find out just what the dimensions of this miracle might be. For her ministry had not been to save the children of the cruel streets of the cities of the world. Her ministry had been to help save the one species made in the image of God. That was still her ministry. And if there was something wrong with the child she had taken into her heart as a beloved son, she would find out about it, and give warning.

CHAPTER 7 -- EXPLORATION

"So this launch group was slow getting back to their barracks."

"There is a twenty-one-minute discrepancy."

"Is that a lot? I didn't even know this sort of thing was tracked."

"For safety. And to have an idea, in the event of emergency, where everyone is. Tracking the uniforms that departed from the mess hall and the uniforms that entered the barracks, we come up with an aggregate of twenty-one minutes. That could be twenty-one children loitering for exactly one minute, or one child for twenty-one minutes."

"That's very helpful. Am I supposed to ask them?"

"No! They aren't supposed to know that we track them by their uniforms. It isn't good for them to know how much we know about them."

"And how little."

"Little?"

"If it was one student, it wouldn't be good for him to know that our tracking methods don't tell us who it was."

"Ah. Good point. And ... actually, I came to you because I believe that it was one student only."

"Even though your data aren't clear?"

"Because of the arrival pattern. Spaced out in groups of two or three, a few solos. Just the way they left the mess hall. A little bit of clumping -- three solos become a threesome, two twos arrive as four -- but if there had been some kind of major distraction in the corridor, it would have caused major coalescing, a much larger group arriving at once after the disturbance ended."

"So. One student with twenty-one minutes unaccounted for."

"I thought you should at least be aware."

"What would he do with twenty-one minutes?"

"You know who it was?"

"I will, soon enough. Are the toilets tracked? Are we sure it wasn't somebody so nervous he went in to throw up his lunch?"

"Toilet entry and exit patterns were normal. In and out."

"Yes, I'll find out who it was. And keep watching the data for this launch group."

"So I was right to bring this to your attention?"

"Did you have any doubt of it?"

Bean slept lightly, listening, as he always did, waking twice that he remembered. He didn't get up, just lay there listening to the breathing of the others. Both times, there was a little whispering somewhere in the room. Always children's voices, no urgency about them, but the sound was enough to rouse Bean and kindle his attention, just for a moment till he was sure there was no danger.

He woke the third time when Dimak entered the room. Even before sitting up, Bean knew that's who it was, from the weight of his step, the sureness of his movement, the press of authority. Bean's eyes were open before Dimak spoke; he was on all fours, ready to move in any direction, before Dimak finished his first sentence.

"Naptime is over, boys and girls, time for work."

It was not about Bean. If Dimak knew what Bean had done after lunch and before their nap, he gave no sign. No immediate danger.

Bean sat on his bunk as Dimak instructed them in the use of their lockers and desks. Palm the wall beside the locker and it opens. Then turn on the desk and enter your name and a password.

Bean immediately palmed his own locker with his right hand, but did not palm the desk. Instead, he checked on Dimak -- busy helping another student near the door -- then scrambled to the unoccupied third bunk above his own and palmed *that* locker with his left hand. There was a desk inside that one, too. Quickly he turned on his own desk and typed in his name and a password. Bean. Achilles. Then he pulled out the other desk and turned it on. Name? Poke. Password? Carlotta.

He slipped the second desk back into the locker and closed the door, then tossed his first desk down onto his own bunk and slipped down after it. He did not look around to see if anyone noticed him. If they did, they'd say something soon enough; visibly checking around would merely call attention to him and make people suspect him who would not otherwise have noticed what he did.

Of course the adults would know what he had done. In fact, Dimak was certainly noticing already, when one child complained that his locker wouldn't open. So the station computer knew how many students there were and stopped opening lockers when the right total had been opened. But Dimak did not turn and demand to know who had opened two lockers. Instead, he pressed his own palm against the last student's locker. It popped open. He closed it again, and now it responded to the student's palm.

So they were going to let him have his second locker, his second desk, his second identity. No doubt they would watch him with special interest to see what he did with it. He would have to make a point of fiddling with it now and then, clumsily, so they'd think they knew what he wanted a second identity for. Maybe some kind of prank. Or to write down secret thoughts. That would be fun -- Sister Carlotta was always prying after his secret thoughts, and no doubt these teachers would, too. Whatever he wrote, they'd eat it up.

Therefore they wouldn't be looking for his truly private work, which he would perform on his own desk. Or, if it was risky, on the desk of one of the boys across from him, both of whose passwords he had carefully noticed and memorized. Dimak was lecturing them about protecting their desks at all times, but it was inevitable that kids would be careless, and desks would be left lying around.

For now, though, Bean would do nothing riskier than what he had already done. The teachers had their own reasons for letting him do it. What mattered is that they not know his own.

After all, he didn't know himself. It was like the vent -- if he thought of something that might get him some advantage later, he did it.

Dimak went on talking about how to submit homework, the directory of teachers' names, and the fantasy game that was on every desk. "You are not to spend study time playing the game," he said. "But when your studies are done, you are permitted a few minutes to explore."

Bean understood at once. The teachers *wanted* the students to play the game, and knew that the best way to encourage it was to put strict limits on it ... and then not enforce them. A game-Sister Carlotta had used games to try to analyze Bean from time to time. So Bean always turned them into the same game: Try to figure out what Sister Carlotta is trying to learn from the way I play this game.

In this case, though, Bean figured that anything he did with the game would tell them things that he didn't want them to know about him. So he would not play at all, unless they compelled him. And maybe not even then. It was one thing to joust with Sister Carlotta; here, they no doubt had real experts, and Bean was not going to give them a chance to learn more about him than he knew himself.

Dimak took them on the tour, showing them most of what Bean had already seen. The other kids went ape over the game room. Bean did not so much as glance at the vent into which he had climbed, though he did make it a point to fiddle with the game he had watched the bigger boys play, figuring out how the controls worked and verifying that his tactics could, in fact, be carried out.

They did a workout in the gym, in which Bean immediately began working on the exercises that he thought he'd need -- one-armed pushups and pullups being the most important, though they had to get a stool for him to stand on in order to reach the lowest chinning bar. No problem. Soon enough he'd be able to jump to reach it. With all the food they were giving him, he could build up strength quickly.

And they seemed grimly determined to pack food into him at an astonishing rate. After the gym they showered, and then it was suppertime. Bean wasn't even hungry yet, and they piled enough food onto his tray to feed his whole crew back in Rotterdam. Bean immediately headed for a couple of the kids who had whined about their small portions and, without even asking permission, scraped his excess onto their trays. When one of them tried to talk to him about it, Bean just put his finger to his lips. In answer, the boy grinned. Bean still ended up with more food than he wanted, but when he turned in his tray, it was scraped clean. The nutritionist would be happy. It remained to be seen if the janitors would report the food Bean left on the floor.

Free time. Bean headed back to the game room, hoping that tonight he'd actually see the famous Ender Wiggin. If he was there, he would no doubt be the center of a group of admirers. But at the center of the groups he saw were only the ordinary prestige-hungry clique-formers who thought they were leaders and so would follow their group anywhere in order to maintain that delusion. No way could any of them be Ender Wiggin. And Bean was not about to ask.

Instead, he tried his hand at several games. Each time, though, the moment he lost for the first time, other kids would push him out of the way. It was an interesting set of social rules. The students knew that even the shortest, greenest launchy was entitled to his turn -- but the moment a turn ended, so did the protection of the rule. And they were rougher in shoving him than they needed to be, so the message was clear -- you shouldn't have been using that game and making me wait. Just like the food lines at the charity kitchens in Rotterdam -- except that absolutely nothing that mattered was at stake.

That was interesting, to find that it wasn't hunger that caused children to become bullies on the street. The bulliness was already in the child, and whatever the stakes were, they would find a way to act as they needed to act. If it was about food, then the children who lost would die; if it was about games, though, the bullies did not hesitate to be just as intrusive and send the same message. Do what I want, or pay for it.

Intelligence and education, which all these children had, apparently didn't make any important difference in human nature. Not that Bean had really thought they would.

Nor did the low stakes make any difference in Bean's response to the bullies. He simply complied without complaint and took note of who the bullies were. Not that he had any intention of punishing them or of avoiding them, either. He would simply remember who acted as a bully and take that into account when he was in a situation where that information might be important.

No point in getting emotional about anything. Being emotional didn't help with survival. What mattered was to learn everything, analyze the situation, choose a course of action, and then move boldly. Know, think, choose, do. There was no place in that list for "feel." Not that Bean didn't have feelings. He simply refused to think about them or dwell on them or let them influence his decisions, when anything important was at stake.

"He's even smaller than Ender was."

Again, again. Bean was so tired of hearing that.

"Don't talk about that hijo de puta to me, bicho."

Bean perked up. Ender had an enemy. Bean was wondering when he'd spot one, for someone who was first in the standings *had* to have provoked something besides admiration. Who said it? Bean drifted nearer to the group the conversation had come from. The same voice came up again. Again. And then he knew: That one was the boy who had called Ender an hijo de puta.

He had the silhouette of some kind of lizard on his uniform. And a single triangle on his sleeve. None of the boys around him had the triangle. All were focused on him. Captain of the team?

Bean needed more information. He tugged on the sleeve of a boy standing near him.

"What," said the boy, annoyed.

"Who's that boy there?" asked Bean. "The team captain with the lizard."

"It's a salamander, pinhead. Salamander *army*. And he's the *commander*."

Teams are called armies. Commander is the triangle rank. "What's his name?"

"Bonzo Madrid. And he's an even bigger asshole than you." The boy shrugged himself away from Bean.

So Bonzo Madrid was bold enough to declare his hatred for Ender Wiggin, but a kid who was not in Bonzo's army had contempt for *him* in turn and wasn't afraid to say so to a stranger. Good to know. The only enemy Ender had, so far, was contemptible.

But ... contemptible as Bonzo might be, he was a commander. Which meant it was possible to become a commander without being the kind of boy that everybody respected. So what was their standard of judgment, in assigning command in this war game that shaped the life of Battle School?

More to the point, how do I get a command?

That was the first moment that Bean realized that he even had such a goal. Here in Battle School, he had arrived with the highest scores in his launch group -- but he was the smallest and youngest and had been isolated even further by the deliberate actions of his teacher, making him a target of resentment. Somehow, in the midst of all this, Bean had made the decision that this would not be like Rotterdam. He was not going to live on the fringes, inserting himself only when it was absolutely essential for his own survival. As rapidly as possible, he was going to put himself in place to command an army.

Achilles had ruled because he was brutal, because he was willing to kill. That would always trump intelligence, when the intelligent one was physically smaller and had no strong allies. But here, the bullies only shoved and spoke rudely. The adults controlled things tightly and so brutality would not prevail, not in the assignment of command. Intelligence, then, had a chance to win out. Eventually, Bean might not have to live under the control of stupid people.

If this was what Bean wanted -- and why not try for it, as long as some more important goal didn't come along first? -- then he had to learn how the teachers made their decisions about command. Was it solely based on performance in classes? Bean doubted it. The International Fleet had to have smarter people than that running this school. The fact that they had that fantasy game on every desk suggested that they were looking at personality as well. Character. In the end, Bean suspected, character mattered more than intelligence. In Bean's litany of survival -- know, think, choose, do -- intelligence only mattered in the first three, and was the decisive factor only in the second one. The teachers knew that.

Maybe I *should* play the game, thought Bean.

Then: Not yet. Let's see what happens when I don't play.

At the same time he came to another conclusion he did not even know he had been concerned about. He would talk to Bonzo Madrid.

Bonzo was in the middle of a computer game, and he was obviously the kind of person who thought of anything unexpected as an affront to his dignity. That meant that for Bean to accomplish what he wanted, he could not approach Bonzo in a cringing way, like the suckups who surrounded him as he played, commending him even for his stupid mistakes in game-play.

Instead, Bean pushed close enough to see when Bonzo's onscreen character died -- again. "Señor [Senor] Madrid, puedo hablar convozco?" The Spanish came to mind easily enough -- he had listened to Pablo de Noches talk to fellow immigrants in Rotterdam who visited his apartment, and on the telephone to family members back in Valencia. And using Bonzo's native language had the desired effect. He didn't ignore Bean. He turned and glared at him.

"What do you want, bichinho?" Brazilian slang was common in Battle School, and Bonzo apparently felt no need to assert the purity of his Spanish.

Bean looked him in the eye, even though he was about twice Bean's height, and said, "People keep saying that I remind them of Ender Wiggin, and you're the only person around here who doesn't seem to worship him. I want to know the truth."

The way the other kids fell silent told Bean that he had judged aright -- it was dangerous to ask Bonzo about Ender Wiggin. Dangerous, but that's why Bean had phrased his request so carefully.

"Damn right I don't worship the farteating insubordinate traitor, but why should I tell *you* about him?"

"Because you won't lie to me," said Bean, though he actually thought it was obvious Bonzo would probably lie outrageously in order to make himself look like the hero of what was obviously a story of his own humiliation at Ender's hands. "And if people are going to keep comparing me to the guy, I've got to know what he really is. I don't want to get iced because I do it all wrong here. You don't owe me nothing, but when you're small like me, you gots to have somebody who can tell you the stuff you gots to know to survive." Bean wasn't quite sure of the slang here yet, but what he knew, he used.

One of the other kids chimed in, as if Bean had written him a script and he was right on cue. "Get lost, launchy, Bonzo Madrid doesn't have time to change diapers."

Bean rounded on him and said fiercely, "I can't ask the teachers, they don't tell the truth. If Bonzo don't talk to me who I ask then? *You*? You don't know zits from zeroes."

It was pure Sergeant, that spiel, and it worked. Everybody laughed at the kid who had tried to brush him off, and Bonzo joined in, then put a hand on Bean's shoulder. "I'll tell you what I know, kid, it's about time somebody wanted to hear the truth about that walking rectum." To the kid that

Bean had just fronted, Bonzo said, "Maybe you better finish my game, it's the only way you'll ever get to play at that level."

Bean could hardly believe a commander would say such a pointlessly offensive thing to one of his own subordinates. But the boy swallowed his anger and grinned and nodded and said, "That's right, Bonzo," and turned to the game, as instructed. A real suckup.

By chance Bonzo led him to stand right in front of the wall vent where Bean had been stuck only a few hours before. Bean gave it no more than a glance.

"Let me tell you about Ender. He's all about beating the other guy. Not just winning -- he has to beat the other guy into the ground or he isn't happy. No rules for him. You give him a plain order, and he acts like he's going to obey it, but if he sees a way to make himself look good and all he has to do is disobey the order, well, all I can say is, I pity whoever has him in his army."

"He used to be Salamander?"

Bonzo's face reddened. "He wore a uniform with our colors, his name was on my roster, but he was **never** Salamander. The minute I saw him, I knew he was trouble. That cocky look on his face, like he thinks the whole Battle School was made just to give him a place to strut. I wasn't having it. I put in to transfer him the second he showed up and I refused to let him practice with us, I knew he'd learn our whole system and then take it to some other army and use what he learned from me to stick it to my army as fast as he could. I'm not stupid!"

In Bean's experience, that was a sentence never uttered except to prove its own inaccuracy.

"So he didn't follow orders."

"It's more than that. He goes crying like a baby to the teachers about how I don't let him practice, even though they **know** I've put in to transfer him out, but he whines and they let him go in to the battleroom during freetime and practice alone. Only he starts getting kids from his launch group and then kids from other armies, and they go in there as if he was their commander, doing what he tells them. That really pissed off a lot of us. And the teachers always give that little suckup whatever he wants, so when we commanders **demanded** that they bar our soldiers from practicing with him, they just said, 'Freetime is **free**,' but everything is part of the game, sabe? Everything, so they're letting him cheat, and every lousy soldier and sneaky little bastard goes to Ender for those freetime practices so every army's system is compromised, sabe? You plan your strategy for a game and you never know if your plans aren't being told to a soldier in the enemy army the second they come out of your mouth, sabe?"

Sabe sabe sabe. Bean wanted to shout back at him, Si, yo **s,** [**se**], but you couldn't show impatience with Bonzo. Besides, this was all fascinating. Bean was getting a pretty good picture of how this army game shaped the life of Battle School. It gave the teachers a chance to see not only how the kids handled command, but also how they responded to incompetent commanders like Bonzo. Apparently, he had decided to make Ender the goat of his army, only Ender refused to take it. This Ender Wiggin was the kind of kid who got it that the teachers ran everything and used them

by getting that practice room. He didn't ask them to get Bonzo to stop picking on him, he asked them for an alternate way to train himself. Smart. The teachers had to love that, and Bonzo couldn't do a thing about it.

Or could he?

"What did you do about it?"

"It's what we're going to do. I'm about fed up. If the teachers won't stop it, somebody else will have to, neh?" Bonzo grinned wickedly. "So I'd stay out of Ender Wiggin's freetime practice if I were you."

"Is he really number one in the standings?"

"Number one is piss," said Bonzo. "He's dead last in loyalty. There's not a commander who wants him in his army."

"Thanks," said Bean. "Only now it kind of pisses me off that people say I'm like him."

"Just because you're small. They made him a soldier when he was still way too young. Don't let them do that to you, and you'll be OK, sabe?"

"Ahora s, [se]," said Bean. He gave Bonzo his biggest grin.

Bonzo smiled back and clapped him on his shoulder. "You'll do OK. When you get big enough, if I haven't graduated yet, maybe you'll be in Salamander."

If they leave you in command of an army for another day, it's just so that the other students can learn how to make the best of taking orders from a higher-ranking idiot. "I'm not going to be a soldier for a *long* time," said Bean.

"Work hard," said Bonzo. "It pays off." He clapped him on the shoulder yet again, then walked off with a big grin on his face. Proud of having helped a little kid. Glad to have convinced somebody of his own twisted version of dealing with Ender Wiggin, who was obviously smarter farting than Bonzo was talking.

And there was a threat of violence against the kids who practiced with Ender Wiggin in freetime. That was good to know. Bean would have to decide now what to do with that information. Get the warning to Ender? Warn the teachers? Say nothing? Be there to watch?

Freetime ended. The game room cleared out as everyone headed to their barracks for the time officially dedicated to independent study. Quiet time, in other words. For most of the kids in Bean's launch group, though, there was nothing to study -- they hadn't had any classes yet. So for tonight, study meant playing the fantasy game on their desks and bantering with each other to assert position. Everybody's desk popped up with the suggestion that they could write letters home to their

families. Some of the kids chose to do that. And, no doubt, they all assumed that's what Bean was doing.

But he was not. He signed on to his first desk as Poke and discovered that, as he suspected, it didn't matter which desk he used, it was the name and password that determined everything. He would never have to pull that second desk out of its locker. Using the Poke identity, he wrote a journal entry. This was not unexpected -- "diary" was one of the options on the desk.

What should he be? A whiner? "Everybody pushed me out of the way in the game room just because I'm little, it isn't fair!" A baby? "I miss Sister Carlotta so so so much, I wish I could be in my own room back in Rotterdam." Ambitious? "I'll get the best scores on everything, they'll see."

In the end, he decided on something a little more subtle.

{What would Achilles do if he were me? Of course he's not little, but with his bad leg it's almost the same thing. Achilles always knew how to wait and not show them anything. That's what I've got to do, too. Just wait and see what pops up. Nobody's going to want to be my friend at first. But after a while, they'll get used to me and we'll start sorting ourselves out in the classes. The first ones who'll let me get close will be the weaker ones, but that's not a problem. You build your crew based on loyalty first, that's what Achilles did, build loyalty and train them to obey. You work with what you have, and go from there.}

Let them stew on *that*. Let them think he was trying to turn Battle School into the street life that he knew. They'd believe it. And in the meantime, he'd have time to learn as much as he could about how Battle School actually worked, and come up with a strategy that actually fit the situation.

Dimak came in one last time before lights out. "Your desks keep working after lights out," he said, "but if you use it when you're supposed to be sleeping, we'll know about it and we'll know what you're doing. So it better be important, or you go on the pig list."

Most of the kids put their desks away; a couple of them defiantly kept them out. Bean didn't care either way. He had other things to think about. Plenty of time for the desk tomorrow, or the next day.

He lay in the near-darkness -- apparently the babies here had to have a little light so they could find their way to the toilet without tripping -- and listened to the sounds around him, learning what they meant. A few whispers, a few shushes. The breathing of boys and girls as, one by one, they fell asleep. A few even had light child-snores. But under those human sounds, the windsound from the air system, and random clicking and distant voices, sounds of the flexing of a station rotating into and out of sunlight, the sound of adults working through the night.

This place was so expensive. Huge, to hold thousands of kids and teachers and staff and crew. As expensive as a ship of the fleet, surely. And all of it just to train little children. The adults may keep the kids wrapped up in a game, but it was serious business to *them*. This program of training children for war wasn't just some wacko educational theory gone mad, though Sister Carlotta was probably right when she said that a lot of people thought it was. The I.F. wouldn't maintain it at this

level if it weren't expected to give serious results. So these kids snoring and soughing and whispering their way into the darkness, they really mattered.

They expect results from me. It's not just a party up here, where you come for the food and then do what you want. They really do want to make commanders out of us. And since Battle School has been going for a while, they probably have proof that it works -- kids who already graduated and went on to compile a decent service record. That's what I've got to keep in mind. Whatever the system is here, it works.

A different sound. Not regular breathing. Jagged little breaths. An occasional gasp. And then ... a sob.

Crying. Some boy was crying himself to sleep.

In the nest, Bean had heard some of the kids cry in their sleep, or as they neared sleep. Crying because they were hungry or injured or sick or cold. But what did these kids have to cry about here?

Another set of soft sobs joined the first.

They're homesick, Bean realized. They've never been away from mommy and daddy before, and it's getting to them.

Bean just didn't get it. He didn't feel that way about anybody. You just live in the place you're in, you don't worry about where you used to be or where you wish you were, *here* is where you are and here's where you've got to find a way to survive and lying in bed boo-hooing doesn't help much with *that*.

No problem, though. Their weakness just puts me farther ahead. One less rival on my road to becoming a commander.

Is that how Ender Wiggin thought about things? Bean recalled everything he had learned about Ender so far. The kid was resourceful. He didn't openly fight with Bonzo, but he didn't put up with his stupid decisions, either. It was fascinating to Bean, because on the street the one rule he knew for sure was, you don't stick your neck out unless your throat's about to be slit anyway. If you have a stupid crew boss, you don't tell him he's stupid, you don't show him he's stupid, you just go along and keep your head down. That's how kids survived.

When he had to, Bean had taken a bold risk. Got himself onto Poke's crew that way. But that was about food. That was about not dying. Why did Ender take such a risk when there was nothing at stake but his standing in the war game?

Maybe Ender knew something Bean didn't know. Maybe there was some reason why the game was more important than it seemed.

Or maybe Ender was one of those kids who just couldn't stand to lose, ever. The kind of kid who's for the team only as long as the team is taking him where he wants to go, and if it isn't, then it's every man for himself. That's what Bonzo thought. But Bonzo was stupid.

Once again, Bean was reminded that there were things he didn't understand. Ender wasn't doing every man for himself. He didn't practice alone. He opened his free time practice to other kids. Launchies, too, not just kids who could do things for him. Was it possible he did that just because it was a decent thing to do?

The way Poke had offered herself to Achilles in order to save Bean's life?

No, Bean didn't *know* that's what she did, he didn't know that's why she died.

But the possibility was there. And in his heart, he believed it. That was the thing he had always despised about her. She acted tough but she was soft at heart. And yet ... that softness was what saved his life. And try as he might, he couldn't get himself to take the too-bad-for-her attitude that prevailed on the street. She listened to me when I talked to her, she did a hard thing that risked her own life on the chance that it would lead to a better life for all her crew. Then she offered me a place at her table and, in the end, she put herself between me and danger. Why?

What was this great secret? Did Ender know it? How did he learn it? Why couldn't Bean figure it out for himself? Try as he might, though, he couldn't understand Poke. He couldn't understand Sister Carlotta, either. Couldn't understand the arms she held him with, the tears she shed over him. Didn't they understand that no matter how much they loved him, he was still a separate person, and doing good for him didn't improve their lives in any way?

If Ender Wiggin has this weakness, then I will not be anything like him. I am not going to sacrifice myself for anybody. And the beginning of that is that I refuse to lie in my bed and cry for Poke floating there in the water with her throat slit, or boo-hoo because Sister Carlotta isn't asleep in the next room.

He wiped his eyes, rolled over, and willed his body to relax and go to sleep. Moments later, he was dozing in that light, easy-to-rouse sleep. Long before morning his pillow would be dry.

He dreamed, as human beings always dream -- random firings of memory and imagination that the unconscious mind tries to put together into coherent stories. Bean rarely paid attention to his own dreams, rarely even remembered that he dreamed at all. But this morning he awoke with a clear image in his mind.

Ants, swarming from a crack in the sidewalk. Little black ants. And larger red ants, doing battle with them, destroying them. All of them scurrying. None of them looking up to see the human shoe coming down to stamp the life out of them.

When the shoe came back up, what was crushed under it was not ant bodies at all. They were the bodies of children, the urchins from the streets of Rotterdam. All of Achilles' family. Bean himself -- he recognized his own face, rising above his flattened body, peering around for one last glimpse at the world before death.

Above him loomed the shoe that killed him. But now it was worn on the end of a bugger's leg, and the bugger laughed and laughed.

Bean remembered the laughing bugger when he awoke, and remembered the sight of all those children crushed flat, of his own body mashed like gum under a shoe. The meaning was obvious: While we children play at war, the buggers are coming to crush us. We must look above the level of our private struggles and keep in mind the greater enemy.

Except that Bean rejected that interpretation of his own dream the moment he thought of it. Dreams have no meaning at all, he reminded himself. And even if they do mean something, it's a meaning that reveals what I feel, what I fear, not some deep abiding truth. So the buggers are coming. So they might crush us all like ants under their feet. What's that to me? My business right now is to keep Bean alive, to advance myself to a position where I might be useful in the war against the buggers. There's nothing I can do to stop them right now.

Here's the lesson Bean took from his own dream: Don't be one of the scurrying, struggling ants.

Be the shoe.

Sister Carlotta had reached a dead end in her search of the nets. Plenty of information on human genetics studies, but nothing like what she was looking for.

So she sat there, doodling with a nuisance game on her desk while trying to think of what to do next and wondering why she was bothering to look into Bean's beginnings at all, when the secure message arrived from the I.F. Since the message would erase itself a minute after arrival, to be re-sent every minute until it was read by the recipient, she opened it at once and keyed in her first and second passwords.

{FROM: Col.Graff@BattleSchool.IF

TO: Ss.Carlotta@SpecAsn.RemCon.IF

RE: Achilles

Please report all info on "Achilles" as known to subject.}

As usual, a message so cryptic that it didn't actually have to be encrypted, though of course it had been. This was a secure message, wasn't it? So why not just use the kid's name. "Please report on 'Achilles' as known to *Bean*."

Somehow Bean had given them the name Achilles, and under circumstances such that they didn't want to ask him directly to explain. So it had to be in something he had written. A letter to her? She felt a little thrill of hope and then scoffed at her own feelings. She knew perfectly well that mail from the kids in Battle School was almost never passed along, and besides, the chance of Bean actually writing to her was remote. But they had the name somehow, and wanted to know from her what it meant.

The trouble is, she didn't want to give him that information without knowing what it would mean for Bean.

So she prepared an equally cryptic reply:

{Will reply by secure conference only.}

Of course this would infuriate Graff, but that was just a perk. Graff was so used to having power far beyond his rank that it would be good for him to have a reminder that all obedience was voluntary and ultimately depended on the free choice of the person receiving the orders. And she would obey, in the end. She just wanted to make sure Bean was not going to suffer from the information. If they knew he had been so closely involved with both the perpetrator and the victim of a murder, they might drop him from the program. And even if she was sure it would be all right to talk about it, she might be able to get a quid pro quo.

It took another hour before the secure conference was set up, and when Graff's head appeared in the display above her computer, he was not happy. "What game are you playing today, Sister Carlotta?"

"You've been putting on weight, Colonel Graff. That's not healthy."

"Achilles," he said.

"Man with a bad heel," she said. "Killed Hector and dragged his body around the gates of Troy. Also had a thing for a captive girl named Briseis."

"You know that's not the context."

"I know more than that. I know you must have got the name from something Bean wrote, because the name is not pronounced uh-KILL-eez, it's pronounced ah-SHEEL. French."

"Someone local there."

"Dutch is the native language here, though Fleet Common has just about driven it out as anything but a curiosity."

"Sister Carlotta, I don't appreciate your wasting the expense of this conference."

"And I'm not going to talk about it until I know why you need to know."

Graff took a few deep breaths. She wondered if his mother taught him to count to ten, or if, perhaps, he had learned to bite his tongue from dealing with nuns in Catholic school.

"We are trying to make sense of something Bean wrote."

"Let me see it and I'll help you as I can."

"He's not your responsibility anymore, Sister Carlotta," said Graff.

"Then why are you asking me about him? He's your responsibility, yes? So I can get back to work, yes?"

Graff sighed and did something with his hands, out of sight in the display. Moments later the text of Bean's diary entry appeared on her display below and in front of Graff's face. She read it, smiling slightly.

"Well?" asked Graff.

"He's doing a number on you, Colonel."

"What do you mean?"

"He knows you're going to read it. He's misleading you."

"You *know* this?"

"Achilles might indeed be providing him with an example, but not a good one. Achilles once betrayed someone that Bean valued highly."

"Don't be vague, Sister Carlotta."

"I wasn't vague. I told you precisely what I wanted you to know. Just as Bean told you what he wanted you to hear. I can promise you that his diary entries will only make sense to you if you recognize that he is writing these things for you, with the intent to deceive."

"Why, because he didn't keep a diary down there?"

"Because his memory is perfect," said Sister Carlotta. "He would never, never commit his real thoughts to a readable form. He keeps his own counsel. Always. You will never find a document written by him that is not meant to be read."

"Would it make a difference if he was writing it under another identity? Which he thinks we don't know about?"

"But you *do* know about it, and so he *knows* you will know about it, so the other identity is there only to confuse you, and it's working."

"I forgot, you think this kid is smarter than God."

"I'm not worried that you don't accept my evaluation. The better you know him, the more you'll realize that I'm right. You'll even come to believe those test scores."

"What will it take to get you to help me with this?" asked Graff.

"Try telling me the truth about what this information will mean to Bean."

"He's got his primary teacher worried. He disappeared for twenty-one minutes on the way back from lunch -- we have a witness who talked to him on a deck where he had no business, and that still doesn't account for that last seventeen minutes of his absence. He doesn't play with his desk --"

"You think setting up false identities and writing phony diary entries isn't playing?"

"There's a diagnostic / therapeutic game that all the children play -- he hasn't even signed on yet."

"He'll know that the game is psychological, and he won't play it until he knows what it will cost him."

"Did you teach him that attitude of default hostility?"

"No, I learned it from him."

"Tell me straight. Based on this diary entry, it looks as though he plans to set up his own crew here, as if this were the street. We need to know about this Achilles so we'll know what he actually has in mind."

"He plans no such thing," said Sister Carlotta.

"You say it so forcefully, but without giving me a single reason to trust your conclusion."

"You called *me*, remember?"

"That's not enough, Sister Carlotta. Your opinions on this boy are suspect."

"He would never emulate Achilles. He would never write his true plans where you could find them. He does not build crews, he joins them and uses them and moves on without a backward glance."

"So investigating this Achilles won't give us a clue about Bean's future behavior?"

"Bean prides himself on not holding grudges. He thinks they're counterproductive. But at some level, I believe he wrote about Achilles specifically because you would read what he wrote and would want to know more about Achilles, and if you investigated him you would discover a very bad thing that Achilles did."

"To Bean?"

"To a friend of his."

"So he *is* capable of having friendships?"

"The girl who saved his life here on the street."

"And what's *her* name?"

"Poke. But don't bother looking for her. She's dead."

Graff thought about that a moment. "Is that the bad thing Achilles did?"

"Bean has reason to believe so, though I don't think it would be evidence enough to convict in court. And as I said, all these things may be unconscious. I don't think Bean would knowingly try to get even with Achilles, or anybody else, for that matter, but he might hope you'd do it for him."

"You're still holding back, but I have no choice but to trust your judgment, do I?"

"I promise you that Achilles is a dead end."

"And if you think of a reason why it might not be so dead after all?"

"I want your program to succeed, Colonel Graff, even more than I want Bean to succeed. My priorities are not skewed by the fact that I do care about the child. I really have told you everything now. But I hope you'll help me also."

"Information isn't traded in the I.F., Sister Carlotta. It flows from those who have it to those who need it."

"Let me tell you what I want, and you decide if I need it."

"Well?"

"I want to know of any illegal or top secret projects involving the alteration of the human genome in the past ten years."

Graff looked off into the distance. "It's too soon for you to be off on a new project, isn't it. So this is the same old project. This is about Bean."

"He came from somewhere."

"You mean his mind came from somewhere."

"I mean the whole package. I think you're going to end up relying on this boy, betting all our lives on him, and I think you need to know what's going on in his genes. It's a poor second to knowing what's happening in his mind, but that, I suspect, will always be out of reach for you."

"You sent him up here, and then you tell me something like this. Don't you realize that you have just guaranteed that I will never let him move to the top of our selection pool?"

"You say that now, when you've only had him for a day," said Sister Carlotta. "He'll grow on you."

"He damn well better not shrink or he'd get sucked away by the air system."

"Tut-tut, Colonel Graff."

"Sorry, Sister," he answered.

"Give me a high enough clearance and I'll do the search myself."

"No," he said. "But I'll get summaries sent to you."

She knew that they would give her only as much information as they thought she should have. But when he tried to fob her off with useless drivel, she'd deal with that problem, too. Just as she would try to get to Achilles before the I.F. found him. Get him away from the streets and into a school. Under another name. Because if the I.F. found him, in all likelihood they would test him -- or find her scores on him. If they tested him, they would fix his foot and bring him up to Battle School. And she had promised Bean that he would never have to face Achilles again.

CHAPTER 8 -- GOOD STUDENT

"He doesn't play the fantasy game at *all*?"

"He has never so much as chosen a figure, let alone come through the portal."

"It's not possible that he hasn't discovered it."

"He reset the preferences on his desk so that the invitation no longer pops up."

"From which you conclude ..."

"He knows it isn't a game. He doesn't want us analyzing the workings of his mind."

"And yet he wants us to advance him."

"I don't know that. He buries himself in his studies. For three months he's been getting perfect scores on every test. But he only reads the lesson material once. His study is on other subjects of his own choosing."

"Such as?"

"Vauban."

"Seventeenth-century fortifications? What is he *thinking*?"

"You see the problem?"

"How does he get along with the other children?"

"I think the classic description is 'loner.' He is polite. He volunteers nothing. He asks only what he's interested in. The kids in his launch group think he's strange. They know he scores better than them on everything, but they don't hate him. They treat him like a force of nature. No friends, but no enemies."

"That's important, that they don't hate him. They should, if he stays aloof like that."

"I think it's a skill he learned on the street -- to turn away anger. He never gets angry himself. Maybe that's why the teasing about his size stopped."

"Nothing that you're telling me suggests that he has command potential."

"If you think he's trying to show command potential and failing at it, then you're right."

"So ... what do you think he's doing?"

"Analyzing us."

"Gathering information without giving any. Do you really think he's that sophisticated?"

"He stayed alive on the street."

"I think it's time for you to probe a little."

"And let him know that his reticence bothers us?"

"If he's as clever as you think, he already knows."

Bean didn't mind being dirty. He had gone years without bathing, after all. A few days didn't bother him. And if other people minded, they kept their opinions to themselves. Let them add it to the gossip about him. Smaller and younger than Ender! Perfect scores on every test! Stinks like a pig!

That shower time was precious. That's when he could sign on to his desk as one of the boys bunking near him -- while they were showering. They were naked, wearing only towels to the shower, so their uniforms weren't tracking them. During that time Bean could sign on and explore the system without letting the teachers know that he was learning the tricks of the system. It tipped his hand, just a little, when he altered the preferences so he didn't have to face that stupid invitation to play their mind game every time he changed tasks on his desk. But that wasn't a very difficult hack, and he decided they wouldn't be particularly alarmed that he'd figured it out.

So far, Bean had found only a few really useful things, but he felt as though he was on the verge of breaking through more important walls. He knew that there was a virtual system that the students were meant to hack through. He had heard the legends about how Ender (of course) had hacked the system on his first day and signed on as God, but he knew that while Ender might have been unusually quick about it, he wasn't doing anything that wasn't expected of bright, ambitious students.

Bean's first achievement was to find the way the teachers' system tracked student computer activity. By avoiding the actions that were automatically reported to the teachers, he was able to create a private file area that they wouldn't see unless they were deliberately looking for it. Then, whenever he found something interesting while signed on as someone else, he would remember the location, then go and download the information into his secure area and work on it at his leisure -- while his desk reported that he was reading works from the library. He actually read those works, of course, but far more quickly than his desk reported.

With all that preparation, Bean expected to make real progress. But far too quickly he ran into the firewalls -- information the system had to have but wouldn't yield. He found several workarounds. For instance, he couldn't find any maps of the whole station, only of the student-accessible areas, and those were always diagrammatic and cute, deliberately out of scale. But he did find a series of emergency maps in a program that would automatically display them on the walls of the corridors in the event of a pressure-loss emergency, showing the nearest safety locks. These maps were to scale, and by combining them into a single map in his secure area, he was able to create a schema of the whole station. Nothing was labeled except the locks, of course, but he learned of the existence of a parallel system of corridors on either side of the student area. The station must be not one but three parallel wheels, cross-linked at many points. That's where the teachers and staff lived, where the life support was located, the communications with the Fleet. The bad news was that they had separate air-circulation systems. The ductwork in one would not lead him to either of the others. Which meant that while he could probably spy on anything going on in the student wheel, the other wheels were out of reach.

Even within the student wheel, however, there were plenty of secret places to explore. The students had access to four decks, plus the gym below A-Deck and the battleroom above D-Deck.

There were actually nine decks, however, two below A-Deck and three above D. Those spaces had to be used for something. And if they thought it was worth hiding it from the students, Bean figured it was worth exploring.

And he would have to start exploring soon. His exercise was making him stronger, and he was staying lean by not overeating -- it was unbelievable how much food they tried to force on him, and they kept increasing his portions, probably because the previous servings hadn't caused him to gain as much weight as they wanted him to gain. But what he could not control was the increase in his height. The ducts would be impassable for him before too long -- if they weren't already. Yet using the air system to get him access to the hidden decks was not something he could do during showers. It would mean losing sleep. So he kept putting it off -- one day wouldn't make that much difference.

Until the morning when Dimak came into the barracks first thing in the morning and announced that everyone was to change his password immediately, with his back turned to the rest of the room, and was to tell no one what the new password was. "Never type it in where anyone can see," he said.

"Somebody's been using other people's passwords?" asked a kid, his tone suggesting that he thought this an appalling idea. Such dishonor! Bean wanted to laugh.

"It's required of all I.F. personnel, so you might as well develop the habit now," said Dimak. "Anyone found using the same password for more than a week will go on the pig list."

But Bean could only assume that they had caught on to what he was doing. That meant they had probably looked back into his probing for the past months and knew pretty much what he had found out. He signed on and purged his secure file area, on the chance that they hadn't actually found it yet. Everything he really needed there, he had already memorized. He would never rely on the desk again for anything his memory could hold.

Stripping and wrapping his towel around him, Bean headed for the showers with the others. But Dimak stopped him at the door.

"Let's talk," he said.

"What about my shower?" asked Bean.

"Suddenly you care about cleanliness?" asked Dimak.

So Bean expected to be chewed out for stealing passwords. Instead, Dimak sat beside him on a lower bunk near the door and asked him far more general questions. "How are you getting on here?"

"Fine."

"I know your test scores are good, but I'm concerned that you aren't making many friends among the other kids."

"I've got a lot of friends."

"You mean you know a lot of people's names and don't quarrel with anybody."

Bean shrugged. He didn't like this line of questioning any better than he would have liked an inquiry into his computer use.

"Bean, the system here was designed for a reason. There are a lot of factors that go into our decisions concerning a student's ability to command. The classwork is an important part of that. But so is leadership."

"Everybody here is just full of leadership ability, right?"

Dimak laughed. "Well, that's true, you can't all be leaders at once."

"I'm about as big as a three-year-old," said Bean. "I don't think a lot of kids are eager to start saluting me."

"But you could be building networks of friendship. The other kids are. You don't."

"I guess I don't have what it takes to be a commander."

Dimak raised an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting you **want** to be iced?"

"Do my test scores look like I'm trying to fail?"

"What **do** you want?" asked Dimak. "You don't play the games the other kids play. Your exercise program is weird, even though you know the regular program is designed to strengthen you for the battleroom. Does that mean you don't intend to play that game, either? Because if that's your plan, you really **will** get iced. That's our primary means of assessing command ability. That's why the whole life of the school is centered around the armies."

"I'll do fine in the battleroom," said Bean.

"If you think you can do it without preparation, you're mistaken. A quick mind is no replacement for a strong, agile body. You have no idea how physically demanding the battleroom can be."

"I'll join the regular workouts, sir."

Dimak leaned back and closed his eyes with a small sigh. "My, but you're compliant, aren't you, Bean."

"I try to be, sir."

"That is such complete bullshit," said Dimak.

"Sir?" Here it comes, thought Bean.

"If you devoted the energy to making friends that you devote to hiding things from the teachers, you'd be the most beloved kid in the school."

"That would be Ender Wiggin, sir."

"And don't think we haven't picked up on the way you obsess about Wiggin."

"Obsess?" Bean hadn't asked about him after that first day. Never joined in discussions about the standings. Never visited the battleroom during Ender's practice sessions.

Oh. What an obvious mistake. Stupid.

"You're the only launchy who has completely avoided so much as seeing Ender Wiggin. You track his schedule so thoroughly that you are never in the same room with him. That takes real effort."

"I'm a launchy, sir. He's in an army."

"Don't play dumb, Bean. It's not convincing and it wastes my time."

Tell a useless and obvious truth, that was the rule. "Everyone compares me to Ender all the time 'cause I came here so young and small. I wanted to make my own way."

"I'll accept that for now because there's a limit to how deeply I want to wade into your bullshit," said Dimak.

But in saying what he'd said about Ender, Bean wondered if it might not be true. Why shouldn't I have such a normal emotion as jealousy? I'm not a machine. So he was a little offended that Dimak seemed to assume that something more subtle had to be going on. That Bean was lying no matter what he said.

"Tell me," said Dimak, "why you refuse to play the fantasy game."

"It looks boring and stupid," said Bean. That was certainly true.

"Not good enough," said Dimak. "For one thing, it *isn't* boring and stupid to any other kid in Battle School. In fact, the game adapts itself to your interests."

I have no doubt of *that*, thought Bean. "It's all pretending," said Bean. "None of it's real."

"Stop hiding for one second, can't you?" snapped Dimak. "You know perfectly well that we use the game to analyze personality, and that's why you refuse to play."

"Sounds like you've analyzed my personality anyway," said Bean.

"You just don't let up, do you?"

Bean said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"I've been looking at your reading list," said Dimak. "Vauban?"

"Yes?"

"Fortification engineering from the time of Louis the Fourteenth?"

Bean nodded. He thought back to Vauban and how his strategies had adapted to fit Louis's ever-more-straitened finances. Defense in depth had given way to a thin line of defenses; building new fortresses had largely been abandoned, while razing redundant or poorly placed ones continued. Poverty triumphing over strategy. He started to talk about this, but Dimak cut him off.

"Come on, Bean. Why are you studying a subject that has nothing to do with war in space?"

Bean didn't really have an answer. He had been working through the history of strategy from Xenophon and Alexander to Caesar and Machiavelli. Vauban came in sequence. There was no plan -- mostly his readings were a cover for his clandestine computer work. But now that Dimak was asking him, what *did* seventeenth-century fortifications have to do with war in space?

"I'm not the one who put Vauban in the library."

"We have the full set of military writings that are found in every library in the fleet. Nothing more significant than that."

Bean shrugged.

"You spent two hours on Vauban."

"So what? I spent as long on Frederick the Great, and I don't think we're doing field drills, either, or bayoneting anyone who breaks ranks during a march into fire."

"You didn't actually read Vauban, did you," said Dimak. "So I want to know what you *were* doing."

"I *was* reading Vauban."

"You think we don't know how fast you read?"

"And *thinking* about Vauban?"

"All right then, what were you thinking?"

"Like you said. About how it applies to war in space." Buy some time here. What *does* Vauban have to do with war in space?

"I'm waiting," said Dimak. "Give me the insights that occupied you for two hours just yesterday."

"Well of course fortifications are impossible in space," said Bean. "In the traditional sense, that is. But there are things you can do. Like his mini-fortresses, where you leave a sallying force outside the main fortification. You can station squads of ships to intercept raiders. And there are barriers you can put up. Mines. Fields of flotsam to cause collisions with fast-moving ships, holing them. That sort of thing."

Dimak nodded, but said nothing.

Bean was beginning to warm to the discussion. "The real problem is that unlike Vauban, we have only one strong point worth defending -- Earth. And the enemy is not limited to a primary direction of approach. He could come from anywhere. From anywhere all at once. So we run into the classic problem of defense, cubed. The farther out you deploy your defenses, the more of them you have to have, and if your resources are limited, you soon have more fortifications than you can man. What good are bases on moons Jupiter or Saturn or Neptune, when the enemy doesn't even have to come in on the plane of the ecliptic? He can bypass all our fortifications. The way Nimitz and MacArthur used two-dimensional island-hopping against the defense in depth of the Japanese in World War II. Only our enemy can work in three dimensions. Therefore we cannot possibly maintain defense in depth. Our only defense is early detection and a single massed force."

Dimak nodded slowly. His face showed no expression. "Go on."

Go on? That wasn't enough to explain two hours of reading? "Well, so I thought that even that was a recipe for disaster, because the enemy is free to divide his forces. So even if we intercept and defeat ninety-nine of a hundred attacking squadrons, he only has to get one squadron through to cause terrible devastation on Earth. We saw how much territory a single ship could scour when they first showed up and started burning over China. Get ten ships to Earth for a single day -- and if they spread us out enough, they'd have a lot more than a day! -- and they could wipe out most of our main population centers. All our eggs are in that one basket."

"And all this you got from Vauban," said Dimak.

Finally. That was apparently enough to satisfy him. "From thinking about Vauban, and how much harder our defensive problem is."

"So," said Dimak, "what's your solution?"

Solution? What did Dimak think Bean was? I'm thinking about how to get control of the situation here in Battle School, not how to save the world! "I don't think there is a solution," said Bean, buying time again. But then, having said it, he began to believe it. "There's no point in trying to defend Earth at all. In fact, unless they have some defensive device we don't know about, like some

way of putting an invisible shield around a planet or something, the enemy is just as vulnerable. So the only strategy that makes any sense at all is an all-out attack. To send our fleet against *their* home world and destroy it."

"What if our fleets pass in the night?" asked Dimak. "We destroy each other's worlds and all we have left are ships?"

"No," said Bean, his mind racing. "Not if we sent out a fleet immediately after the Second Bugger War. After Mazer Rackham's strike force defeated them, it would take time for word of their defeat to come back to them. So we build a fleet as quickly as possible and launch it against their home world immediately. That way the news of their defeat reaches them at the same time as our devastating counterattack."

Dimak closed his eyes. "Now you tell us."

"No," said Bean, as it dawned on him that he was right about everything. "That fleet was already sent. Before anybody on this station was born, that fleet was launched."

"Interesting theory," said Dimak. "Of course you're wrong on every point."

"No I'm not," said Bean. He knew he wasn't wrong, because Dimak's air of calm was not holding. Sweat was standing out on his forehead. Bean had hit on something really important here, and Dimak knew it.

"I mean your theory is right, about the difficulty of defense in space. But hard as it is, we still have to do it, and that's why you're here. As to some fleet we supposedly launched -- the Second Bugger War exhausted humanity's resources, Bean. It's taken us this long to get a reasonable-sized fleet again. And to get better weaponry for the next battle. If you learned anything from Vauban, you should have learned that you can't build more than your people have resources to support. Besides which, you're assuming we know where the enemy's home world is. But your analysis is good insofar as you've identified the magnitude of the problem we face."

Dimak got up from the bunk. "It's nice to know that your study time isn't completely wasted on breaking into the computer system," he said.

With that parting shot, he left the barracks.

Bean got up and walked back to his own bunk, where he got dressed. No time for a shower now, and it didn't matter anyway. Because he knew that he had struck a nerve in what he said to Dimak. The Second Bugger War hadn't exhausted humanity's resources, Bean was sure of that. The problems of defending a planet were so obvious that the I.F. couldn't possibly have missed them, especially not in the aftermath of a nearly-lost war. They knew they had to attack. They built the fleet. They launched it. It was gone. It was inconceivable that they had done anything else.

So what was all this nonsense with the Battle School for? Was Dimak right, that Battle School was simply about building up the defensive fleet around Earth to counter any enemy assault that might have passed our invasion fleet on the way?

If that were true, there would be no reason to conceal it. No reason to lie. In fact, all the propaganda on Earth was devoted to telling people how vital it was to prepare for the next Bugger invasion. So Dimak had done nothing more than repeat the story that the I.F. had been telling everybody on Earth for three generations. Yet Dimak was sweating like a fish. Which suggested that the story wasn't true.

The defensive fleet around Earth was already fully manned, that was the problem. The normal process of recruitment would have been enough. Defensive war didn't take brilliance, just alertness. Early detection, cautious interception, protection of an adequate reserve. Success depended, not on the quality of command, but on the quantity of available ships and the quality of the weaponry. There was no reason for Battle School -- Battle School only made sense in the context of an offensive war, a war where maneuver, strategy, and tactics would play an important role. But the offensive fleet was already gone. For all Bean knew, the battle had already been fought years ago and the I.F. was just waiting for news about whether we had won or lost. It all depended on how many light-years away the Bugger home planet was.

For all we know, thought Bean, the war is already over, the I.F. knows that we won, and they simply haven't told anybody.

And the reason for that was obvious. The only thing that had ended war on Earth and bound together all of humanity was a common cause -- defeating the Buggers. As soon as it was known that the Bugger threat was eliminated, all the pent-up hostilities would be released. Whether it was the Muslim world against the West, or long-restrained Russian imperialism and paranoia against the Atlantic alliance, or Indian adventurism, or ... or all of them at once. Chaos. The resources of the International Fleet would be co-opted by mutinying commanders from one faction or another. Conceivably it could mean the destruction of Earth -- without any help from the Formics at all.

That's what the I.F. was trying to prevent. The terrible cannibalistic war that would follow. Just as Rome tore itself apart in civil war after the final elimination of Carthage -- only far worse, because the weapons were more terrible and the hatreds far deeper, national and religious hatreds rather than the mere personal rivalries among leading citizens of Rome.

The I.F. was determined to prevent it.

In that context, Battle School made perfect sense. For many years, almost every child on Earth had been tested, and those with any potential brilliance in military command were taken out of their homeland and put into space. The best of the Battle School graduates, or at least those most loyal to the I.F., might very well be used to command armies when the I.F. finally announced the end of the war and struck preemptively to eliminate national armies and unify the world, finally and permanently, under one government. But the main purpose of the Battle School was to get these kids off Earth so that they could not become commanders of the armies of any one nation or faction.

After all, the invasion of France by the major European powers after the French Revolution led to the desperate French government discovering and promoting Napoleon, even though in the end he seized the reins of power instead of just defending the nation. The I.F. was determined that there would be no Napoleons on Earth to lead the resistance. All the potential Napoleons were here, wearing silly uniforms and battling each other for supremacy in a stupid game. It was all pig lists. By taking us, they have tamed the world.

"If you don't get dressed, you'll be late for class," said Nikolai, the boy who slept on the bottommost bunk directly across from Bean.

"Thanks," said Bean. He shed his dry towel and hurriedly pulled on his uniform.

"Sorry I had to tell them about your using my password," said Nikolai.

Bean was dumfounded.

"I mean, I didn't *know* it was you, but they started asking me what I was looking for in the emergency map system, and since I didn't know what they were talking about, it wasn't hard to guess that somebody was signing on as me, and there you are, in the perfect place to see my desk whenever I sign on, and ... I mean, you're really smart. But it's not like I set out to tell on you."

"That's fine," said Bean. "Not a problem."

"But, I mean, what *did* you find out? From the maps?"

Until this moment, Bean would have blown off the question -- and the boy. Nothing much, I was just curious, that's what he would have said. But now his whole world had changed. Now it mattered that he have connections with the other boys, not so he could show his leadership ability to the teachers, but so that when war did break out on Earth, and when the I.F.'s little plan failed, as it was bound to do, he would know who his allies and enemies were among the commanders of the various national and factional armies.

For the I.F.'s plan *would* fail. It was a miracle it hadn't failed already. It depended too heavily on millions of soldiers and commanders being more loyal to the I.F. than to their homeland. It would not happen. The I.F. itself would break up into factions, inevitably.

But the plotters no doubt were aware of that danger. They would have kept the number of plotters as small as possible -- perhaps only the triumvirate of Hegemon, Strategos, and Polemarch and maybe a few people here at Battle School. Because this station was the heart of the plan. Here was where every single gifted commander for two generations had been studied intimately. There were records on every one of them -- who was most talented, most valuable. What their weaknesses were, both in character and in command. Who their friends were. What their loyalties were. Which of them, therefore, should be approached to command the I.F.'s forces in the intrahuman wars to come, and which should be stripped of command and held incommunicado until hostilities were over.

No wonder they were worried about Bean's lack of participation in their little mind game. It made him an unknown quantity. It made him dangerous.

Now it was even more dangerous for Bean to play than ever. Not playing might make them suspicious and fearful -- but in whatever move they planned against him, at least they wouldn't know anything about him. While if he did play, then they might be less suspicious -- but if they did move against him, they would do it knowing whatever information the game gave to them. And Bean was not at all confident of his ability to outplay the game. Even if he tried to give them misleading results, that strategy in itself might tell them more about him than he wanted them to know.

And there was another possibility, too. He might be completely wrong. There might be key information that he did not have. Maybe no fleet had been launched. Maybe they hadn't defeated the Buggers at their home world. Maybe there really was a desperate effort to build a defensive fleet. Maybe maybe maybe.

Bean had to get more information in order to have some hope that his analysis was correct and that his choices would be valid.

And Bean's isolation had to end.

"Nikolai," said Bean, "you wouldn't believe what I found out from those maps. Did you know there are nine decks, not just four?"

"Nine?"

"And that's just in this wheel. There are two other wheels they never tell us about."

"But the pictures of the station show only the one wheel."

"Those pictures were all taken when there **was** only one wheel. But in the plans, there are three. Parallel to each other, turning together."

Nikolai looked thoughtful. "But that's just the plans. Maybe they never built those other wheels."

"Then why would they still have maps for them in the emergency system?"

Nikolai laughed. "My father always said, bureaucrats never throw anything away."

Of course. Why hadn't he thought of that? The emergency map system was no doubt programmed before the first wheel was ever brought into service. So all those maps would already be in the system, even if the other wheels were never built, even if two-thirds of the maps would never have a corridor wall to be displayed on. No one would bother to go into the system and clean them out.

"I never thought of that," said Bean. He knew, given his reputation for brilliance, that he could pay Nikolai no higher compliment. As indeed the reaction of the other kids in nearby bunks showed. No one had ever had such a conversation with Bean before. No one had ever thought of something that Bean hadn't obviously thought of first. Nikolai was blushing with pride.

"But the nine decks, that makes sense," said Nikolai.

"Wish I knew what was on them," said Bean.

"Life support," said the girl named Corn Moon. "They got to be making oxygen somewhere here. That takes a lot of plants."

More kids joined in. "And staff. All we ever see are teachers and nutritionists."

"And maybe they **did** build the other wheels. We don't **know** they didn't."

The speculation ran rampant through the group. And at the center of it all: Bean.

Bean and his new friend, Nikolai.

"Come on," said Nikolai, "we'll be late for math."

PART THREE -- SCHOLAR

CHAPTER 9 -- GARDEN OF SOFIA

"So he found out how many decks there are. What can he possibly do with that information?"

"Yes, that's the exact question. What was he planning, that he felt it necessary to find that out? Nobody else even looked for that, in the whole history of this school."

"You think he's plotting revolution?"

"All we know about this kid is that he survived on the streets of Rotterdam. It's a hellish place, from what I hear. The kids are vicious. They make Lord of the Flies look like Pollyanna."

"When did you read Pollyanna?"

"It was a book?"

"How can he plot a revolution? He doesn't have any friends."

"I never said anything about revolution, that's **your** theory."

"I don't have a theory. I don't understand this kid. I never even wanted him up here. I think we should just send him home."

"No."

"No **sir**, I'm sure you meant to say."

"After three months in Battle School, he figured out that defensive war makes no sense and that we must have launched a fleet against the Bugger home worlds right after the end of the last war."

"He knows **that**? And you come telling me he knows how many **decks** there are?"

"He doesn't **know** it. He guessed. I told him he was wrong."

"I'm sure he believed you."

"I'm sure he's in doubt."

"This is all the more reason to send him back to Earth. Or out to some distant base somewhere. Do you realize the nightmare if there's a breach of security on this?"

"Everything depends on how he uses the information."

"Only we don't know anything about him, so we have no way of knowing how he'll use it."

"Sister Carlotta --"

"Do you **hate** me? That woman is even more inscrutable than your little dwarf."

"A mind like Bean's is not to be thrown away just because we fear there might be a security breach."

"Nor is security to be thrown away for the sake of one really smart kid."

"Aren't we smart enough to create new layers of deception for him? Let him find out something that he'll think is the truth. All we have to do is come up with a lie that we think he'll believe."

Sister Carlotta sat in the terrace garden, across the tiny table from the wizened old exile.

"I'm just an old Russian scientist living out the last years of his life on the shores of the Black Sea." Anton took a long drag on his cigarette and blew it out over the railing, adding it to the pollution flowing from Sofia out over the water.

"I'm not here with any law enforcement authority," said Sister Carlotta.

"You have something much more dangerous to me. You are from the Fleet."

"You're in no danger."

"That's true, but only because I'm not going to tell you anything."

"Thank you for your candor."

"You value candor, but I don't think you would appreciate it if I told you the thoughts your body arouses in the mind of this old Russian."

"Trying to shock nuns is not much sport. There is no trophy."

"So you take nunitude seriously."

Sister Carlotta sighed. "You think I came here because I know something about you and you don't want me to find out more. But I came here because of what I can't find out about you."

"Which is?"

"Anything. Because I was researching a particular matter for the I.F., they gave me a summary of articles on the topic of research into altering the human genome."

"And my name came up?"

"On the contrary, your name was never mentioned."

"How quickly they forget."

"But when I read the few papers available from the people they did mention -- always early work, before the I.F. security machine clamped down on them -- I noticed a trend. Your name was always cited in their footnotes. Cited constantly. And yet not a word of yours could be found. Not even abstracts of papers. Apparently you have never published."

"And yet they quote me. Almost miraculous, isn't it? You people do collect miracles, don't you? To make saints?"

"No beatification until after you're dead, sorry."

"I have only one lung left as it is," said Anton. "So I don't have that long to wait, as long as I keep smoking."

"You could stop."

"With only one lung, it takes twice as many cigarettes to get the same nicotine. Therefore I have had to increase my smoking, not cut down. This should be obvious, but then, you do not think like a scientist, you think like a woman of faith. You think like an obedient person. When you find out something is bad, you don't do it."

"Your research was into genetic limitations on human intelligence."

"Was it?"

"Because it's in that area that you are always cited. Of course, these papers were never *about* that exact subject, or they too would have been classified. But the titles of the articles mentioned in the footnotes -- the ones you never wrote, since you never published anything -- are all tied to that area."

"It is so easy in a career to find oneself in a rut."

"So I want to ask you a hypothetical question."

"My favorite kind. Next to rhetorical ones. I can nap equally well through either kind."

"Suppose someone were to break the law and attempt to alter the human genome, specifically to enhance intelligence."

"Then someone would be in serious danger of being caught and punished."

"Suppose that, using the best available research, he found certain genes that he could alter in an embryo that would enhance the intelligence of the person when he was born."

"Embryo! Are you testing me? Such changes can only happen in the egg. A single cell."

"And suppose a child was born with these alterations in place. The child was born and he grew up enough for his great intelligence to be noticed."

"I assume you are not speaking of your own child."

"I'm speaking of no child at all. A hypothetical child. How would someone recognize that this child had been genetically altered? Without actually examining the genes."

Anton shrugged. "What does it matter if you examine the genes? They will be normal."

"Even though you altered them?"

"It is such a little change. Hypothetically speaking."

"Within the normal range of variation?"

"It is two switches, one that you turn on, one that you turn off. The gene is already there, you see."

"What gene?"

"Savants were the key, for me. Autistic, usually. Dysfunctional. They have extraordinary mental powers. Lightning-fast calculations. Phenomenal memories. But they are inept, even retarded in other areas. Square roots of twelve-digit numbers in seconds, but incapable of conducting a simple purchase in a store. How can they be so brilliant, and so stupid?"

"That gene?"

"No, it was another, but it showed me what was possible. The human brain could be far smarter than it is. But is there a, how you say, bargain?"

"Trade-off."

"A terrible bargain. To have this great intellect, you have to give up everything else. That's how the brains of autistic savants accomplish such feats. They do one thing, and the rest is a distraction, an annoyance, beyond the reach of any conceivable interest. Their attention truly is undivided."

"So all hyperintelligent people would be retarded in some other way."

"That is what we all assumed, because that is what we saw. The exceptions seemed to be only mild savants, who were thus able to spare some concentration on ordinary life. Then I thought ... but I can't tell you what I thought, because I have been served with an order of inhibition."

He smiled helplessly. Sister Carlotta's heart fell. When someone was a proven security risk, they implanted in his brain a device that caused any kind of anxiety to launch a feedback loop, leading to a panic attack. Such people were then given periodic sensitization to make sure that they felt a great deal of anxiety when they contemplated talking about the forbidden subject. Viewed one way, it was a monstrous intrusion on a person's life; but if it was compared to the common practice of imprisoning or killing people who could not be trusted with a vital secret, an order of intervention could look downright humane.

That explained, of course, why Anton was amused by everything. He had to be. If he allowed himself to become agitated or angry -- any strong negative emotion, really -- then he would have a panic attack even without talking about forbidden subjects. Sister Carlotta had read an article once in which the wife of a man equipped with such a device said that their life together had never been happier, because now he took everything so calmly, with good humor. "The children love him now, instead of dreading his time at home." She said that, according to the article, only hours before he threw himself from a cliff. Life was better, apparently, for everyone but him.

And now she had met a man whose very memories had been rendered inaccessible.

"What a shame," said Sister Carlotta.

"But stay. My life here is a lonely one. You're a sister of mercy, aren't you? Have mercy on a lonely old man, and walk with me."

She wanted to say no, to leave at once. At that moment, however, he leaned back in his chair and began to breathe deeply, regularly, with his eyes closed, as he hummed a little tune to himself.

A ritual of calming. So ... at the very moment of inviting her to walk with him, he had felt some kind of anxiety that triggered the device. That meant there was something important about his invitation.

"Of course I'll walk with you," she said. "Though technically my order is relatively unconcerned with mercy to individuals. We are far more pretentious than that. Our business is trying to save the world."

He chuckled. "One person at a time would be too slow, is that it?"

"We make our lives of service to the larger causes of humanity. The Savior already died for sin. We work on trying to clean up the consequences of sin on other people."

"An interesting religious quest," said Anton. "I wonder whether my old line of research would have been considered a service to humanity, or just another mess that someone like you would have to clean up."

"I wonder that myself," said Sister Carlotta.

"We will never know." They strolled out of the garden into the alley behind the house, and then to a street, and across it, and onto a path that led through an untended park.

"The trees here are very old," Sister Carlotta observed.

"How old are *you*, Carlotta?"

"Objectively or subjectively?"

"Stick to the Gregorian calendar, please, as most recently revised."

"That switch away from the Julian system still sticks in the Russian craw, does it?"

"It forced us for more than seven decades to commemorate an October Revolution that actually occurred in November."

"You are much too young to remember when there were Communists in Russia."

"On the contrary, I am old enough now to have all the memories of my people locked within my head. I remember things that happened long before I was born. I remember things that never happened at all. I live in memory."

"Is that a pleasant place to dwell?"

"Pleasant?" He shrugged. "I laugh at all of it because I must. Because it is so sweetly sad -- all the tragedies, and yet nothing is learned."

"Because human nature never changes," she said.

"I have imagined," he said, "how God might have done better, when he made man -- in his own image, I believe."

"Male and female created he them. Making his image anatomically vague, one must suppose."

He laughed and clapped her rather too forcefully on the back. "I didn't know you could laugh about such things! I am pleasantly surprised!"

"I'm glad I could bring cheer into your bleak existence."

"And then you sink the barb into the flesh." They reached an overlook that had rather less of a view of the sea than Anton's own terrace. "It is not a bleak existence, Carlotta. For I can celebrate God's great compromise in making human beings as we are."

"Compromise?"

"Our bodies could live forever, you know. We don't have to wear out. Our cells are all alive; they can maintain and repair themselves, or be replaced by fresh ones. There are even mechanisms to keep replenishing our bones. Menopause need not stop a woman from bearing children. Our brains need not decay, shedding memories or failing to absorb new ones. But God made us with death inside."

"You are beginning to sound serious about God."

"God made us with death inside, and also with intelligence. We have our seventy years or so -- perhaps ninety, with care -- in the mountains of Georgia, a hundred and thirty is not unheard of, though I personally believe they are all liars. They would claim to be immortal if they thought they could get away with it. We could live forever, if we were willing to be stupid the whole time."

"Surely you're not saying that God had to choose between long life and intelligence for human beings!"

"It's there in your own Bible, Carlotta. Two trees -- knowledge and life. You eat of the tree of knowledge, and you will surely die. You eat of the tree of life, and you remain a child in the garden forever, undying."

"You speak in theological terms, and yet I thought you were an unbeliever."

"Theology is a joke to me. Amusing! I laugh at it. I can tell amusing stories about theology, to jest with believers. You see? It pleases me and keeps me calm."

At last she understood. How clearly did he have to spell it out? He was telling her the information she asked about, but doing it in code, in a way that fooled not only any eavesdroppers -- and there might well be listeners to every word they said -- but even his own mind. It was all a jest; therefore he could tell her the truth, as long as he did it in this form.

"Then I don't mind hearing your wild humorous forays into theology."

"Genesis tells of men who lived to be more than nine hundred years old. What it does not tell you is how very stupid these men all were."

Sister Carlotta laughed aloud.

"That's why God had to destroy humanity with his little flood," Anton went on. "Get rid of those stupid people and replace them with quicker ones. Quick quick quick, their minds moved, their metabolism. Rushing onward into the grave."

"From Methuselah at nearly a millennium of life to Moses with his hundred and twenty years, and now to us. But our lives are getting longer."

"I rest my case."

"Are we stupider now?"

"So stupid that we would rather have long life for our children than see them become too much like God, knowing ... good and evil ... knowing ... everything." He clutched at his chest, gasping. "Ah, God! God in heaven!" He sank to his knees, His breath was shallow and rapid now. His eyes rolled back in his head. He fell over.

Apparently he hadn't been able to maintain his self-deception. His body finally caught on to how he had managed to tell his secret to this woman by speaking it in the language of religion.

She rolled him onto his back. Now that he had fainted, his panic attack was subsiding. Not that fainting was trivial in a man of Anton's age. But he would not need any heroism to bring him back, not this time. He would wake up calm.

Where were the people who were supposed to be monitoring him? Where were the spies who were listening in to their conversation?

Pounding feet on the grass, on the leaves.

"A bit slow, weren't you?" she said without looking up.

"Sorry, we didn't expect anything." The man was youngish, but not terribly bright-looking. The implant was supposed to keep him from spilling his tale; it was not necessary for his guards to be clever.

"I think he'll be all right."

"What were you talking about?"

"Religion," she said, knowing that her account would probably be checked against a recording. "He was criticizing God for mis-making human beings. He claimed to be joking, but I think that a man of his age is never really joking when he talks about God, do you?"

"Fear of death gets in them," said the young man sagely -- or at least as sagely as he could manage.

"Do you think he accidentally triggered this panic attack by agitating his own anxiety about death?" If she asked it as a question, it wasn't actually a lie, was it?

"I don't know. He's coming around."

"Well, I certainly don't want to cause him any more anxiety about religious matters. When he wakes up, tell him how grateful I am for our conversation. Assure him that he has clarified for me one of the great questions about God's purpose."

"Yes, I'll tell him," said the young man earnestly.

Of course he would garble the message hopelessly.

Sister Carlotta bent over and kissed Anton's cold, sweaty forehead. Then she rose to her feet and walked away.

So that was the secret. The genome that allowed a human being to have extraordinary intelligence acted by speeding up many bodily processes. The mind worked faster. The child developed faster. Bean was indeed the product of an experiment in unlocking the savant gene. He had been given the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But there was a price. He would not be able to taste of the tree of life. Whatever he did with his life, he would have to do it young, because he would not live to be old.

Anton had not done the experiment. He had not played God, bringing forth human beings who would live in an explosion of intelligence, sudden fireworks instead of single, long-burning candles. But he had found a key God had hidden in the human genome. Someone else, some follower, some insatiably curious soul, some would-be visionary longing to take human beings to the next stage of evolution or some other such mad, arrogant cause -- this someone had taken the bold step of turning that key, opening that door, putting the killing, brilliant fruit into the hand of

Eve. And because of that act -- that serpentine, slithering crime -- it was Bean who had been expelled from the garden. Bean who would now, surely, die -- but die like a god, knowing good and evil.

CHAPTER 10 -- SNEAKY

"I can't help you. You didn't give me the information I asked for."

"We gave you the damned summaries."

"You gave me nothing and you know it. And now you come to me asking me to evaluate Bean for you -- but you do not tell me why, you give me no context. You expect an answer but you deprive me of the means of providing it."

"Frustrating, isn't it?"

"Not for me. I simply won't give you any answer."

"Then Bean is out of the program."

"If your mind is made up, no answer of mine will change you, especially because you have made certain my answer will be unreliable."

"You know more than you've told me, and I must have it."

"How marvelous. You have achieved perfect empathy with me, for that is the exact statement I have repeatedly made to you."

"An eye for an eye? How Christian of you."

"Unbelievers always want *other* people to act like Christians."

"Perhaps you haven't heard, but there's a war on."

"Again, I could have said the same thing to you. There's a war on, yet you fence me around with foolish secrecy. Since there is no evidence of the Formic enemy spying on us, this secrecy is not about the war. It's about the Triumvirate maintaining their power over humanity. And I am not remotely interested in that."

"You're wrong. That information is secret in order to prevent some terrible experiments from being performed."

"Only a fool closes the door when the wolf is already inside the barn."

"Do you have proof that Bean is the result of a genetic experiment?"

"How can I prove it, when you have cut me off from all evidence? Besides, what matters is not *whether* he has altered genes, but what those genetic changes, if he has them, might lead him to do. Your tests were all designed to allow you to predict the behavior of normal human beings. They may not apply to Bean."

"If he's that unpredictable, then we can't rely on him. He's out."

"What if he's the only one who can win the war? Do you drop him from the program then?"

Bean didn't want to have much food in his body, not tonight, so he gave away almost all his food and turned in a clean tray long before anyone else was done. Let the nutritionist be suspicious -- he had to have time alone in the barracks.

The engineers had always located the intake at the top of the wall over the door into the corridor. Therefore the air must flow into the room from the opposite end, where the extra bunks were unoccupied. Since he had not been able to see a vent just glancing around that end of the room, it had to be located under one of the lower bunks. He couldn't search for it when others would see him, because no one could be allowed to know that he was interested in the vents. Now, alone, he dropped to the floor and in moments was jimmying at the vent cover. It came off readily. He tried putting it back on, listening carefully for the level of noise that operation caused. Too much. The vent screen would have to stay off. He laid it on the floor beside the opening, but out of the way so he wouldn't accidentally bump into it in the darkness. Then, to be sure, he took it completely out from under that bunk and slid it under the one directly across.

Done. He then resumed his normal activities.

Until night. Until the breathing of the others told him that most, if not all, were asleep.

Bean slept naked, as many of the boys did -- his uniform would not give him away. They were told to wear their towels when going to and from the toilet in the night, so Bean assumed that it, too, could be tracked.

So as Bean slid down from his bunk, he pulled his towel from its hook on the bunk frame and wrapped it around himself as he trotted to the door of the barracks.

Nothing unusual. Toilet trips were allowed, if not encouraged, after lights out, and Bean had made it a point to make several such runs during his time in Battle School. No pattern was being violated. And it was a good idea to make his first excursion with an empty bladder.

When he came back, if anyone was awake all they saw was a kid in a towel heading back to his bunk.

But he walked past his bunk and quietly sank down and slid under the last bunk, where the uncovered vent awaited him. His towel remained on the floor under the bunk, so that if anyone woke enough to notice that Bean's bunk was empty, they would see that his towel was missing and assume he had gone to the toilet.

It was no less painful this time, sliding into the vent, but once inside, Bean found that his exercise had paid off. He was able to slide down at an angle, always moving slowly enough to make no noise and to avoid snagging his skin on any protruding metal. He wanted no injuries he'd have to explain.

In the utter darkness of the air duct, he had to keep his mental map of the station constantly in mind. The faint nightlight of each barracks cast only enough light into the air ducts to allow him to make out the location of each vent. But what mattered was not the location of the other barracks on this level. Bean had to get either up or down to a deck where teachers lived and worked. Judging from the amount of time it took Dimak to get to their barracks the rare times that a quarrel demanded his attention, Bean assumed that his quarters were on another deck. And because Dimak always arrived breathing a little heavily, Bean also assumed it was a deck below their own level, not above -- Dimak had to climb a ladder, not slide down a pole, to reach them.

Nevertheless, Bean had no intention of going down first. He had to see whether he could successfully climb to a higher deck before getting himself potentially trapped on a lower one.

So when he finally -- after passing three barracks -- came to a vertical shaft, he did not climb down. Instead, he probed the walls to see how much larger it was than the horizontals. It was much wider -- Bean could not reach all the way across it. But it was only slightly deeper, front to back. That was good. As long as Bean didn't work too hard and sweat too much, friction between his skin and the front and back walls of the duct would allow him to inch his way upward. And in the vertical duct, he could face forward, giving his neck a much-needed respite from being perpetually turned to one side.

Downward was almost harder than upward, because once he started sliding it was harder to stop. He was also aware that the lower he went, the heavier he would become. And he had to keep checking the wall beside him, looking for another side duct.

But he didn't have to find it by probing, after all. He could see the side duct, because there was light in both directions. The teachers didn't have the same lights-out rules as the students, and their quarters were smaller, so that vents came more frequently, spilling more light into the duct.

In the first room, a teacher was awake and working at his desk. The trouble was that Bean, peering out of a vent screen near the floor, could not see a thing he was typing.

It would be that way in all the rooms. The floor vents would not work for him. He had to get into the air-intake system.

Back to the vertical duct. The wind was coming from above, and so that was where he had to go if he was to cross over from one system to another. His only hope was that the duct system would have an access door before he reached the fans, and that he would be able to find it in the dark.

Heading always into the wind, and finding himself noticeably lighter after climbing past seven decks, he finally reached a wider area with a small light strip. The fans were much louder, but he still wasn't near enough to see them. It didn't matter. He would be out of this wind.

The access door was clearly marked. It also might be wired to sound an alarm if it was opened. But he doubted it. That was the kind of thing that was done in Rotterdam to guard against burglars. Burglary wasn't a serious problem on space stations. This door would only have been alarmed if all doors in the station were fitted with alarms. He'd find out soon enough.

He opened the door, slipped out into a faintly lighted space, closed the door behind him.

The structure of the station was visible here, the beams, the sections of metal plating. There were no solid surfaces. The room was also noticeably colder, and not just because he was out of the hot wind. Cold hard space was on the other side of those curved plates. The furnaces might be located here, but the insulation was very good, and they had not bothered to pump much of that hot air into this space, relying instead on seepage to heat it. Bean hadn't been this cold since Rotterdam ... but compared to wearing thin clothing in the winter streets with the wind off the North Sea, this was still almost balmy. It annoyed Bean that he had become so pampered here that he even cared about such a slight chill. And yet he couldn't keep himself from shivering a couple of times. Even in Rotterdam, he hadn't been naked.

Following the ductwork, he climbed up the workmen's ladderways to the furnaces and then found the air-intake ducts and followed them back down. It was easy to find an access door and enter the main vertical duct.

Because the air in the intake system did not have to be under positive pressure, the ducts did not have to be so narrow. Also, this was the part of the system where dirt had to be caught and removed, so it was more important to maintain access; by the time air got past the furnaces, it was already as clean as it was ever going to get. So instead of shinnying up and down narrow shafts, Bean scrambled easily down a ladder, and in the low light still had no trouble reading the signs telling which deck each side opening led to.

The side passages weren't really ducts at all. Instead, they consisted of the entire space between the ceiling of one corridor and the floor of the one above. All the wiring was here, and the water pipes -- hot, cold, sewer. And besides the strips of dim worklights, the space was frequently lighted by the vents on both sides of the space -- those same narrow strips of vent openings that Bean had seen from the floor below on his first excursion.

Now he could see easily down into each teacher's quarters. He crept along, making as little noise as possible -- a skill he had perfected prowling through Rotterdam. He quickly found what he was looking for -- a teacher who was awake, but not working at his desk. The man was not well known to Bean, because he supervised an older group of launchies and did not teach any of the classes

Bean was taking. He was heading for a shower. That meant he would come back to the room and, perhaps, would sign in again, allowing Bean to have a chance at getting both his log-in name and his password.

No doubt the teachers changed passwords often, so whatever he got wouldn't last long. Moreover, it was always possible that attempting to use a teacher's password on a student desk might set off some kind of alarm. But Bean doubted it. The whole security system was designed to shut students out, to monitor student behavior. The teachers would not be so closely watched. They frequently worked on their desks at odd hours, and they also frequently signed on to student desks during the day to call on their more powerful tools to help solve a student's problem or give a student more personalized computer resources. Bean was reasonably sure that the risk of discovery was outweighed by the benefits of snagging a teacher's identity.

While he waited, he heard voices a few rooms up. He wasn't quite close enough to make out the words. Did he dare risk missing the bather's return?

Moments later he was looking down into the quarters of ... Dimak himself. Interesting. He was talking to a man whose holographic image appeared in the air over his desk. Colonel Graff, Bean realized. The commandant of Battle School.

"My strategy was simple enough," Graff was saying. "I gave in and got her access to the stuff she wanted. She was right, I can't get good answers from her unless I let her see the data she's asking for."

"So did she give you any answers?"

"No, too soon. But she gave me a very good question."

"Which is?"

"Whether the boy is actually human."

"Oh, come on. Does she think he's a Bugger larva in a human suit?"

"Nothing to do with the Buggers. Genetically enhanced. It would explain a lot."

"But still human, then."

"Isn't that debatable? The difference between humans and chimpanzees is genetically slight. Between humans and neanderthals it had to be minute. How much difference would it take for him to be a different species?"

"Philosophically interesting, but in practical terms --"

"In practical terms, we don't know what this kid will do. There's no data on his species. He's a primate, which suggests certain regularities, but we can't assume anything about his motivations that --"

"Sir, with all due respect, he's still a kid. He's a human being. He's not some alien --"

"That's precisely what we've got to find out before we determine how much we can rely on him. And that's why you are to watch him even more carefully. If you can't get him into the mind game, then find some other way to figure out what makes him tick. Because we can't use him until we know just how much we can rely on him."

Interesting that they openly call it the mind game among themselves, thought Bean.

Then he realized what they were saying. "Can't get him into the mind game." As far as Bean knew, he was the only kid who didn't play the fantasy game. They were talking about him. New species. Genetically altered. Bean felt his heart pounding in his chest. What am I? Not just smart, but ... different.

"What about the breach of security?" Dimak asked.

"That's the other thing. You've got to figure out what he knows. Or at least how likely he is to spill it to any other kids. That's the greatest danger right now. Is the possibility of this kid being the commander we need great enough to balance the risk of breaching security and collapsing the program? I thought with Ender we had an all-or-nothing long-odds bet, but this one makes Ender look like a sure thing."

"I didn't think of you as a gambler, sir."

"I'm not. But sometimes you're forced into the game."

"I'm on it, sir."

"Encrypt everything you send me on him. No names. No discussions with other teachers beyond the normal. Contain this."

"Of course."

"If the only way we can beat the Buggers is to replace ourselves with a new species, Dimak, then have we really saved humanity?"

"One kid is not replacement of a species," said Dimak.

"Foot in the door. Camel's nose in the tent. Give them an inch."

"*Them*, sir?"

"Yes, I'm paranoid and xenophobic. That's how I got this job. Cultivate those virtues and you, too, might rise to my lofty station."

Dimak laughed. Graff didn't. His head disappeared from the display.

Bean had the discipline to remember that he was waiting to get a password. He crept back to the bather's room.

Still not back.

What breach of security were they talking about? It must have been recent, for them to be discussing it with such urgency. That meant it had to be Bean's conversation with Dimak about what was really going on with the Battle School. And yet his guess that the battle had already happened could not be it, or Dimak and Graff would not be talking about how he might be the only way they could beat the Buggers. If the Buggers were still unbeaten, the breach of security had to be something else.

It could still be that his earlier guess was partly right, and Battle School existed as much to strip the Earth of good commanders as to beat the Buggers. Graff and Dimak's fear might be that Bean would let other kids in on the secret. For some of them, at least, it might rekindle their loyalty to the nation or ethnic group or ideology of their parents.

And since Bean had definitely been planning to probe the loyalties of other students over the next months and years, he now would have to be doubly cautious not to let his pattern of conversation attract the attention of the teachers. All he needed to know was which of the best and brightest kids had the strongest home loyalties. Of course, for that Bean would need to figure out just how loyalty worked, so he would have some idea of how to weaken it or strengthen it, how to exploit it or turn it.

But just because this first guess of Bean's could explain their words didn't mean it was right. And just because the final Bugger war had not yet been fought didn't mean his initial guess was completely wrong. They might, for instance, have launched a fleet against the Bugger home world years ago, but were still preparing commanders to fight off an invasion fleet now approaching Earth. In that case, the security breach Graff and Dimak feared was that Bean would frighten others by letting them know how urgent and dire the situation of humanity was.

The irony was that of all the children Bean had ever known, none could keep a secret as well as he did. Not even Achilles, for in refusing his share of Poke's bread, he had tipped his hand.

Bean could keep a secret, but he also knew that sometimes you had to give some hint of what you knew in order to get more information. That was what had prompted Bean's conversation with Dimak. It was dangerous, but in the long run, if he could keep them from removing him from the school entirely in order to silence him -- not to mention keeping them from killing him -- he had learned more important information than he had given them. In the end, the only things they could learn from him were about himself. And what he learned from them was about everything else -- a much larger pool of knowledge.

Himself. That was their puzzle -- who he was. Silly to be concerned about whether he was human. What else *could* he be? He had never seen any child show any desire or emotion that he himself had not felt. The only difference was that Bean was stronger, and did not let his fleeting needs and passions control his actions. Did that make him alien? He was human -- only better.

The teacher came back into the room. He hung up his damp towel, but even before he dressed he sat back down and logged on. Bean watched his fingers move over the keys. It was so quick. A blur of keystrokes. He would have to replay the memory in his mind many times to make sure. But at least he had seen it; nothing obstructed his view.

Bean crawled back toward the vertical intake shaft. The evening's expedition had already taken as long as he dared -- he needed his sleep, and every minute away increased the risk of chance discovery.

In fact, he had been very lucky on this first foray through the ducts. To happen to hear Dimak and Graff conversing about him, to happen to watch a teacher who conveniently gave him a clear view of his log-in. For a moment it crossed Bean's mind that they might know he was in the air system, might even have staged all this for him, to see what he'd do. It might be just one more experiment.

No. It wasn't just luck that this teacher showed him the log-in. Bean had chosen to watch him because he was going to shower, because his desk was sitting on the table in such a way that Bean had a reasonable chance of seeing the log-in. It was an intelligent choice on Bean's part. He had gone with the best odds, and it paid off.

As for Dimak and Graff, it might have been chance that he overheard them talking, but it was his own choice to move closer at once in order to hear. And, come to think of it, he had chosen to go exploring in the ducts because of precisely the same event that had prompted Graff and Dimak to be so concerned. Nor was it a surprise that their conversation happened after lights-out for the children -- that's when things would have quieted down, and, with duties done, there would be time for a conversation without Graff calling Dimak in for a special meeting, which might arouse questions in the minds of the other teachers. Not luck, really -- Bean had made his own luck. He saw the log-in and overheard the conversation because he had made that quick decision to get into the intake system and acted on it at once.

He had always made his own luck.

Maybe that was something that went along with whatever genetic alteration Graff had found out about.

She, they had said. **She** had raised the question of whether Bean was genetically human. Some woman who was searching for information, and Graff had given in, was letting her have access to facts that had been hidden from her. That meant that he would receive more answers from this woman as she began to use that new data. More answers about Bean's origins.

Could it be Sister Carlotta who had doubted Bean's humanity?

Sister Carlotta, who wept when he left her and went into space? Sister Carlotta, who loved him as a mother loves her child? How could *she* doubt him?

If they wanted to find some inhuman human, some alien in a human suit, they ought to take a good long look at a nun who embraces a child as her own, and then goes around casting doubt about whether he's a real boy. The opposite of Pinocchio's fairy. She touches a real boy and turns him into something awful and fearful.

It could not have been Sister Carlotta they were talking about. Just another woman. His guess that it might be her was simply wrong, just like his guess that the final battle with the Buggers had already happened. That's why Bean never fully trusted his own guesses. He acted on them, but always kept himself open to the possibility that his interpretations might be wrong.

Besides, *his* problem was not figuring out whether he really was human or not. Whatever he was, he was himself and must act in such a way as to not only stay alive but also get as much control over his own future as possible. The only danger to him was that *they* were concerned about the issue of his possible genetic alteration. Bean's task was therefore to appear so normal that their fears on that score would be dispelled.

But how could he pretend to be normal? He hadn't been brought here because he was normal, he was brought here because he was extraordinary. For that matter, so were all the other kids. And the school put so much strain on them that some became downright odd. Like Bonzo Madrid, with his loud vendetta against Ender Wiggin. So in fact, Bean shouldn't appear normal, he should appear weird in the expected ways.

Impossible to fake that. He didn't know yet what signs the teachers were looking for in the behavior of the children here. He could find ten things to do, and do them, never guessing that there were ninety things he hadn't noticed.

No, what he had to do was not to *act* in predictable ways, but to *become* what they hoped their perfect commander would be.

When he got back to his barracks, climbed back up to his bunk, and checked the time on his desk, he found that he had done it all in less than an hour. He put away his desk and lay there replaying in his mind the image in his memory of the teacher's fingers, logging in. When he was reasonably certain of what the log-in and password were, he allowed himself to drift toward sleep.

Only then, as he was beginning to doze, did he realize what his perfect camouflage would be, quelling their fears and bringing him both safety and advancement.

He had to become Ender Wiggin.

CHAPTER 11 -- DADDY

"Sir. I asked for a private interview."

"Dimak is here because your breach of security affects his work."

"Breach of security! This is why you reassign me?"

"There is a child who used your log-in to the master teacher system. He found the log-in record files and rewrote them to give himself an identity."

"Sir, I have faithfully adhered to all regulations. I never sign on in front of the students."

"Everyone *says* they never sign on, but then it turns out they do."

"Excuse me, sir, but Uphanad does not. He's always on the others when he catches them doing it. Actually, he's kind of anal about it. Drives us all crazy."

"You can check my log-in records. I never sign on during teaching hours. In fact, I never sign on outside my quarters."

"Then how could this child possibly get in using your log-in?"

"My desk sits on my table, like so. If I may use your desk to demonstrate."

"Of course."

"I sit like so. I keep my back to the door so no one can even see in. I never sign on in any other position."

"Well it's not like there's a window he can peek through!"

"Yes there is, sir."

"Dimak?"

"There *is* a window, sir. Look. The vent."

"Are you seriously suggesting that he could --"

"He is the smallest child who ever --"

"It was that little *Bean* child who got my log-in?"

"Excellent, Dimak, you've managed to let his name slip out, haven't you."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Ah. Another security breach. Will you send Dimak home with me?"

"I'm not sending anybody home."

"Sir, I must point out that Bean's intrusion into the master teacher system is an excellent opportunity."

"To have a student romping through the student data files?"

"To study Bean. We don't have him in the fantasy game, but now we have the game *he* chooses to play. We watch where he goes in the system, what he does with this power he has created for himself."

"But the damage he can do is --"

"He won't do any damage, sir. He won't do anything to give himself away. This kid is too street-smart. It's information he wants. He'll look, not touch."

"So you've got him analyzed already, is that it? You know what he's doing at all times?"

"I know that if there's a story we really want him to believe, he has to discover it himself. He has to *steal* it from us. So I think this little security breach is the perfect way to heal a much more important one."

"What I'm wondering is, if he's been crawling through the ducts, what *else* has he heard?"

"If we close off the duct system, he'll know he was caught, and then he won't trust what we set up for him to find."

"So I have to permit a child to crawl around through the ductwork and --"

"He can't do it much longer. He's growing, and the ducts are extremely shallow."

"That's not much comfort right now. And, unfortunately, we'll still have to kill Uphanad for knowing too much."

"Please assure me that you're joking."

"Yes, I'm joking. You'll have him as a student soon enough, Captain Uphanad. Watch him very carefully. Speak of him only with me. He's unpredictable and dangerous."

"Dangerous. Little Bean."

"He cleaned *your* clock, didn't he?"

"Yours too, sir, begging your pardon."

Bean worked his way through every student at Battle School, reading the records of a half dozen or so per day. Their original scores, he found, were the least interesting thing about them. Everyone here had such high scores on all the tests given back on Earth that the differences were almost trivial. Bean's own scores were the highest, and the gap between him and the next highest, Ender Wiggin, was wide -- as wide as the gap between Ender and the next child after him. But it was all relative. The difference between Ender and Bean amounted to half of a percentage point; most of the children clustered between 97 and 98 percent.

Of course, Bean knew what they could not know, that for him getting the highest possible score on the tests had been easy. He could have done more, he could have done better, but he had reached the boundary of what the test could discover. The gap between him and Ender was much wider than they supposed.

And yet ... in reading the records, Bean came to see that the scores were merely a guide to a child's potential. The teachers talked most about things like cleverness, insight, intuition; the ability to develop rapport, to outguess an opponent; the courage to act boldly, the caution to make certain before committing, the wisdom to know which course was the appropriate one. And in considering this, Bean realized that he was not necessarily any better at *these* things than the other students.

Ender Wiggin really did know things that Bean did not know. Bean might have thought to do as Wiggin did, arranging extra practices to make up for being with a commander who wouldn't train him. Bean even might have tried to bring in a few other students to train with him, since many things could not be done alone. But Wiggin had taken all comers, no matter how difficult it became to practice with so many in the battleroom, and according to the teachers' notes, he spent more time now training others than in working on his own technique. Of course, that was partly because he was no longer in Bonzo Madrid's army, so he got to take part in the regular practices. But he still kept working with the other kids, especially the eager launchies who wanted a head start before they were promoted into a regular army. Why?

Is he doing what I'm doing, studying the other students to prepare for a later war on Earth? Is he building some kind of network that reaches out into all the armies? Is he somehow mistraining them, so he can take advantage of their mistakes later?

From what Bean heard about Wiggin from the kids in his launch group who attended those practices, he came to realize that it was something else entirely. Wiggin seemed really to care about the other kids doing their best. Did he need so badly for them to like him? Because it was working, if that's what he was trying for. They worshiped him.

But there had to be more to it than some hunger for love. Bean couldn't get a handle on it.

He found that the teachers' observations, while helpful, didn't really help him get inside Wiggin's head. For one thing, they kept the psychological observations from the mind game somewhere else

that Bean didn't have access to. For another, the teachers couldn't really get into Wiggin's mind because they simply didn't think at his level.

Bean did.

But Bean's project wasn't to analyze Wiggin out of scientific curiosity, or to compete with him, or even to understand him. It was to make himself into the kind of child that the teachers would trust, would rely on. Would regard as fully human. For that project, Wiggin was his teacher because Wiggin had already done what Bean needed to do.

And Wiggin had done it without being perfect. Without being, as far as Bean could tell, completely sane. Not that anyone was. But Wiggin's willingness to give up hours every day to training kids who could do nothing for him -- the more Bean thought about it, the less sense it made. Wiggin was not building a network of supporters. Unlike Bean, he didn't have a perfect memory, so Bean was quite sure Wiggin was not compiling a mental dossier on every other kid in Battle School. The kids he worked with were not the best, and were often the most fearful and dependent of the launchies and of the losers in the regular armies. They came to him because they thought being in the same room with the soldier who was leading in the standings might bring some luck to them. But why did Wiggin keep giving his time to *them*?

Why did Poke die for me?

That was the same question. Bean knew it. He found several books about ethics in the library and called them up on his desk to read. He soon discovered that the only theories that explained altruism were bogus. The stupidest was the old sociobiological explanation of uncles dying for nephews -- there were no blood ties in armies now, and people often died for strangers. Community theory was fine as far as it went -- it explained why communities all honored sacrificial heroes in their stories and rituals, but it still didn't explain the heroes themselves.

For that was what Bean saw in Wiggin. This was the hero at his root.

Wiggin really does not care as much about himself as he does about these other kids who aren't worth five minutes of his time.

And yet this may be the very trait that makes everyone focus on him. Maybe this is why in all those stories Sister Carlotta told him, Jesus always had a crowd around him.

Maybe this is why I'm so afraid of Wiggin. Because *he's* the alien, not me. He's the unintelligible one, the unpredictable one. He's the one who doesn't do things for sensible, predictable reasons. I'm going to survive, and once you know that, there's nothing more to know about me. Him, though, he could do anything.

The more he studied Wiggin, the more mysteries Bean uncovered. The more he determined to act like Wiggin until, at some point, he came to see the world as Wiggin saw it.

But even as he tracked Wiggin -- still from a distance -- what Bean could not let himself do was what the younger kids did, what Wiggin's disciples did. He could not call him Ender. Calling him by his last name kept him at a distance. A microscope's distance, anyway.

What did Wiggin study when he read on his own? Not the books of military history and strategy that Bean had blown through in a rush and was now rereading methodically, applying everything to both space combat and modern warfare on Earth. Wiggin did his share of reading, too, but when he went into the library he was just as likely to look at combat vids, and the ones he watched most often were of Bugger ships. Those and the clips of Mazer Rackham's strike force in the heroic battle that broke the back of the Second Invasion.

Bean watched them too, though not over and over again -- once he saw them, he remembered them perfectly and could replay them in his mind, with enough detail that he could notice things later that he hadn't realized at first. Was Wiggin seeing something new each time he went back to these vids? Or was he looking for something that he hadn't yet found?

Is he trying to understand the way the Buggers think? Why doesn't he realize that the library here simply doesn't have enough of the vids to make it useful? It's all propaganda stuff here. They withheld all the terrible scenes of dead guys, of fighting and killing hand to hand when ships were breached and boarded. They didn't have vids of defeats, where the Buggers blew the human ships out of the sky. All they had here was ships moving around in space, a few minutes of preparation for combat.

War in space? So exciting in the made-up stories, so boring in reality. Occasionally something would light up, mostly it was just dark.

And, of course, the obligatory moment of Mazer Rackham's victory.

What could Wiggin possibly hope to learn?

Bean learned more from the omissions than from what he actually saw. For instance, there was not one picture of Mazer Rackham anywhere in the library. That was odd. The Triumvirates' faces were everywhere, as were those of other commanders and political leaders. Why not Rackham? Had he died in the moment of victory? Or was he, perhaps, a fictitious figure, a deliberately-created legend, so that there could be a name to peg the victory to? But if that were the case, they'd have created a face for him -- it was too easy to do that. Was he deformed?

Was he really, really small?

If I grow up to be the commander of the human fleet that defeats the Buggers, will they hide my picture, too, because someone so tiny can never be seen as a hero?

Who cares? I don't want to be a hero.

That's Wiggin's gig.

Nikolai, the boy across from him. Bright enough to make some guesses Bean hadn't made first. Confident enough not to get angry when he caught Bean intruding on him. Bean was so hopeful when he came at last to Nikolai's file.

The teacher evaluation was negative. "A place-holder." Cruel -- but was it true?

Bean realized: I have been putting too much trust in the teachers' evaluations. Do I have any real evidence that they're right? Or do I believe in their evaluations because I am rated so highly? Have I let them flatter me into complacency?

What if all their evaluations were hopelessly wrong?

I had no teacher files on the streets of Rotterdam. I actually knew the children. Poke -- I made my own judgment of her, and I was almost right, just a few surprises here and there. Sergeant -- no surprises at all. Achilles -- yes, I knew him.

So why have I stayed apart from the other students? Because they isolated me at first, and because I decided that the teachers had the power. But now I see that I was only partly right. The teachers have the power here and now, but someday I will not be in Battle School, and what does it matter then what the teachers think of me? I can learn all the military theory and history that I want, and it will do me no good if they never entrust me with command. And I will never be placed in charge of an army or a fleet unless they have reason to believe that other men would follow me.

Not men today, but boys, most of them, a few girls. Not men, but they *will* be men. How do they choose their leaders? How do I make them follow one who is so small, so resented?

What did Wiggin do?

Bean asked Nikolai which of the kids in their launch group practiced with Wiggin.

"Only a few. And they on the fringes, neh? Suckups and brags."

"But who are they?"

"You trying to get in with Wiggin?"

"Just want to find out about him."

"What you want to know?"

The questions bothered Bean. He didn't like talking so much about what he was doing. But he didn't sense any malice in Nikolai. He just wanted to know.

"History. He the best, neh? How he get that way?" Bean wondered if he sounded quite natural with the soldier slang. He hadn't used it that much. The music of it, he still wasn't quite there.

"You find out, you tell me." He rolled his eyes in self-derision.

"I'll tell you," said Bean.

"I got a chance to be best like Ender?" Nikolai laughed. "*You* got a chance, the way you learn."

"Wiggin's snot ain't honey," said Bean.

"What does that mean?"

"He human like anybody. I find out, I tell you, OK?"

Bean wondered why Nikolai already despaired about his own chances of being one of the best. Could it be that the teachers' negative evaluation was right after all? Or had they unconsciously let him see their disdain for him, and he believed them?

From the boys Nikolai had pointed out -- the brags and suckups, which wasn't an inaccurate evaluation as far as it went -- Bean learned what he wanted to know. The names of Wiggin's closest friends.

Shen. Alai. Petra -- her again! But Shen the longest.

Bean found him in the library during study time. The only reason to go there was for the vids -- all the books could be read from the desks. Shen wasn't watching vids, though. He had his desk with him, and he was playing the fantasy game.

Bean sat down beside him to watch. A lion-headed man in chain mail stood before a giant, who seemed to be offering him a choice of drinks -- the sound was shaped so that Bean couldn't hear it from beside the desk, though Shen seemed to be responding; he typed in a few words. His lion-man figure drank one of the substances and promptly died.

Shen muttered something and shoved the desk away.

"That the Giant's Drink?" said Bean. "I heard about that."

"You've never played it?" said Shen. "You can't win it. I *thought*."

"I heard. Didn't sound fun."

"*Sound* fun? You haven't tried it? It's not like it's hard to find."

Bean shrugged, trying to fake the mannerisms he'd seen other boys use. Shen looked amused. Because Bean did the cool-guy shrug wrong? Or because it looked cute to have somebody so small do it?

"Come on, you don't play the fantasy game?"

"What you said," Bean prompted him. "You **thought** nobody ever won it."

"I saw a guy in a place I'd never seen. I asked him where it was, and he said, 'Other side of the Giant's Drink.'"

"He tell you how to get there?"

"I didn't ask."

"Why not?"

Shen grinned, looked away.

"It be Wiggin, neh?" asked Bean.

The grin faded. "I didn't say that."

"I know you're his friend, that's why I came here."

"What is this? You spying on him? You from Bonzo?"

This was not going well. Bean hadn't realized how protective Wiggin's friends might be. "I'm from me. Look, nothing bad, OK? I just -- look, I just want to know about -- you know him from the start, right? They say you been his friend from launchy days."

"So what?"

"Look, he got friends, right? Like you. Even though he always does better in class, always the best on everything, right? But they don't hate him."

"Plenty bichfo [bichao] hate him."

"I got to make some friends, man." Bean knew that he shouldn't try to sound pitiful. Instead, he should sound like a pitiful kid who was trying really hard **not** to sound pitiful. So he ended his maudlin little plea with a laugh. As if he was trying to make it sound like a joke.

"You're pretty short," said Shen.

"Not on the planet I'm from," said Bean.

For the first time, Shen let a genuine smile come to his face. "The planet of the pygmies."

"Them boys too big for me."

"Look, I know what you're saying," said Shen. "I had this funny walk. Some of the kids were ragging me. Ender stopped them."

"How?"

"Ragged them more."

"I never heard he got a mouth."

"No, he didn't say nada. Did it on the desk. Sent a message from God."

Oh, yeah. Bean had heard about that. "He did that for you?"

"They were making fun of my butt. I had a big butt. Before workouts, you know? Back then. So he make fun of them for looking at my butt. But he signs it God."

"So they didn't know it was him."

"Oh, they knew. Right away. But he didn't say anything. Out loud."

"That's how you got to be friends? He the protector of the little guys?" Like Achilles ...

"*Little* guys?" said Shen. "He was the smallest in our launch group. Not like you, but way small. Younger, see."

"He was youngest, but he became your protector?"

"No. Not like that. No, he kept it from going on, that's all. He went to the group -- it was Bernard, he was getting together the biggest guys, the tough guys --"

"The bullies."

"Yeah, I guess. Only Ender, he goes to Bernard's number one, his best friend. Alai. He gets Alai to be his friend, too."

"So he stole away Bernard's support?"

"No, man. No, it's not like that. He made friends with Alai, and then got Alai to help him make friends with Bernard."

"Bernard ... he's the one, Ender broke his arm in the shuttle."

"That's right. And I think, really, Bernard never forgave him, but he saw how things were."

"How were things?"

"Ender's *good*, man. You just -- he doesn't hate anybody. If you're a good person, you're going to like him. You want him to like you. If he likes you, then you're OK, see? But if you're scum, he just makes you mad. Just knowing he exists, see? So Ender, he tries to wake up the good part of you."

"How do you wake up 'good parts'?"

"I don't know, man. You think I know? It just ... you know Ender long enough, he just makes you want him to be proud of you. That sounds so ... sounds like I'm a baby, neh?"

Bean shook his head. What it sounded like to him was devotion. Bean hadn't really understood this. Friends were friends, he thought. Like Sergeant and Poke used to be, before Achilles. But it was never love. When Achilles came, they loved him, but it was more like worship, like ... a god, he got them bread, they gave bread back to him. Like ... well, like what he called himself. Papa. Was it the same thing? Was Ender Achilles all over again?

"You're smart, kid," said Shen. "I was there, neh? Only I never once thought, How did Ender *do* it? How can I do the same, be like him? It's like that was Ender, he's great, but it's nothing *I* could do. Maybe I should have tried. I just wanted to be ... *with* him."

"Cause you're good, too," said Bean.

Shen rolled his eyes. "I guess that's what I was saying, wasn't it? Implying, anyway. Guess that makes me a brag, neh?"

"Big old brag," said Bean, grinning.

"He's just ... he makes you want to ... I'd die for him. That sounds like hero talk, neh? But it's true. I'd die for him. I'd kill for him."

"You'd fight for him."

Shen got it at once. "That's right. He's a born commander."

"Alai fight for him too?"

"A lot of us."

"But some not, yes?"

"Like I said, the bad ones, they hate him, he makes them crazy."

"So the whole world divides up -- good people love Wiggin, bad people hate Wiggin."

Shen's face went suspicious again. "I don't know why I told you all that merda. You too smart to believe any of it."

"I do believe it," said Bean. "Don't be mad at me." He'd learned that one a long time ago. Little kid says, Don't be mad at me, they feel a little silly.

"I'm not mad," said Shen. "I just thought you were making fun of me."

"I wanted to know how Wiggin makes friends."

"If I knew that, if I really understood that, I'd have more friends than I do, kid. But I got Ender as my friend, and all his friends are my friends too, and I'm their friend, so ... it's like a family."

A family. Papa. Achilles again.

That old dread returned. That night after Poke died. Seeing her body in the water. Then Achilles in the morning. How he acted. Was that Wiggin? Papa until he got his chance?

Achilles was evil, and Ender was good. Yet they both created a family. Both had people who loved them, who would die for them. Protector, papa, provider, mama. Only parent to a crowd of orphans. We're all street kids up here in Battle School, too. We might not be hungry, but we're all still wishing for a family.

Except me. Last thing I need. Some papa smiling at me, waiting with a knife.

Better to **be** the papa than to have one.

How can I do that? Get somebody to love me the way Shen loves Wiggin?

No chance. I'm too little. Too cute. I got nothing they want. All I can do is protect myself, work the system. Ender's got plenty to teach those that have some hope of doing what he's done. But me, I have to learn my own way.

Even as he made the decision, though, he knew he wasn't done with Wiggin. Whatever Wiggin had, whatever Wiggin knew, Bean **would** learn it.

And so passed the weeks, the months. Bean did all his regular classwork. He attended the regular battleroom classes with Dimak teaching them how to move and shoot, the basic skills. On his own he completed all the enrichment courses you could take at your own desk, certifying in everything. He studied military history, philosophy, strategy. He read ethics, religion, biology. He kept track of every student in the school, from the newly arrived launchies to the students about to graduate. When he saw them in the halls, he knew more about them than they knew about themselves. He knew their nation of origin. He knew how much they missed their families and how important their

native country or ethnic or religious group was to them. He knew how valuable they might be to a nationalist or idealist resistance movement.

And he kept reading everything Wiggin read, watching everything Wiggin watched. Hearing about Wiggin from the other kids. Watching Wiggin's standings on the boards. Meeting more of Wiggin's friends, hearing them talk about him. Bean listened to all the things Wiggin was quoted as saying and tried to fit them into some coherent philosophy, some worldview, some attitude, some plan.

And he found out something interesting. Despite Wiggin's altruism, despite his willingness to sacrifice, not one of his friends ever said that Wiggin came and talked over his problems. They all went to Wiggin, but who did Wiggin go to? He had no more *real* friends than Bean did. Wiggin kept his own counsel, just like Bean.

Soon Bean found himself being advanced out of classes whose work he had already mastered and being plunged into classwork with older and older groups, who looked at him with annoyance at first, but later simply with awe, as he raced past them and was promoted again before they were half done. Had Wiggin been pushed through his classwork at an accelerated rate? Yes, but not quite as fast. Was that because Bean was better? Or because the deadline was getting closer?

For the sense of urgency in teacher evaluations was getting greater. The ordinary students -- as if any child here were ordinary -- were getting briefer and briefer notations. They weren't being ignored, exactly. But the best were being identified and lifted out.

The *seeming* best. For Bean began to realize that the teachers' evaluations were often colored by which students they liked the best. The teachers pretended to be dispassionate, impartial, but in fact they got sucked in by the more charismatic children, just as the other students did. If a kid was likable, they gave him better comments on leadership, even if he was really just glib and athletic and needed to surround himself with a team. As often as not, they tagged the very students who would be the least effective commanders, while ignoring the ones who, to Bean, showed real promise. It was frustrating to watch them make such obvious mistakes. Here they had Wiggin right before their eyes -- Wiggin, who was the real thing -- and they still went on misreading everybody else. Getting all excited about some of these energetic, self-confident, ambitious kids even though they weren't actually producing excellent work.

Wasn't this whole school set up in order to find and train the best possible commanders? The Earthside testing did pretty well -- there were no real dolts among the students. But the system had overlooked one crucial factor: How were the teachers chosen?

They were career military, all of them. Proven officers with real ability. But in the military you don't get trusted positions just because of your ability. You also have to attract the notice of superior officers. You have to be liked. You have to fit in with the system. You have to look like what the officers above you think that officers should look like. You have to think in ways that they are comfortable with.

The result was that you ended up with a command structure that was top-heavy with guys who looked good in uniform and talked right and did well enough not to embarrass themselves, while the really good ones quietly did all the serious work and bailed out their superiors and got blamed for errors they had advised against until they eventually got out.

That was the military. These teachers were all the kind of people who thrived in that environment. And they were selecting their favorite students based on precisely that same screwed-up sense of priorities.

No wonder a kid like Dink Meeker saw through it and refused to play. He was one of the few kids who was both likable *and* talented. His likability made them try to make him commander of his own army; his talent let him understand why they were doing it and turn them down because he couldn't believe in such a stupid system. And other kids, like Petra Arkanian, who had obnoxious personalities but could handle strategy and tactics in their sleep, who had the confidence to lead others into war, to trust their own decisions and act on them -- they didn't care about trying to be one of the guys, and so they got overlooked, every flaw became magnified, every strength belittled.

So Bean began constructing his own anti-army. Kids who weren't getting picked out by the teachers, but were the real talents, the ones with heart and mind, not just face and chat. He began to imagine who among them should be officers, leading their own toons under the command of ...

Of Ender Wiggin, of course. Bean could not imagine anyone else in that position. Wiggin would know how to use them.

And Bean knew just where he should be. Close to Wiggin. A toon leader, but the most trusted of them. Wiggin's righthand man. So when Wiggin was about to make a mistake, Bean could point out to him the error he was making. And so that Bean could be close enough to maybe understand why Wiggin was human and he himself was not.

Sister Carlotta used her new security clearance like a scalpel, most of the time, slicing her way into the information establishment, picking up answers here and new questions there, talking to people who never guessed what her project was, why she knew so much about their top-secret work, and quietly putting it all together in her own mind, in memos to Colonel Graff.

But sometimes she wielded her top security clearance like a meat-ax, using it to get past prison wardens and security officers, who saw her unbelievable level of need-to-know and then, when they checked to make sure her documents weren't a stupid forgery, were screamed at by officers so high-ranked that it made them want to treat Sister Carlotta like God.

That's how, at last, she came face to face with Bean's father. Or at least the closest thing to a father that he had.

"I want to talk to you about your installation in Rotterdam."

He looked at her sourly. "I already reported on everything. That's why I'm not dead, though I wonder if I made the right choice."

"They told me you were quite the whiner," said Sister Carlotta, utterly devoid of compassion. "I didn't expect it to surface so quickly."

"Go to hell." He turned his back on her.

As if that meant anything. "Dr. Volescu, the records show that you had twenty-three babies in your organ farm in Rotterdam."

He said nothing.

"But of course that's a lie."

Silence.

"And, oddly enough, I know that the lie is not your idea. Because I know that your installation was not an organ farm indeed, and that the reason you aren't dead is because you agreed to plead guilty to running an organ farm in exchange for never discussing what you were **really** doing there."

He slowly turned around again. Enough that he could look up and see her with a sidelong glance. "Let me see that clearance you tried to show me before."

She showed it to him again. He studied it.

"What do you know?" he asked.

"I know your real crime was continuing a research project after it was closed down. Because you had these fertilized eggs that had been meticulously altered. You had turned Anton's key. You wanted them to be born. You wanted to see who they would become."

"If you know all that, why have you come to me? Everything I knew is in the documents you must have read."

"Not at all," said Sister Carlotta. "I don't care about confessions. I don't care about logistics. I want to know about the babies."

"They're all dead," he said. "We killed them when we knew we were about to be discovered." He looked at her with bitter defiance. "Yes, infanticide. Twenty-three murders. But since the government couldn't admit that such children had ever existed, I was never charged with the crimes. God judges me, though. God will press the charges. Is that why you're here? Is that who gave you your clearance?"

You make jokes about this? "All I want to know is what you learned about them."

"I learned nothing, there was no time, they were still babies."

"You had them for almost a year. They developed. All the work done since Anton found his key was theoretical. *You* watched the babies grow."

A slow smile crept across his face. "This is like those Nazi medical crimes all over again. You deplore what I did, but you still want to know the results of my research."

"You monitored their growth. Their health. Their intellectual development."

"We were about to start the tracking of intellectual development. The project wasn't funded, of course, so it's not as if we could provide much more than a clean warm room and basic bodily needs."

"Their bodies, then. Their motor skills."

"Small," he said. "They are born small, they grow slowly. Undersized and underweight, all of them."

"But very bright?"

"Crawling very young. Making pre-speech sounds far earlier than normal. That's all we knew. I didn't see them often myself. I couldn't afford the risk of detection."

"So what was your prognosis?"

"Prognosis?"

"How did you see their future?"

"Dead. That's everyone's future. What are you talking about?"

"If they hadn't been slaughtered, Dr. Volescu, what would have happened?"

"They would have kept on growing, of course."

"And later?"

"There *is* no later. They keep on growing."

She thought for a moment, trying to process the information.

"That's right, Sister. You're getting it. They grow slowly, but they never stop. That's what Anton's key does. Unlocks the mind because the brain never stops growing. But neither does anything else. The cranium keeps expanding -- it's never fully closed. The arms and legs, longer and longer."

"So when they reach adult height ..."

"There is no adult height. There's just height at time of death. You can't keep growing like that forever. There's a reason why evolution builds a stop-clock into the growth control of long-lived bodies. You can't keep growing without some organ giving out, eventually. Usually the heart."

The implications filled Sister Carlotta with dread. "And the rate of this growth? In the children, I mean? How long until they are at normal height for their age?"

"My guess was that they'd catch up twice," said Volescu. "Once just before puberty, and then the normal kids would leap ahead for a while, but slow and steady wins the race, n'est-ce pas? By twenty, they would be giants. And then they'd die, almost certainly before age twenty-five. Do you have any idea how huge they would be? So my killing them, you see -- it was a mercy."

"I doubt any of them would have chosen to miss out on even the mere twenty years you took from them."

"They never knew what happened to them. I'm not a monster. We drugged them all. They died in their sleep and then the bodies were incinerated."

"What about puberty? Would they ever mature sexually?"

"That's the part we'll never know, isn't it?"

Sister Carlotta got up to go.

"He lived, didn't he?" asked Volescu.

"Who?"

"The one we lost. The one whose body wasn't with the others. I counted only twenty-two going into the fire."

"When you worship Moloch, Dr. Volescu, you get no answers but the ones your chosen god provides."

"Tell me what he's like." His eyes were so hungry.

"You know it was a boy?"

"They were all boys," said Volescu.

"What, did you discard the girls?"

"How do you think I got the genes I worked with? I implanted my own altered DNA into denucleated eggs."

"God help us, they were all your own twins?"

"I'm not the monster you think I am," said Volescu. "I brought the frozen embryos to life because I had to know what they would become. Killing them was my greatest sorrow."

"And yet you did it -- to save yourself."

"I was afraid. And the thought came to me: They're only copies. It isn't murder to discard the copies."

"Their souls and lives were their own."

"Do you think the government would have let them live? Do you really think they would have survived? Any of them?"

"You don't deserve to have a son," said Sister Carlotta.

"But I have one, don't I?" He laughed. "While you, Miss Carlotta, perpetual bride of the invisible God, how many do **you** have?"

"They may have been copies, Volescu, but even dead they're worth more than the original."

He continued laughing as she walked down the corridor away from him, but it sounded forced. She knew his laughter was a mask for grief. But it wasn't the grief of compassion, or even of remorse. It was the grief of a damned soul.

Bean. God be thanked, she thought, that you do not know your father, and never will. You're nothing like him. You're far more human.

In the back of her mind, though, she had one nagging doubt. Was she sure Bean had more compassion, more humanity? Or was Bean as cold of heart as this man? As incapable of empathy? Was he all mind?

Then she thought of him growing and growing, from this too-tiny child to a giant whose body could no longer sustain life. This was the legacy your father gave you. This was Anton's key. She thought of David's cry, when he learned of the death of his son. Absalom! Oh Absalom! Would God I could die for thee, Absalom, my son!

But he was not dead yet, was he? Volescu might have been lying, might simply be wrong. There might be some way to prevent it. And even if there was not, there were still many years ahead of Bean. And how he lived those years still mattered.

God raises up the children that he needs, and makes men and women of them, and then takes them from this world at his good pleasure. To him all of life is but a moment. All that matters is what that moment was used for. And Bean *would* use it well. She was sure of that.

Or at least she hoped it with such fervor that it felt like certainty.

CHAPTER 12 -- ROSTER

"If Wiggin's the one, then let's get him to Eros."

"He's not ready for Command School yet. It's premature."

"Then we have to go with one of the alternates."

"That's your decision."

"*Our* decision! What do we have to go on but what you tell us?"

"I've told you about those older boys, too. You have the same data I have."

"Do we have all of it?"

"Do you *want* all of it?"

"Do we have the data on all the children with scores and evaluations at such a high level?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Some of them are disqualified for various reasons."

"Disqualified by whom?"

"By me."

"On what grounds?"

"One of them is borderline insane, for instance. We're trying to find some structure in which his abilities will be useful. But he could not possibly bear the weight of complete command."

"That's one."

"Another is undergoing surgery to correct a physical defect."

"Is it a defect that limits his ability to command?"

"It limits his ability to be trained to command."

"But it's being fixed."

"He's about to have his third operation. If it works, he might amount to something. But, as you say, there won't be time."

"How many more children have you concealed from us?"

"I have *concealed* none of them. If you mean how many have I simply not referred to you as potential commanders, the answer is *all* of them. Except the ones whose names you already have."

"Let me be blunt. We hear rumors about a very young one."

"They're all young."

"We hear rumors about a child who makes the Wiggin boy look slow."

"They all have their different strengths."

"There are those who want you relieved of your command."

"If I'm not to be allowed to select and train these kids properly, I'd prefer to be relieved, sir. Consider this a request."

"So it was a stupid threat. Advance them all as quickly as you can. just keep in mind that they need a certain amount of time in Command School, too. It does us no good to give them all your training if they don't have time to get ours."

Dimak met Graff in the battleroom control center. Graff conducted all his secure meetings here, until they could be sure Bean had grown enough that he couldn't get through the ducts. The battlerooms had their own separate air systems.

Graff had an essay on his desk display. "Have you read this? 'Problems in Campaigning Between Solar Systems Separated by Light-years.'"

"It's been circulating pretty widely among the faculty."

"But it isn't signed," said Graff. "You don't happen to know who wrote it, do you?"

"No, sir. Did you write it?"

"I'm no scholar, Dimak, you know that. In fact, this was written by a student."

"At Command School?"

"A student here."

At that moment Dimak understood why he had been called in. "Bean."

"Six years old. The paper reads like a work of scholarship!"

"I should have guessed. He picks up the voice of the strategists he's been reading. Or their translators. Though I don't know what will happen now that he's he's [sic -- should be a single "he's"] been reading Frederick and Bulow in the original -- French and German. He inhales languages and breathes them back out."

"What did you think of this paper?"

"You already know it's killing me to keep key information from this boy. If he can write *this* with what he knows, what would happen if we told him everything? Colonel Graff, why can't we promote him right out of Battle School, set him loose as a theorist, and then watch what he spits out?"

"Our job isn't to find theorists here. It's too late for theory anyway."

"I just think ... look, a kid so small, who'd follow him? He's being wasted here. But when he writes, nobody knows how little he is. Nobody knows how young he is."

"I see your point, but we're not going to breach security, period."

"Isn't he already a grave security risk?"

"The mouse who scuttles through the ducts?"

"No. I think he's grown too big for that. He doesn't do those side-arm pushups anymore. I thought the security risk came from the fact that he guessed that an offensive fleet had been launched generations ago, so why were we still training children for command?"

"From analysis of his papers, from his activities when he signs on as a teacher, we think he's got a theory and it's wonderfully wrong. But he believes his false theory *only* because he doesn't know about the ansible. Do you understand? Because that's the main thing we'd have to tell him about, isn't it?"

"Of course."

"So you see, that's the one thing we can't tell him."

"What is his theory?"

"That we're assembling children here in preparation for a war between nations, or between nations and the I.F. A landside war, back on Earth."

"Why would we take the kids into space to prepare for a war on Earth?"

"Think just a minute and you'll get it."

"Because ... because when we've licked the Formics, there probably **will** be a little landside conflict. And all the talented commanders -- the I.F. would already have them."

"You see? We can't have this kid publishing, not even within the I.F. Not everybody has given up loyalty to groups on Earth."

"So why did you call me in?"

"Because I **do** want to use him. We aren't running the war here, but we **are** running a school. Did you read his paper about the ineffectiveness of using officers as teachers?"

"Yes. I felt slapped."

"This time he's mostly wrong, because he has no way of knowing how nontraditional our recruitment of faculty has always been. But he may also be a little bit right. Because our system of testing for officer potential was designed to produce candidates with the traits identified in the most highly regarded officers in the Second Invasion."

"Hi-ho."

"You see? Some of the highly regarded were officers who performed well in battle, but the war was too short to weed out the deadwood. The officers they tested included just the kind of people he criticized in his paper. So ..."

"So he had the wrong reason, but the right result."

"Absolutely. It gives us little pricks like Bonzo Madrid. You've known officers like him, haven't you? So why should we be surprised that our tests give him command of an army even though he has no idea what to do with it. All the vanity and all the stupidity of Custer or Hooker or -- hell, pick your own vain incompetent, it's the most common kind of general officer."

"May I quote you?"

"I'll deny it. The thing is, Bean has been studying the dossiers of all the other students. We think he's evaluating them for loyalty to their native identity group, and also for their excellence as commanders."

"By *his* standards of excellence."

"We need to get Ender the command of an army. We're under a lot of pressure to get our leading candidates into Command School. But if we bust one of the current commanders in order to make a place for Ender, it'll cause too much resentment."

"So you have to give him a new army."

"Dragon."

"There are still kids here who remember the last Dragon Army."

"Right. I like that. The jinx."

"I see. You want to give Ender a running start."

"It gets worse."

"I thought it would."

"We also aren't going to give him any soldiers that aren't already on their commanders' transfer list."

"The dregs? What are you *doing* to this kid?"

"If we choose them, by our ordinary standards, then yes, the dregs. But we aren't going to choose Ender's army."

"Bean?"

"Our tests are worthless on this, right? Some of those dregs are the very best students, according to Bean, right? And he's been studying the launchies. So give him an assignment. Tell him to solve a hypothetical problem. Construct an army only out of launchies. Maybe the soldiers on the transfer lists, too."

"I don't think there's any way to do that without telling him that we're on to his fake teacher login."

"So tell him."

"Then he won't believe anything he found while searching."

"He didn't find anything," said Graff. "We didn't have to plant anything fake for him to find, because he had his false theory. See? So whether he thinks we planted stuff or not, he'll stay deceived and we're still secure."

"You seem to be counting on your understanding of his psychology."

"Sister Carlotta assures me that he differs from ordinary human DNA in only one small area."

"So now he's human again?"

"I've got to make decisions based on *something*, Dimak!"

"So the jury's still out on the human thing?"

"Get me a roster of the hypothetical army Bean would pick, so we can give it to Ender."

"He'll put himself in it, you know."

"He damn well better, or he's not as smart as we've been thinking."

"What about Ender? Is he ready?"

"Anderson thinks he is." Graff sighed. "To Bean, it's still just a game, because none of the weight has fallen on him yet. But Ender ... I think he knows, deep down, where this is going to lead. I think he feels it already."

"Sir, just because you're feeling the weight doesn't mean he is."

Graff laughed. "You cut straight to the heart of things, don't you!"

"Bean's hungry for it, sir. If Ender isn't, then why not put the burden where it's wanted?"

"If Bean's hungry for it, it proves he's still too young. Besides, the hungry ones always have something to prove. Look at Napoleon. Look at Hitler. Bold at first, yes, but then *still* bold later on, when they need to cautious, to pull back. Patton. Caesar. Alexander. Always overreaching, never quite putting the finish on it. No, it's Ender, not Bean. Ender doesn't want to do it, so he won't have anything to prove."

"Are you sure you're not just picking the kind of commander you'd want to serve under?"

"That's precisely what I'm doing," said Graff. "Can you think of a better standard?"

"The thing is, you can't pass the buck on this one, can you? Can't say how it was the tests, you just followed the tests. The scores. Whatever."

"Can't run this like a machine."

"That's why you don't want Bean, isn't it? Because he was *made*, like a machine."

"I don't analyze myself. I analyze *them*."

"So if we win, who really won the war? The commander you picked? Or you, for picking him?"

"The Triumvirate, for trusting me. After their fashion. But if we lose ..."

"Well *then* it's definitely you."

"We're *all* dead then. What will they do? Kill me first? Or leave me till last so I can contemplate the consequences of my error?"

"Ender, though. I mean if he's the one. *He* won't say it's you. He'll take it all on himself. Not the credit for victory -- just the blame for failure."

"Win or lose, the kid I pick is going to have a brutal time of it."

Bean got his summons during lunch. He reported at once to Dimak's quarters.

He found his teacher sitting at his desk, reading something. The light was set so that Bean couldn't read it through the dazzle.

"Have a seat," said Dimak.

Bean jumped up and sat on Dimak's bed, his legs dangling.

"Let me read you something," said Dimak. "There are no fortifications, no magazines, no strong points ... In the enemy solar system, there can be no living off the land, since access to habitable planets will be possible only after complete victory ... Supply lines are not a problem, since there are none to protect, but the cost of that is that all supplies and ordnance must be carried with the invading fleet ... In effect, all interstellar invasion fleets are suicide attacks, because time dilation means that even if a fleet returns intact, almost no one they knew will still be alive. They can never return, and so must be sure that their force is sufficient to be decisive and therefore is worth the sacrifice.... Mixed-sex forces allow the possibility of the army becoming a permanent colony and/or occupying force on the captured enemy planet."

Bean listened complacently. He had left it in his desk for them to find it, and they had done so.

"You wrote this, Bean, but you never submitted it to anybody."

"There was never an assignment that it fit."

"You don't seem surprised that we found it."

"I assume that you routinely scan our desks."

"Just as you routinely scan ours?"

Bean felt his stomach twist with fear. They knew.

"Cute, naming your false log-in 'Graff' with a caret in front of it."

Bean said nothing.

"You've been scanning all the other students' records. Why?"

"I wanted to know them. I've only made friends with a few."

"Close friends with none."

"I'm little and I'm smarter than they are. Nobody's standing in line."

"So you use their records to tell you more about them. Why do you feel the need to understand them?"

"Someday I'll be in command of one of these armies."

"Plenty of time to get to know your soldiers then."

"No sir," said Bean. "No time at all."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the way I've been promoted. And Wiggin. We're the two best students in this school, and we're being raced through. I'm not going to have much time when I get an army."

"Bean, be realistic. It's going to be a long time before anybody's going to be willing to follow you into battle."

Bean said nothing. He knew that this was false, even if Dimak didn't. "Let's see just how good your analysis is. Let me give you an assignment."

"For which class?"

"No class, Bean. I want you to create a hypothetical army. Working only with launchies, construct an entire roster, the full complement of forty-one soldiers."

"*No* veterans?"

Bean meant the question neutrally, just checking to make sure he understood the rules. But Dimak seemed to take it as criticism of the unfairness of it. "No, tell you what, you can include veterans who are posted for transfer at their commanders' request. That'll give you some experienced ones."

The ones the commander couldn't work with. Some really were losers, but some were the opposite. "Fine," said Bean.

"How long do you think it will take you?"

Bean already had a dozen picked out. "I can tell the list to you right now."

"I want you to think about it seriously."

"I already have. But you need to answer a couple of questions first. You said forty-one soldiers, but that would include the commander."

"All right, forty, and leave the commander blank."

"I have another question. Am I to command the army?"

"You can write it up that way, if you want."

But Dimak's very unconcern told Bean that the army was not for him. "This army's for Wiggin, isn't it?"

Dimak glowered. "It's hypothetical."

"Definitely Wiggin," said Bean. "You can't boot somebody else out of command to make room for him, so you're giving Wiggin a whole new army. I bet it's Dragon."

Dimak looked stricken, though he tried to cover it.

"Don't worry," said Bean. "I'll give him the best army you can form, following those rules."

"I *said* this was hypothetical!"

"You think I wouldn't figure it out when I found myself in Wiggin's army and everybody else in it was also on my roster?"

"Nobody's said we're actually going to follow your roster!"

"You will. Because I'll be right and you'll know it," said Bean. "And I can promise you, it'll be a hell of an army. With Wiggin to train us, we'll kick ass."

"Just do the hypothetical assignment, and talk to no one about it. Ever."

That was dismissal, but Bean didn't want to be dismissed yet. They came to *him*. They were having *him* do their work. He wanted to have his say while they were still listening. "The reason this army can be so good is that your system's been promoting a lot of the wrong kids. About half the best kids in this school are launchies or on the transfer lists, because they're the ones who haven't already been beaten into submission by the kiss-ass idiots you put in command of armies or toons. These misfits and little kids are the ones who can win. Wiggin will figure that out. He'll know how to use us."

"Bean, you're not as smart about everything as you think you are!"

"Yes I am, sir," said Bean. "Or you wouldn't have given this assignment to me. May I be dismissed? Or do you want me to tell you the roster now?"

"Dismissed," said Dimak.

I probably shouldn't have provoked him, thought Bean. Now it's possible that he'll fiddle with my roster just to prove he can. But that's not the kind of man he is. If I'm not right about that, then I'm not right about anybody else, either.

Besides, it felt good to speak the truth to someone in power.

After working with the list a little while, Bean was just as glad that Dimak hadn't taken him up on his foolish offer to make up the roster on the spot. Because it wasn't just a matter of naming the forty best soldiers among the launchies and the transfer lists.

Wiggin was way early for command, and that would make it harder for older kids to take it -- getting put into a kid's army. So he struck off the list all who were older than Wiggin.

That left him with nearly sixty kids who were good enough to be in the army. Bean was ranking them in order of value when he realized that he was about to make another mistake. Quite a few of these kids were in the group of launchies and soldiers that practiced with Wiggin during free time. Wiggin would know these kids best, and naturally he'd look to them to be his toon leaders. The core of his army.

The trouble was, while a couple of them would do fine as toon leaders, relying on that group would mean passing over several who weren't part of that group. Including Bean.

So he doesn't choose me to lead a toon. He isn't going to choose me anyway, right? I'm too little. He won't look at me and see a leader.

Is this just about me, then? Am I corrupting this process just to get myself a chance to show what I can do?

And if I am, what's wrong with that? I know what I can do, and no one else really gets it. The teachers think I'm a scholar, they know I'm smart, they trust my judgment, but they aren't making this army for me, they're making it for him. I still have to prove to them what I can do. And if I really am one of the best, it would be to the benefit of the program to have it revealed as quickly as possible.

And then he thought: Is this how idiots rationalize their stupidity to themselves?

"Ho, Bean," said Nikolai.

"Ho," said Bean. He passed a hand across his desk, blanking the display. "Tell me."

"Nothing to tell. *You* looked grim."

"Just doing an assignment."

Nikolai laughed. "You never look that serious doing classwork. You just read for a while and then you type for a while. Like it was nothing. This is something."

"An extra assignment."

"A hard one, neh?"

"Not very."

"Sorry to break in. Just thought maybe something was wrong. Maybe a letter from home."

They both laughed at that. Letters weren't that common here. Every few months at the most. And the letters were pretty empty when they came. Some never got mail at all. Bean was one of them, and Nikolai knew why. It wasn't a secret, he was just the only one who noticed and the only one who asked about it. "No family at *all*?" he had said. "Some kids' families, maybe I'm the lucky one," Bean answered him, and Nikolai agreed. "But not mine. I wish you had parents like mine." And then he went on about how he was an only child, but his parents really worked hard to get him. "They did it with surgery, fertilized five or six eggs, then twinned the healthiest ones a few more times, and finally they picked me. I grew up like I was going to be king or the Dalai Lama or something. And then one day the I.F. says, we need him. Hardest thing my parents ever did, saying yes. But I said, What if I'm the next Mazer Rackham? And they let me go."

That was months ago, but it was still between them, that conversation. Kids didn't talk much about home. Nikolai didn't discuss his family with anybody else, either. Just with Bean. And in return, Bean told him a little about life on the street. Not a lot of details, because it would sound like he was asking for pity or trying to look cool. But he mentioned how they were organized into a family. Talked about how it was Poke's crew, and then it became Achilles' family, and how they got into a charity kitchen. Then Bean waited to see how much of this story started circulating.

None of it did. Nikolai never said a word about it to anyone else. That was when Bean was sure that Nikolai was worth having as a friend. He could keep things to himself without even having to be asked to do it.

And now here Bean was, making up the roster for this great army, and here sat Nikolai, asking him what he was doing. Dimak had said to tell no one, but Nikolai could keep a secret. What harm could it do?

Then Bean recovered his senses. Knowing about this wouldn't help Nikolai in any way. Either he'd be in Dragon Army or he wouldn't. If he wasn't, he'd know Bean hadn't put him there. If he was, it would be worse, because he'd wonder if Bean had included him in the roster out of friendship instead of excellence.

Besides, Nikolai shouldn't be in Dragon Army. Bean liked him and trusted him, but Nikolai was not among the best of the launchies. He was smart, he was quick, he was good -- but he was nothing special.

Except to me, thought Bean.

"It was a letter from **your** parents," said Bean. "They've stopped writing to you, they like me better."

"Yeah, and the Vatican is moving to Mecca."

"And I'm going to be made Polemarch."

"No jeito," said Nikolai. "You too tall, bicho." Nikolai picked up his desk. "I can't help you with your classwork tonight, Bean, so please don't beg me." He lay back on his bed, started into the fantasy game.

Bean lay back, too. He woke up his display and began wrestling with the names again. If he eliminated every one of the kids who'd been practicing with Wiggin, how many of the good ones would it leave? Fifteen veterans from the transfer lists. Twenty-two launchies, including Bean.

Why **hadn't** these launchies taken part in Wiggin's freetime practices? The veterans, they were already in trouble with their commanders, they weren't about to antagonize them any more, so it made sense for them not to have taken part. But these launchies, weren't they ambitious? Or were they bookish, trying to do it all through classwork instead of catching on that the battleroom was everything? Bean couldn't fault them for that -- it had taken him a while to catch on, too. Were they so confident of their own abilities they didn't think they needed the extra prep? Or so arrogant they didn't want anybody to think they owed their success to Ender Wiggin? Or so shy they ...

No. He couldn't possibly guess their motives. They were all too complex anyway. They were smart, with good evaluations -- good by Bean's standards, not necessarily by the teachers'. That was all he needed to know. If he gave Wiggin an army without a single kid he'd worked with in practices, then all the army would start out equal in his eyes. Which meant Bean would have the

same chance as any other kid to earn Wiggin's eye and maybe get command of a toon. If they couldn't compete with Bean for that position, then too damn bad for them.

But that left him with thirty-seven names on the roster. Three more slots to fill.

He went back and forth on a couple. Finally decided to include Crazy Tom, a veteran who held the unenviable record of being the most-transferred soldier in the history of the game who wasn't actually iced and sent home. So far. The thing was, Crazy Tom really was good. Sharp mind. But he couldn't stand it when somebody above him was stupid and unfair. And when he got pissed, he really went off. Ranting, throwing things, tearing bedding off every bed in his barracks once, another time writing a message about what an idiot his commander was and mailing it to every other student in the school. A few actually got it before the teachers intercepted it, and they said it was the hottest thing they ever read. Crazy Tom. Could be disruptive. But maybe he was just waiting for the right commander. He was in.

And a girl, Wu, which of course had become Woo and even Woo-*hoo*. Brilliant at her studies, absolutely a killer in the arcade games, but she refused to be a toon leader and as soon as her commanders asked her, she put in for a transfer and refused to fight until they gave it to her. Weird. Bean had no idea why she did that -- the teachers were baffled, too. Nothing in her tests to show why. What the hell, thought Bean. She's in.

Last slot.

He typed in Nikolai's name.

Am I doing him a favor? He's not bad, he's just a little slower than these kids, just a little gentler. It'll be hard for him. And if he's left out of it, he won't mind. He'll just do his best with whatever army he gets sent to eventually.

And yet ... Dragon Army is going to be a legend. Not just here in Battle School, either. These kids are going to go on to be leaders in the I.F. Or somewhere, anyway. And they'll tell stories about when they were in Dragon Army with the great Ender Wiggin. And if I include Nikolai, then even if he isn't the best of the soldiers, even if he's in fact the slowest, he'll still be *in*, he'll still be able to tell those stories someday. And he's not bad. He won't embarrass himself. He won't bring down the army. He'll do OK. So why not?

And I want him with me. He's the only one I've ever talked to. About personal things. The only one who knows the name of Poke. I want him. And there's a slot on the roster.

Bean went down the list one more time. Then he alphabetized it and mailed it to Dimak.

The next morning, Bean, Nikolai, and three other kids in their launch group had their assignment to Dragon Army. Months before they should have been promoted to soldiers. The unchosen kids

were envious, hurt, furious by turn. Especially when they realized Bean was one of the chosen. "Do they *make* uniform flash suits that size?"

It was a good question. And the answer was no, they didn't. The colors of Dragon Army were grey, orange, grey. Because soldiers were usually a lot older than Bean when they came in, they had to cut a flash suit down for Bean, and they didn't do it all that well. Flash suits weren't manufactured in space, and nobody had the tools to do a first-rate job of alteration.

When they finally got it to fit him, Bean wore his flash suit to the Dragon Army barracks. Because it had taken him so long to be fitted, he was the last to arrive. Wiggin arrived at the door just as Bean was entering. "Go ahead," said Wiggin.

It was the first time Wiggin had ever spoken to him -- for all Bean knew, the first time Wiggin had even noticed him. So thoroughly had Bean concealed his fascination with Wiggin that he had made himself effectively invisible.

Wiggin followed him into the room. Bean started down the corridor between the bunks, heading for the back of the room where the younger soldiers always had to sleep. He glanced at the other kids, who were all looking at him as he passed with a mixture of horror and amusement. They were in an army so lame that *this* little tiny kid was part of it?

Behind him, Wiggin was starting his first speech. Voice confident, loud enough but not shouting, not nervous. "I'm Ender Wiggin. I'm your commander. Bunking will be arranged by seniority."

Some of the launchies groaned.

"Veterans to the back of the room, newest soldiers to the front."

The groaning stopped. That was the opposite of the way things were usually arranged. Wiggin was already shaking things up. Whenever he came into the barracks, the kids closest to him would be the new ones. Instead of getting lost in the shuffle, they'd always have his attention.

Bean turned around and headed back to the front of the room. He was still the youngest kid in Battle School, but five of the soldiers were from more recently arrived launch groups, so they got the positions nearest the door. Bean got an upper bunk directly across from Nikolai, who had the same seniority, being from the same launch group.

Bean clambered up onto his bed, hampered by his flash suit, and put his palm beside the locker. Nothing happened.

"Those of you who are in an army for the first time," said Wiggin, "just pull the locker open by hand. No locks. Nothing private here."

Laboriously Bean pulled off his flash suit to stow it in his locker.

Wiggin walked along between the bunks, making sure that seniority was respected. Then he jogged to the front of the room. "All right, everybody. Put on your flash suits and come to practice."

Bean looked at him in complete exasperation. Wiggin had been looking right at him when he started taking off his flash suit. Why didn't he suggest that Bean not take the damn thing off?

"We're on the morning schedule," Wiggin continued. "Straight to practice after breakfast. Officially you have a free hour between breakfast and practice. We'll see what happens after I find out how good you are."

Truth was, Bean felt like an idiot. Of course Wiggin would head for practice immediately. He shouldn't have needed a warning not to take the suit off. He should have *known*.

He tossed his suit pieces onto the floor and slid down the frame of the bunk. A lot of the other kids were talking, flipping clothes at each other, playing with their weapons. Bean tried to put on the cut-down suit, but couldn't figure out some of the jury-rigged fastenings. He had to take off several pieces and examine them to see how they fit, and finally gave up, took it all off, and started assembling it on the floor.

Wiggin, unconcerned, glanced at his watch. Apparently three minutes was his deadline. "All right, everybody out, now! On your way!"

"But I'm naked!" said one boy -- Anwar, from Ecuador, child of Egyptian immigrants. His dossier ran through Bean's mind.

"Dress faster next time," said Wiggin.

Bean was naked, too. Furthermore, Wiggin was standing right there, watching him struggle with his suit. He could have helped. He could have waited. What am I getting myself in for?

"Three minutes from first call to running out the door -- that's the rule this week," said Wiggin. "Next week the rule is two minutes. Move!"

Out in the corridor, kids who were in the midst of free time or were heading for class stopped to watch the parade of the unfamiliar uniforms of Dragon Army. And to mock the ones that were even more unusual.

One thing for sure. Bean was going to have to practice getting dressed in his cut-down suit if he was going to avoid running naked through the corridors. And if Wiggin didn't make any exceptions for him the first day, when he'd only just got his nonregulation flash suit, Bean certainly was *not* going to ask for special favors.

I chose to put myself in this army, Bean reminded himself as he jogged along, trying to keep pieces of his flash suit from spilling out of his arms.

PART FOUR -- SOLDIER

CHAPTER 13 -- DRAGON ARMY

"I need access to Bean's genetic information," said Sister Carlotta.

"That's not for you," said Graff.

"And here I thought my clearance level would open any door."

"We invented a special new category of security, called 'Not for Sister Carlotta.' We don't want you sharing Bean's genetic information with anyone else. And you were already planning on putting it in other hands, weren't you?"

"Only to perform a test. So ... you'll have to perform it for me. I want a comparison between Bean's DNA and Volescu's."

"I thought you told me Volescu was the source of the cloned DNA."

"I've been thinking about it since I told you that, Colonel Graff, and you know what? Bean doesn't look anything like Volescu. I couldn't see how he could possibly grow up to be like him, either."

"Maybe the difference in growth patterns makes him look different, too."

"Maybe. But it's also possible Volescu is lying. He's a vain man."

"Lying about everything?"

"Lying about anything. About paternity, quite possibly. And if he's lying about that --"

"Then maybe Bean's prognosis isn't so bleak? Don't you think we've already checked with our genetics people? Volescu wasn't lying about that, anyway. Anton's key will probably behave just the way he described."

"Please. Run the test and tell me the results."

"Because you don't want Bean to be Volescu's son."

"I don't want Bean to be Volescu's twin. And neither, I think, do you."

"Good point. Though I must tell you, the boy does have a vain streak."

"When you're as gifted as Bean, accurate self-assessment looks like vanity to other people."

"Yeah, but he doesn't have to rub it in, does he?"

"Uh-oh. Has someone's ego been hurt?"

"Not mine. Yet. But one of his teachers is feeling a little bruised."

"I notice you aren't telling me I faked his scores anymore."

"Yes, Sister Carlotta, you were right all along. He deserves to be here. And so does ... Well, let's just say you hit the jackpot after all those years of searching."

"It's humanity's jackpot."

"I said he was worth bringing up here, not that he was the one who'll lead us to victory. The wheel's still spinning on that one. And my money's on another number."

Going up the ladderways while holding a flash suit wasn't practical, so Wiggin made the ones who were dressed run up and down the corridor, working up a sweat, while Bean and the other naked or partially-dressed kids got their suits on. Nikolai helped Bean get his suit fastened; it humiliated Bean to need help, but it would have been worse to be the last one finished -- the pesky little teeny brat who slows everyone down. With Nikolai's help, he was not the last one done.

"Thanks."

"No ojjikay [sic -- no idea what this means]."

Moments later, they were streaming up the ladders to the battleroom level. Wiggin took them all the way to the upper door, the one that opened out into the middle of the battleroom wall. The one used for entering when it was an actual battle. There were handholds on the sides, the ceiling, and the floor, so students could swing out and hurl themselves into the null-G environment. The story was that gravity was lower in the battleroom because it was closer to the center of the station, but Bean had already realized that was bogus. There would still be some centrifugal force at the doors and a pronounced Coriolis effect. Instead, the battlerooms were completely null. To Bean, that meant that the I.F. had a device that would either block gravitation or, more likely, produce false gravity that was perfectly balanced to counter Coriolis and centrifugal forces in the battleroom, starting exactly at the door. It was a stunning technology -- and it was never discussed inside the I.F., at least not in the literature available to students in Battle School, and completely unknown outside.

Wiggin assembled them in four files along the corridor and ordered them to jump up and use the ceiling handholds to fling their bodies into the room. "Assemble on the far wall, as if you were going for the enemy's gate." To the veterans that meant something. To the launchies, who had never

been in a battle and had never, for that matter, entered through the upper door, it meant nothing at all. "Run up and go four at a time when I open the gate, one group per second." Wiggin walked to the back of the group and, using his hook, a controller strapped to the inside of his wrist and curved to conform to his left hand, he made the door, which had seemed quite solid, disappear.

"Go!" The first four kids started running for the gate. "Go!" The next group began to run before the first had even reached it. There would be no hesitation or somebody would crash into you from behind. "Go!" The first group grabbed and swung with varying degrees of clumsiness and heading out in various directions. "Go!" Later groups learned, or tried to, from the awkwardness of the earlier ones. "Go!"

Bean was at the end of the line, in the last group. Wiggin laid a hand on his shoulder. "You can use a side handhold if you want."

Right, thought Bean. *Now* you decide to baby me. Not because my meshugga flash suit didn't fit together right, but just because I'm short. "Go suck on it," said Bean.

"Go!"

Bean kept pace with the other three, though it meant pumping his legs half again as fast, and when he got near the gate he took a flying leap, tapped the ceiling handhold with his fingers as he passed, and sailed out into the room with no control at all, spinning in three nauseating directions at once.

But he didn't expect himself to do any better, and instead of fighting the spin, he calmed himself and did his anti-nausea routine, relaxing himself until he neared a wall and had to prepare for impact. He didn't land near one of the recessed handholds and wasn't facing the right way to grab anything even if he had. So he rebounded, but this time was a little more stable as he flew, and he ended up on the ceiling very near the back wall. It took him less time than some to make his way down to where the others were assembling, lined up along the floor under the middle gate on the back wall -- the enemy gate.

Wiggin sailed calmly through the air. Because he had a hook, during practice he could maneuver in midair in ways that soldiers couldn't; during battle, though, the hook would be useless, so commanders had to make sure they didn't become dependent on the hook's added control. Bean noted approvingly that Wiggin seemed not to use the hook at all. He sailed in sideways, snagged a handhold on the floor about ten paces out from the back wall, and hung in the air. Upside down.

Fixing his gaze on one of them, Wiggin demanded, "Why are you upside down, soldier?"

Immediately some of the other soldiers started to turn themselves upside down like Wiggin.

"Attention!" Wiggin barked. All movement stopped. "I said why are you upside down!"

Bean was surprised that the soldier didn't answer. Had he forgotten what the teacher did in the shuttle on the way here? The deliberate disorientation? Or was that something that only Dimak did?

"I said why does every one of you have his feet in the air and his head toward the ground!"

Wiggin didn't look at Bean in particular, and this was one question Bean didn't want to answer. There was no assurance of which particular correct answer Wiggin was looking for, so why open his mouth just to get shut down?

It was a kid named Shame -- short for Seamus -- who finally spoke up. "Sir, this is the direction we were in coming out of the door." Good job, thought Bean. Better than some lame argument that there was no up or down in null-G.

"Well what difference is that supposed to make! What difference does it make what the gravity was back in the corridor! Are we going to fight in the corridor? Is there any gravity here?"

No sir, they all murmured.

"From now on, you forget about gravity before you go through that door. The old gravity is gone, erased. Understand me? Whatever your gravity is when you get to the door, remember -- the enemy's gate is down. Your feet are toward the enemy gate. Up is toward your own gate. North is that way" -- he pointed toward what had been the ceiling -- "south is that way, east is that way, west is -- what way?"

They pointed.

"That's what I expected," said Wiggin. "The only process you've mastered is the process of elimination, and the only reason you've mastered that is because you can do it in the toilet."

Bean watched, amused. So Wiggin subscribed to the you're-so-stupid-you-need-me-to-wipe-your-butts school of basic training. Well, maybe that was necessary. One of the rituals of training. Boring till it was over, but ... commander's choice.

Wiggin glanced at Bean, but his eyes kept moving.

"What was the circus I saw out here! Did you call that forming up? Did you call that flying? Now everybody, launch and form up on the ceiling! Right now! Move!"

Bean knew what the trap was and launched for the wall they had just entered through before Wiggin had even finished talking. Most of the others also got what the test was, but a fair number of them launched the wrong way -- toward the direction Wiggin had called *north* instead of the direction he had identified as *up*. This time Bean happened to arrive near a handhold, and he caught it with surprising ease. He had done it before in his launch group's battleroom practices, but he was small enough that, unlike the others, it was quite possible for him to land in a place that had no handhold within reach. Short arms were a definite drawback in the battleroom. On short bounds he could aim at a handhold and get there with some accuracy. On a cross-room jump there was little hope of that. So it felt good that this time, at least, he didn't look like an oaf. In fact, having launched first, he arrived first.

Bean turned around and watched as the ones who had blown it made the long, embarrassing second leap to join the rest of the army. He was a little surprised at who some of the bozos were. Inattention can make clowns of us all, he thought.

Wiggin was watching him again, and this time it was no passing glance.

"You!" Wiggin pointed at him. "Which way is down?"

Didn't we just cover this? "Toward the enemy door."

"Name, kid?"

Come on, Wiggin really didn't know who the short kid with the highest scores in the whole damn school was? Well, if we're playing mean sergeant and hapless recruit, I better follow the script. "This soldier's name is Bean, sir."

"Get that for size or for brains?"

Some of the other soldiers laughed. But not many of them. *They* knew Bean's reputation. To them it was no longer funny that he was so small -- it was just embarrassing that a kid that small could make perfect scores on tests that had questions they didn't even understand.

"Well, Bean, you're right onto things." Wiggin now included the whole group as he launched into a lecture on how coming through the door feet first made you a much smaller target for the enemy to shoot at. Harder for him to hit you and freeze you. "Now, what happens when you're frozen?"

"Can't move," somebody said.

"That's what frozen *means*," said Wiggin. "But what *happens* to you?"

Wiggin wasn't phrasing his question very clearly, in Bean's opinion, and there was no use in prolonging the agony while the others figured it out. So Bean spoke up. "You keep going in the direction you started in. At the speed you were going when you were flashed."

"That's true," said Wiggin. "You five, there on the end, move!" He pointed at five soldiers, who spent long enough looking at each other to make sure which five he meant that Wiggin had time to flash them all, freezing them in place. During practice, it took a few minutes for a freeze to wear off, unless the commander used his hook to unfreeze them earlier.

"The next five, move!"

Seven kids moved at once -- no time to count. Wiggin flashed them as quickly as he flashed the others, but because they had already launched, they kept moving at a good clip toward the walls they had headed for.

The first five were hovering in the air near where they had been frozen.

"Look at these so-called soldiers. Their commander ordered them to move, and now look at them. Not only are they frozen, they're frozen right here, where they can get in the way. While the others, because they moved when they were ordered, are frozen down there, plugging up the enemy's lanes, blocking the enemy's vision. I imagine that about five of you have understood the point of this."

We all understand it, Wiggin. It's not like they bring stupid people up here to Battle School. It's not like I didn't pick you the best available army.

"And no doubt Bean is one of them. Right, Bean?"

Bean could hardly believe that Wiggin was singling him out **again**.

Just because I'm little, he's using me to embarrass the others. The little guy knows the answers, so why don't you big boys.

But then, Wiggin doesn't realize yet. He thinks he has an army of incompetent launchies and rejects. He hasn't had a chance to see that he actually has a select group. So he thinks of me as the most ludicrous of a sad lot. He's found out I'm not an idiot, but he still assumes the others are.

Wiggin was still looking at him. Oh, yeah, he had asked a question. "Right, sir," said Bean.

"Then what is the point?"

Spit back to him exactly what he just said to us. "When you are ordered to move, move fast, so if you get iced you'll bounce around instead of getting in the way of your own army's operations."

"Excellent. At least I have one soldier who can figure things out."

Bean was disgusted. This was the commander who was supposed to turn Dragon into a legendary army? Wiggin was supposed to be the alpha and omega of the Battle School, and he's playing the game of singling me out to be the goat. Wiggin didn't even find out our scores, didn't discuss his soldiers with the teachers. If he did, he'd already know that I'm the smartest kid in the school. The others all know it. That's why they're looking at each other in embarrassment. Wiggin is revealing his own ignorance.

Bean saw how Wiggin seemed to be registering the distaste of his own soldiers. It was just an eyeblink, but maybe Wiggin finally got it that his make-fun-of-the-shrimp ploy was backfiring. Because he finally got on with the business of training. He taught them how to kneel in midair -- even flashing their own legs to lock them in place -- and then fire between their knees as they moved downward toward the enemy, so that their legs became a shield, absorbing fire and allowing them to shoot for longer periods of time out in the open. A good tactic, and Bean finally began to get some idea of why Wiggin might not be a disastrous commander after all. He could sense the others giving respect to their new commander at last.

When they'd got the point, Wiggin thawed himself and all the soldiers he had frozen in the demonstration. "Now," he said, "which way is the enemy's gate?"

"Down!" they all answered.

"And what is our attack position?"

Oh, right, thought Bean, like we can all give an explanation in unison. The only way to answer was to demonstrate -- so Bean flipped himself away from the wall, heading for the other side, firing between his knees as he went. He didn't do it perfectly -- there was a little rotation as he went -- but all in all, he did OK for his first actual attempt at the maneuver.

Above him, he heard Wiggin shout at the others. "Is Bean the only one who knows how?"

By the time Bean had caught himself on the far wall, the whole rest of the army was coming after him, shouting as if they were on the attack. Only Wiggin remained at the ceiling. Bean noticed, with amusement, that Wiggin was standing there oriented the same way he had been in the corridor -- his head "north," the old "up." He might have the theory down pat, but in practice, it's hard to shake off the old gravity-based thinking. Bean had made it a point to orient himself sideways, his head to the west. And the soldiers near him did the same, taking their orientation from him. If Wiggin noticed, he gave no sign.

"Now come back at me, all of you, attack *me*!"

Immediately his flash suit lit up with forty weapons firing at him as his entire army converged on him, firing all the way. "Ouch," said Wiggin when they arrived. "You got me."

Most of them laughed.

"Now, what are your legs good for, in combat?"

Nothing, said some boys.

"Bean doesn't think so," said Wiggin.

So he isn't going to let up on me even now. Well, what does he want to hear? Somebody else muttered "shields," but Wiggin didn't key in on that, so he must have something else in mind. "They're the best way to push off walls," Bean guessed.

"Right," said Wiggin.

"Come on, pushing off is movement, not combat," said Crazy Tom. A few others murmured their agreement.

Oh good, now it starts, thought Bean. Crazy Tom picks a meaningless quarrel with his commander, who gets pissed off at him and ...

But Wiggin didn't take umbrage at Crazy Tom's correction. He just corrected him back, mildly. "There **is** no combat without movement. Now, with your legs frozen like this, can you push off walls?"

Bean had no idea. Neither did anyone else.

"Bean?" asked Wiggin. Of course.

"I've never tried it," said Bean, "but maybe if you faced the wall and doubled over at the waist --"

"Right but wrong. Watch me. My back's to the wall, legs are frozen. Since I'm kneeling, my feet are against the wall, Usually, when you push off you have to push downward, so you string out your body behind you like a string **bean**, right?"

The group laughed. For the first time, Bean realized that maybe Wiggin wasn't being stupid to get the whole group laughing at the little guy. Maybe Wiggin knew perfectly well that Bean was the smartest kid, and had singled him out like this because he could tap into all the resentment the others felt for him. This whole session was guaranteeing that the other kids would all think it was OK to laugh at Bean, to despise him even though he was smart.

Great system, Wiggin. Destroy the effectiveness of your best soldier, make sure he gets no respect.

However, it was more important to learn what Wiggin was teaching than to feel sullen about the way he was teaching it. So Bean watched intently as Wiggin demonstrated a frozen-leg takeoff from the wall. He noticed that Wiggin gave himself a deliberate spin. It would make it harder for him to shoot as he flew, but it would also make it very hard for a distant enemy to focus enough light on any part of him for long enough to get a kill.

I may be pissed off, but that doesn't mean I can't learn.

It was a long and grueling practice, drilling over and over again on new skills. Bean saw that Wiggin wasn't willing to let them learn each technique separately. They had to do them all at once, integrating them into smooth, continuous movements. Like dancing, Bean thought. You don't learn to shoot and then learn to launch and then learn to do a controlled spin -- you learn to launch-shoot-spin.

At the end, all of them dripping with sweat, exhausted, and flushed with the excitement of having learned stuff that they'd never heard of other soldiers doing, Wiggin assembled them at the lower door and announced that they'd have another practice during free time. "And don't tell me that free time is supposed to be free. I know that, and you're perfectly free to do what you want. I'm **inviting** you to come to an extra, **voluntary** practice."

They laughed. This group consisted entirely of kids who had **not** chosen to do extra battleroom practice with Wiggin before, and he was making sure they understood that he expected them to

change their priorities now. But they didn't mind. After this morning they knew that when Wiggin ran a practice, every second was effective. They couldn't afford to miss a practice or they'd fall significantly behind. Wiggin would get their free time. Even Crazy Tom wasn't arguing about it.

But Bean knew that he had to change his relationship with Wiggin right now, or there was no chance that he would get a chance for leadership. What Wiggin had done to him in today's practice, feeding on the resentment of the other kids for this little pipsqueak, would make it even less plausible for Bean to be made a leader within the army -- if the other kids despised him, who would follow him?

So Bean waited for Wiggin in the corridor after the others had gone on ahead.

"Ho, Bean," said Wiggin.

"Ho, Ender," said Bean. Did Wiggin catch the sarcasm in the way Bean said his name? Was that why he paused a moment before answering?

"*Sir*," said Wiggin softly.

Oh, cut out the merda, I've seen those vids, we all *laugh* at those vids. "I know what you're doing, *Ender*, sir, and I'm warning you."

"Warning me?"

"I can be the best man you've got, but don't play games with me."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll be the worst man you've got. One or the other." Not that Bean expected Wiggin to understand what he meant by that. How Bean could only be effective if he had Wiggin's trust and respect, how otherwise he'd just be the little kid, useful for nothing. Wiggin would probably take it to mean that Bean meant to cause trouble if Wiggin didn't use him. And maybe he did mean that, a little.

"And what do you want?" asked Wiggin. "Love and kisses?"

Say it flat out, put it in his mind so plainly he can't pretend not to understand. "I want a toon."

Wiggin walked close to Bean, looked down at him. To Bean, though, it was a good sign that Wiggin hadn't just laughed. "Why should you get a toon?"

"Because I'd know what to do with it."

"Knowing what to do with a toon is easy. It's getting them to do it that's hard. Why should any soldier want to follow a little pinprick like you?"

Wiggin had got straight to the crux of the problem. But Bean didn't like the malicious way he said it. "They used to call *you* that, I hear. I hear Bonzo Madrid still does."

Wiggin wasn't taking the bait. "I asked you a question, soldier."

"I'll earn their respect, sir, if you don't stop me."

To his surprise, Wiggin grinned. "I'm helping you."

"Like hell."

"Nobody would notice you, except to feel sorry for the little kid. But I made sure they *all* noticed you today."

You should have done your research, Wiggin. You're the only one who didn't know already who I was.

"They'll be watching every move you make," said Wiggin. "All you have to do to earn their respect now is be perfect."

"So I don't even get a chance to learn before I'm being judged." That's not how you bring along talent.

"Poor kid. Nobody's treatin' him fair."

Wiggin's deliberate obtuseness infuriated Bean. You're smarter than this, Wiggin!

Seeing Bean's rage, Wiggin brought a hand forward and pushed him until his back rested firmly against the wall. "I'll tell you how to get a toon. Prove to me you know what you're doing as a soldier. Prove to me you know how to use other soldiers. And then prove to me that somebody's willing to follow you into battle. Then you'll get your toon. But not bloody well until."

Bean ignored the hand pressing against him. It would take a lot more than that to intimidate him physically. "That's fair," he said. "*If* you actually work that way, I'll be a toon leader in a month."

Now it was Wiggin's turn to be angry. He reached down, grabbed Bean by the front of his flash suit, and slid him up the wall so they stood there eye to eye. "When I say I work a certain way, Bean, then that's the way I work."

Bean just grinned at him. In this low gravity, so high in the station, picking up little kids wasn't any big test of strength. And Wiggin was no bully. There was no serious threat here.

Wiggin let go of him. Bean slid down the wall and landed gently on his feet, rebounded slightly, settled again. Wiggin walked to the pole and slid down. Bean had won this encounter by getting under Wiggin's skin. Besides, Wiggin knew he hadn't handled this situation very well. He wouldn't

forget. In fact, it was Wiggin who had lost a little respect, and he knew it, and he'd be trying to earn it back.

Unlike you, Wiggin, I **do** give the other guy a chance to learn what he's doing before I insist on perfection. You screwed up with me today, but I'll give you a chance to do better tomorrow and the next day.

But when Bean got to the pole and reached out to take hold, he realized his hands were trembling and his grip was too weak. He had to pause a moment, leaning on the pole, till he had calmed enough.

That face-to-face encounter with Wiggin, he hadn't won that. It might even have been a stupid thing to do. Wiggin **had** hurt him with those snide comments, that ridicule. Bean had been studying Wiggin as the subject of his private theology, and today he had found out that all this time Wiggin didn't even know Bean existed. Everybody compared Bean to Wiggin -- but apparently Wiggin hadn't heard or didn't care. He had treated Bean like nothing. And after having worked so hard this past year to earn respect, Bean didn't find it easy to be nothing again. It brought back feelings he thought he left behind in Rotterdam. The sick fear of imminent death. Even though he knew that no one here would raise a hand against him, he still remembered being on the edge of dying when he first went up to Poke and put his life in her hands.

Is that what I've done, once again? By putting myself on this roster, I gave my future into this boy's hands. I counted on him seeing in me what I see. But of course he couldn't. I have to give him time.

If there **was** time. For the teachers were moving quickly now, and Bean might not **have** a year in this army to prove himself to Wiggin.

CHAPTER 14 -- BROTHERS

"You have results for me?"

"Interesting ones. Volescu **was** lying. Somewhat."

"I hope you're going to be more precise than that."

"Bean's genetic alteration was not based on a clone of Volescu. But they **are** related. Volescu is definitely not Bean's father. But he is almost certainly Volescu's [sic -- should be "Bean's"] half-uncle or a double cousin. I hope Volescu has a half-brother or double first cousin, because such a man is the only possible father of the fertilized egg that Volescu altered."

"You have a list of Volescu's relatives, I assume?"

"We didn't need any family at the trial. And Volescu's mother was not married. He uses her name."

"So Volescu's father had another child somewhere only you don't even know his name. I thought you knew everything."

"We know everything that we knew was worth knowing. That's a crucial distinction. We simply haven't looked for Volescu's father. He's not guilty of anything important. We can't investigate everybody."

"Another matter. Since you know everything that you know is worth knowing, perhaps you can tell me why a certain crippled boy has been removed from the school where I placed him?"

"Oh. Him. When you suddenly stopped touting him, we got suspicious. So we checked him out. Tested him. He's no Bean, but he definitely belongs here."

"And it never crossed your mind that I had good reason for keeping him out of Battle School?"

"We assumed that you thought that we might choose Achilles over Bean, who was, after all, far too young, so you offered only your favorite."

"You assumed. I've been dealing with you as if you were intelligent, and you've been dealing with me as if I were an idiot. Now I see it should have been the exact reverse."

"I didn't know Christians got so angry."

"Is Achilles already in Battle School?"

"He's still recovering from his fourth surgery. We had to fix the leg on Earth."

"Let me give you a word of advice. Do **not** put him in Battle School while Bean is still there."

"Bean is only six. He's still too young to **enter** Battle School, let alone graduate."

"If you put Achilles in, take Bean out. Period."

"Why?"

"If you're too stupid to believe me after all my other judgments turned out to be correct, why should I give you the ammunition to let you second-guess me? Let me just say that putting them in school together is a probable death sentence for one of them."

"Which one?"

"That rather depends on which one sees the other first."

"Achilles says he owes everything to Bean. He loves Bean."

"Then by all means, believe him and not me. But don't send the body of the loser back to me to deal with. You bury your own mistakes."

"That sounds pretty heartless."

"I'm not going to weep over the grave of either boy. I tried to save both their lives. You apparently seem determined to let them find out which is fittest in the best Darwinian fashion."

"Calm down, Sister Carlotta. We'll consider what you've told us. We won't be foolish."

"You've already been foolish. I have no high expectations for you now."

As days became weeks, the shape of Wiggin's army began to unfold, and Bean was filled with both hope and despair. Hope, because Wiggin was setting up an army that was almost infinitely adaptable. Despair, because he was doing it without any reliance on Bean.

After only a few practices, Wiggin had chosen his toon leaders -- every one of them a veteran from the transfer lists. In fact, every veteran was either a toon leader or a second. Not only that, instead of the normal organization -- four toons of ten soldiers each -- he had created five toons of eight, and then made them practice a lot in half-toons of four men each, one commanded by the toon leader, the other by the second.

No one had ever fragmented an army like that before. And it wasn't just an illusion. Wiggin worked hard to make sure the toon leaders and seconds had plenty of leeway. He'd tell them their objective and let the leader decide how to achieve it. Or he'd group three toons together under the operational command of one of the toon leaders to handle one operation, while Wiggin himself commanded the smaller remaining force. It was an extraordinary amount of delegation.

Some of the soldiers were critical at first. As they were milling around near the entrance to the barracks, the veterans talked about how they'd practiced that day -- in ten groups of four. "Everybody knows it's loser strategy to divide your army," said Fly Molo, who commanded A toon.

Bean was a little disgusted that the soldier with the highest rank after Wiggin would say something disparaging about his commander's strategy. Sure, Fly was learning, too. But there's such a thing as insubordination.

"He hasn't divided the army," said Bean. "He's just organized it. And there's no such thing as a rule of strategy that you can't break. The idea is to have your army concentrated at the decisive point. Not to keep it huddled together all the time."

Fly glared at Bean. "Just cause you little guys can hear us doesn't mean you understand what we're talking about."

"If you don't want to believe me, think what you want. My talking isn't going to make you stupider than you already are."

Fly came at him, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him to the edge of his bunk.

At once, Nikolai launched himself from the bunk opposite and landed on Fly's back, bumping his head into the front of Bean's bunk. In moments, the other toon leaders had pulled Fly and Nikolai apart -- a ludicrous fight anyway, since Nikolai wasn't that much bigger than Bean.

"Forget it, Fly," said Hot Soup -- Han Tzu, leader of D toon. "Nikolai thinks he's Bean's big brother."

"What's the kid doing mouthing off to a toon leader?" demanded Fly.

"You were being insubordinate toward our commander," said Bean. "And you were also completely wrong. By your view, Lee and Jackson were idiots at Chancellorsville."

"He keeps doing it!"

"Are you so stupid you can't recognize the truth just because the person telling it to you is short?" All of Bean's frustration at not being one of the officers was spilling out. He knew it, but he didn't feel like controlling it. They needed to hear the truth. And Wiggin needed to have the support when he was being taken down behind his back.

Nikolai was standing on the lower bunk, so he was as close to Bean as possible, affirming the bond between them. "Come on, Fly," said Nikolai. "This is *Bean*, remember?"

And, to Bean's surprise, that silenced Fly. Until this moment, Bean had not realized the power that his reputation had. He might be just a regular soldier in Dragon Army, but he was still the finest student of strategy and military history in the school, and apparently everybody -- or at least everybody but Wiggin -- knew it.

"I should have spoken with more respect," said Bean.

"Damn right," said Fly.

"But so should you."

Fly lunged against the grip of the boys holding him.

"Talking about Wiggin," said Bean. "You spoke without respect. 'Everybody knows it's loser strategy to divide your army.'" He got Fly's intonation almost exactly right. Several kids laughed. And, grudgingly, so did Fly.

"OK, right," said Fly. "I was out of line." He turned to Nikolai. "But I'm still an officer."

"Not when you're dragging a little kid off his bunk you're not," said Nikolai. "You're a bully when you do that."

Fly blinked. Wisely, no one else said a thing until Fly had decided how he was going to respond. "You're right, Nikolai. To defend your friend against a bully." He looked from Nikolai to Bean and back again. "Pusha, you guys even look like brothers." He walked past them, heading for his bunk. The other toon leaders followed him. Crisis over.

Nikolai looked at Bean then. "I was never as squished up and ugly as you," he said.

"And if I'm going to grow up to look like you, I'm going to kill myself now," said Bean.

"Do you have to talk to really **big** guys like that?"

"I didn't expect you to attack him like a one-man swarm of bee."

"I guess I wanted to jump on somebody," said Nikolai.

"You? Mr. Nice Guy?"

"I don't feel so nice lately." He climbed up on the bunk beside Bean, so they could talk more softly. "I'm out of my depth here, Bean. I don't belong in this army."

"What do you mean?"

"I wasn't ready to get promoted. I'm just average. Maybe not that good. And even though this army wasn't a bunch of heroes in the standings, these guys are good. Everybody learns faster than me. Everybody **gets** it and I'm still standing there thinking about it."

"So you work harder."

"I **am** working harder. You -- you just get it, right away, everything, you see it all. And it's not that I'm stupid. I always get it, too. Just ... a step behind."

"Sorry," said Bean.

"What are **you** sorry about? It's not **your** fault."

Yes it is, Nikolai. "Come on, you telling me you wish you weren't part of Ender Wiggin's army?"

Nikolai laughed a little. "He's really something, isn't he?"

"You'll do your part. You're a good soldier. You'll see. When we get into the battles, you'll do as well as anybody."

"Eh, probably. They can always freeze me and throw me around. A big lumpy projectile weapon."

"You're not so lumpy."

"Everybody's lumpy compared to you. I've watched you -- you give away half your food."

"They feed me too much."

"I've got to study." Nikolai jumped across to his bunk.

Bean felt bad sometimes about having put Nikolai in this situation. But when they started winning, a lot of kids outside of Dragon Army would be wishing they could trade places with him. In fact, it was kind of surprising Nikolai realized he wasn't as qualified as the others. After all, the differences weren't that pronounced. Probably there were a lot of kids who felt just like Nikolai. But Bean hadn't really reassured him. In fact, he had probably reaffirmed Nikolai's feelings of inferiority.

What a sensitive friend I am.

There was no point in interviewing Volescu again, not after getting such lies from him the first time. All that talk of copies, and him the original -- there was no mitigation now. He was a murderer, a servant of the Father of Lies. He would do nothing to help Sister Carlotta. And the need to find out what might be expected of the one child who evaded Volescu's little holocaust was too great to rely again on the word of such a man.

Besides, Volescu had made contact with his half-brother or double cousin -- how else could he have obtained a fertilized egg containing his DNA? So Sister Carlotta should be able either to follow Volescu's trail or duplicate his research.

She learned quickly that Volescu was the illegitimate child of a Romanian woman in Budapest, Hungary. A little checking -- and the judicious use of her security clearance -- got her the name of the father, a Greek-born official in the League who had recently been promoted to service on the Hegemon's staff. That might have been a roadblock, but Sister Carlotta did not need to speak to the grandfather. She only needed to know who he was in order to find out the names of his three legitimate children. The daughter was eliminated because the shared parent was a male. And in checking the two sons, she decided to go first to visit the married one.

They lived on the island of Crete, where Julian ran a software company whose only client was the International Defense League. Obviously this was not a coincidence, but nepotism was almost honorable compared to some of the outright graft and favor-trading that was endemic in the League. In the long run such corruption was basically harmless, since the International Fleet had seized control of its own budget early on and never let the League touch it again. Thus the Polemarch and the Strategos had far more money at their disposal than the Hegemon, which made him, though first in title, weakest in actual power and independence of movement.

And just because Julian Delphiki owed his career to his father's political connections did not necessarily mean that his company's product was not adequate and that he himself was not an honest man. By the standards of honesty that prevailed in the world of business, anyway.

Sister Carlotta found that she did not need her security clearance to get a meeting with Julian and his wife, Elena. She called and said she would like to see them on a matter concerning the I.F., and they immediately opened their calendar to her. She arrived in Knossos and was immediately driven to their home on a bluff overlooking the Aegean. They looked nervous -- indeed, Elena was almost frantic, wringing a handkerchief.

"Please," she said, after accepting their offer of fruit and cheese. "Please tell me why you are so upset. There's nothing about my business that should alarm you."

The two of them glanced at each other, and Elena became flustered. "Then there's nothing wrong with our boy?"

For a moment, Sister Carlotta wondered if they already knew about Bean -- but how could they?

"Your son?"

"Then he's all right!" Elena burst into tears of relief and when her husband knelt beside her, she clung to him and sobbed.

"You see, it was very hard for us to let him go into service," said Julian. "So when a religious person calls to tell us she needs to see us on business pertaining to the I.F., we thought -- we leapt to the conclusion --"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know you had a son in the military, or I would have been careful to assure you from the start that ... but now I fear I am here under false pretenses. The matter I need to speak to you about is personal, so personal you may be reluctant to answer. Yet it *is* about a matter that is of some importance to the I.F. Truthful answers cannot possibly expose you to any personal risk, I promise."

Elena got control of herself. Julian seated himself again, and now they looked at Sister Carlotta almost with cheerfulness. "Oh, ask whatever you want," said Julian. "We're just happy that -- whatever you want to ask."

"We'll answer if we can," said Elena.

"You say you have a son. This raises the possibility that -- there is reason to wonder if you might not at some point have ... was your son conceived under circumstances that would have allowed a clone of his fertilized egg to be made?"

"Oh yes," said Elena. "That is no secret. A defect in one fallopian tube and an ectopic pregnancy in the other made it impossible for me to conceive in utero. We wanted a child, so they drew out

several of my eggs, fertilized them with my husband's sperm, and then cloned the ones we chose. There were four that we cloned, six copies of each. Two girls and two boys. So far, we have implanted only the one. He was such a -- such a special boy, we did not want to dilute our attention. Now that his education is out of our hands, however, we have been thinking of bearing one of the girls. It's time." She reached over and took Julian's hand and smiled. He smiled back.

Such a contrast to Volescu. Hard to believe there was any genetic material in common.

"You said six copies of each of the four fertilized eggs," said Sister Carlotta.

"Six including the original," said Julian. "That way we have the best chance of implanting each of the four and carrying them through a full pregnancy."

"A total of twenty-four fertilized eggs. And only one of them was implanted?"

"Yes, we were very fortunate, the first one worked perfectly."

"Leaving twenty-three."

"Yes. Exactly."

"Mr. Delphiki, all twenty-three of those fertilized eggs remain in storage, waiting for implantation?"

"Of course."

Sister Carlotta thought for a moment. "How recently have you checked?"

"Just last week," said Julian. "As we began talking about having another child. The doctor assured us that nothing has happened to the eggs and they can be implanted with only a few hours' notice."

"But did the doctor actually check?"

"I don't know," said Julian.

Elena was starting to tense up a little. "What have you heard?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Sister Carlotta. "What I am looking for is the source of a particular child's genetic material. I simply need to make sure that your fertilized eggs were not the source."

"But of course they were not. Except for our son."

"Please don't be alarmed. But I would like to know the name of your doctor and the facility where the eggs are stored. And then I would be glad if you would call your doctor and have him go, in person, to the facility and insist upon seeing the eggs himself."

"They can't be seen without a microscope," said Julian.

"See that they have not been disturbed," said Sister Carlotta.

They had both become hyperalert again, especially since they had no idea what this was all about - nor could they be told. As soon as Julian gave her the name of doctor and hospital, Sister Carlotta stepped onto the porch and, as she gazed at the sail-specked Aegean, she used her global and got herself put through to the I.F. headquarters in Athens.

It would take several hours, perhaps, for either her call or Julian's to bring in the answer, so she and Julian and Elena made a heroic effort to appear unconcerned. They took her on a walking tour of their neighborhood, which offered views both ancient and modern, and of nature verdant, desert, and marine. The dry air was refreshing as long as the breeze from the sea did not lag, and Sister Carlotta enjoyed hearing Julian talk about his company and Elena talk about her work as a teacher. All thought of their having risen in the world through government corruption faded as she

realized that however he got his contract, Julian was a serious, dedicated creator of software, while Elena was a fervent teacher who treated her profession as a crusade. "I knew as soon as I started teaching our son how remarkable he was," Elena told her. "But it wasn't until his pre-tests for school placement that we first learned that his gifts were particularly suited for the I.F."

Alarm bells went off. Sister Carlotta had assumed that their son was an adult. After all, they were not a young couple. "How old is your son?"

"Eight years old now," said Julian. "They sent us a picture. Quite a little man in his uniform. They don't let many letters come through."

Their son was in Battle School. They appeared to be in their forties, but they might not have started to have a family until late, and then tried in vain for a while, going through a tubal pregnancy before finding out that Elena could no longer conceive. Their son was only a couple of years older than Bean.

Which meant that Graff could compare Bean's genetic code with that of the Delphiki boy and find out if they were from the same cloned egg. There would be a control, to compare what Bean was like with Anton's key turned, as opposed to the other, whose genes were unaltered.

Now that she thought about it, of **course** any true sibling of Bean's would have exactly the abilities that would bring the attention of the I.F. Anton's key made a child into a savant in general; the particular mix of skills that the I.F. looked for were not affected. Bean would have had those skills no matter what; the alteration merely allowed him to bring a far sharper intelligence to bear on abilities he already had.

If Bean was in fact their child. Yet the coincidence of twenty-three fertilized eggs and the twenty-three children that Volescu had produced in the "clean room" -- what other conclusion could she reach?

And soon the answer came, first to Sister Carlotta, but immediately thereafter to the Delphikis. The I.F. investigators had gone to the clinic with the doctor and together they had discovered that the eggs were missing.

It was hard news for the Delphikis to bear, and Sister Carlotta discreetly waited outside while Elena and Julian took some time alone together. But soon they invited her in. "How much can you tell us?" Julian asked. "You came here because you suspected our babies might have been taken. Tell me, were they born?"

Sister Carlotta wanted to hide behind the veil of military secrecy, but in truth there was no military secret involved -- Volescu's crime was a matter of public record. And yet ... weren't they better off not knowing?

"Julian, Elena, accidents happen in the laboratory. They might have died anyway. Nothing is certain. Isn't it better just to think of this as a terrible accident? Why add to the burden of the loss you already have?"

Elena looked at her fiercely. "You **will** tell me, Sister Carlotta, if you love the God of truth!"

"The eggs were stolen by a criminal who ... illegally caused them to be brought through gestation. When his crime was about to be discovered, he gave them a painless death by sedative. They did not suffer."

"And this man will be put on trial?"

"He has already been tried and sentenced to life in prison," said Sister Carlotta.

"Already?" asked Julian. "How long ago were our babies stolen?"

"More than seven years ago."

"Oh!" cried Elena. "Then our babies ... when they died ..."

"They were infants. Not a year old yet."

"But why **our** babies? Why would he steal them? Was he going to sell them for adoption? Was he..."

"Does it matter? None of his plans came to fruition," said Sister Carlotta. The nature of Volescu's experiments **was** a secret.

"What was the murderer's name?" asked Julian. Seeing her hesitation, he insisted. "His name is a matter of public record, is it not?"

"In the criminal courts of Rotterdam," said Sister Carlotta. "Volescu."

Julian reacted as if slapped -- but immediately controlled himself. Elena did not see it.

He knows about his father's mistress, thought Sister Carlotta. He understands now what part of the motive had to be. The legitimate son's children were kidnapped by the bastard, experimented on, and eventually killed -- and the legitimate son didn't find out about it for seven years. Whatever privations Volescu fancied that his fatherlessness had caused him, he had taken his vengeance. And for Julian, it also meant that his father's lusts had come back to cause this loss, this pain to Julian and his wife. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation ...

But didn't the scripture say the third and fourth generation of them that hate me? Julian and Elena did not hate God. Nor did their innocent babies.

It makes no more sense than Herod's slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem. The only comfort was the trust that a merciful God caught up the spirits of the slain infants into his bosom, and that he brought comfort, eventually, to the parents' hearts.

"Please," said Sister Carlotta. "I cannot say you should not grieve for the children that you will never hold. But you can still rejoice in the child that you have."

"A million miles away!" cried Elena.

"I don't suppose ... you don't happen to know if the Battle School ever lets a child come home for a visit," said Julian. "His name is Nikolai Delphiki. Surely under the circumstances ..."

"I'm so sorry," said Sister Carlotta. Reminding them of the child they had was not such a good idea after all, when they did not, in fact, have him. "I'm sorry that my coming led to such terrible news for you."

"But you learned what you came to learn," said Julian.

"Yes," said Sister Carlotta.

Then Julian realized something, though he said not a word in front of his wife. "Will you want to return to the airport now?"

"Yes, the car is still waiting. Soldiers are much more patient than cab drivers."

"I'll walk you to the car," said Julian.

"No, Julian," said Elena, "don't leave me."

"Just for a few moments, my love. Even now, we don't forget courtesy." He held his wife for a long moment, then led Sister Carlotta to the door and opened it for her.

As they walked to the car, Julian spoke of what he had come to understand. "Since my father's bastard is already in prison, you did not come here because of his crime."

"No," she said.

"One of our children is still alive," he said.

"What I tell you now I should not tell, because it is not within my authority," said Sister Carlotta. "But my first allegiance is to God, not the I.F. If the twenty-two children who died at Volescu's hand were yours, then a twenty-third may be alive. It remains for genetic testing to be done."

"But we will not be told," said Julian.

"Not yet," said Sister Carlotta. "And not soon. Perhaps not ever. But if it is within my power, then a day will come when you will meet your second son."

"Is he ... do you know him?"

"If it is your son," she said, "then yes, I know him. His life has been hard, but his heart is good, and he is such a boy as to make any father or mother proud. Please don't ask me more. I've already said too much."

"Do I tell this to my wife?" asked Julian. "What will be harder for her, to know or not know?"

"Women are not so different from men. *You* preferred to know."

Julian nodded. "I know that you were only the bearer of news, not the cause of our loss. But your visit here will not be remembered with happiness. Yet I want you to know that I understand how kindly you have done this miserable job."

She nodded. "And you have been unfailingly gracious in a difficult hour."

Julian opened the door of her car. She stooped to the seat, swung her legs inside. But before he could close the door for her, she thought of one last question, a very important one.

"Julian, I know you were planning to have a daughter next. But if you had gone on to bring another son into the world, what would you have named him?"

"Our firstborn was named for my father, Nikolai," he said. "But Elena wanted to name a second son for me."

"Julian Delphiki," said Sister Carlotta. "If this truly is your son, I think he would be proud someday to bear his father's name."

"What name does he use now?" asked Julian.

"Of course I cannot say."

"But ... not Volescu, surely."

"No. As far as I'm concerned, he'll never hear that name. God bless you, Julian Delphiki. I will pray for you and your wife."

"Pray for our children's souls, too, Sister."

"I already have, and do, and will."

Major Anderson looked at the boy sitting across the table from him. "Really, it's not that important a matter, Nikolai."

"I thought maybe I was in trouble."

"No, no. We just noticed that you seemed to be a particular friend of Bean. He doesn't have a lot of friends."

"It didn't help that Dimak painted a target on him in the shuttle. And now Ender's gone and done the same thing. I suppose Bean can take it, but smart as he is, he kind of pisses off a lot of the other kids."

"But not you?"

"Oh, he pisses me off, too."

"And yet you became his friend."

"Well, I didn't mean to. I just had the bunk across from him in launchy barracks."

"You traded for that bunk."

"Did I? Oh. Eh."

"And you did that before you knew how smart Bean was."

"Dimak told us in the shuttle that Bean had the highest scores of any of us."

"Was that why you wanted to be near him?"

Nikolai shrugged.

"It was an act of kindness," said Major Anderson. "Perhaps I'm just an old cynic, but when I see such an inexplicable act I become curious."

"He really does kind of look like my baby pictures. Isn't that dumb? I saw him and I thought, he looks just like cute little baby Nikolai. Which is what my mother always called me in my baby pictures. I never thought of them as *me*. I was big Nikolai. That was cute little baby Nikolai. I used to pretend that he was my little brother and we just happened to have the same name. Big Nikolai and Cute Little Baby Nikolai."

"I see that you're ashamed, but you shouldn't be. It's a natural thing for an only child to do."

"I wanted a brother."

"Many who have a brother wish they didn't."

"But the brother I made up for myself, he and I got along fine." Nikolai laughed at the absurdity of it.

"And you saw Bean and thought of him as the brother you once imagined."

"At first. Now I know who he really is, and it's better. It's like ... sometimes he's the little brother and I'm looking out for him, and sometimes he's the big brother and he's looking out for me."

"For instance?"

"What?"

"A boy that small -- how does he look out for you?"

"He gives me advice. Helps me with classwork. We do some practice together. He's better at almost everything than I am. Only I'm bigger, and I think I like him more than he likes me."

"That may be true, Nikolai. But as far as we can tell, he likes you more than he likes anybody else. He just ... so far, he may not have the same capacity for friendship that you have. I hope that my asking you these questions won't change your feelings and actions toward Bean. We don't assign people to be friends, but I hope you'll remain Bean's."

"I'm not his friend," said Nikolai.

"Oh?"

"I told you. I'm his brother." Nikolai grinned. "Once you get a brother, you don't give him up easy."

CHAPTER 15 -- COURAGE

"Genetically, they're identical twins. The only difference is Anton's key."

"So the Delphikis have two sons."

"The Delphikis have one son, Nikolai, and he's with us for the duration. Bean was an orphan found on the streets of Rotterdam."

"Because he was kidnapped."

"The law is clear. Fertilized eggs are property. I know that this is a matter of religious sensitivity for you, but the I.F. is bound by law, not --"

"The I.F. uses law where possible to achieve its own ends. I know you're fighting a war. I know that some things are outside your power. But the war will not go on forever. All I ask is this: Make this information part of a record -- part of many records. So that when the war ends, the proof of these things can and will survive. So the truth won't stay hidden."

"Of course."

"No, not of course. You know that the moment the Formics are defeated, the I.F. will have no reason to exist. It will try to continue to exist in order to maintain international peace. But the League is not politically strong enough to survive in the nationalist winds that will blow. The I.F. will break into fragments, each following its own leader, and God help us if any part of the fleet ever should use its weapons against the surface of the Earth."

"You've been spending too much time reading the Apocalypse."

"I may not be one of the genius children in your school, but I see how the tides of opinion are flowing here on Earth. On the nets a demagogue named Demosthenes is inflaming the West about illegal and secret maneuvers by the Polemarch to give an advantage to the New Warsaw Pact, and the propaganda is even more virulent from Moscow, Baghdad, Buenos Aires, Beijing. There are a few rational voices, like Locke, but they're given lip service and then ignored. You and I can't do anything about the fact that world war will certainly come. But we *can* do our best to make sure these children don't become pawns in that game."

"The only way they won't be pawns is if they're players."

"You've been raising them. Surely you don't *fear* them. Give them their chance to play."

"Sister Carlotta all my work is aimed at preparing for the showdown with the Formics. At turning these children into brilliant, reliable commanders. I can't look beyond that mark."

"Don't *look*. Just leave the door open for their families, their nations to claim them."

"I can't think about that right now."

"Right now is the only time you'll have the power to do it."

"You overestimate me."

"You underestimate yourself."

Dragon Army had only been practicing for a month when Wiggin came into the barracks only a few seconds after lights-on, brandishing a slip of paper. Battle orders. They would face Rabbit Army at 0700. And they'd do it without breakfast.

"I don't want anybody throwing up in the battleroom."

"Can we at least take a leak first?" asked Nikolai.

"No more than a decaliter," said Wiggin.

Everybody laughed, but they were also nervous. As a new army, with only a handful of veterans, they didn't actually expect to win, but they didn't want to be humiliated, either. They all had different ways of dealing with nerves -- some became silent, others talkative. Some joked and bantered, others turned surly. Some just lay back down on their bunks and closed their eyes.

Bean watched them. He tried to remember if the kids in Poke's crew ever did these things. And then realized: They were *hungry*, not afraid of being shamed. You don't get this kind of fear until you have enough to eat. So it was the bullies who felt like these kids, afraid of humiliation but not of going hungry. And sure enough, the bullies standing around in line showed all these attitudes. They were always performing, always aware of others watching them. Fearful they would have to fight; eager for it, too.

What do I feel?

What's wrong with me that I have to think about it to know?

Oh ... I'm just sitting here, watching. I'm one of *those*.

Bean pulled out his flash suit, but then realized he had to use the toilet before putting it on. He dropped down onto the deck and pulled his towel from its hook, wrapped it around himself. For a moment he flashed back to that night he had tossed his towel under a bunk and climbed into the ventilation system. He'd never fit now. Too thickly muscled, too tall. He was still the shortest kid in Battle School, and he doubted if anyone else would notice how he'd grown, but he was aware of how his arms and legs were longer. He could reach things more easily. Didn't have to jump so often just to do normal things like palming his way into the gym.

I've changed, thought Bean. My body, of course. But also the way I think.

Nikolai was still lying in bed with his pillow over his head. Everybody had his own way of coping.

The other kids were all using the toilets and getting drinks of water, but Bean was the only one who thought it was a good idea to shower. They used to tease him by asking if the water was still warm when it got all the way down there, but the joke was old now. What Bean wanted was the steam. The blindness of the fog around him, of the fogged mirrors, everything hidden, so he could be anyone, anywhere, any size.

Someday they'll all see me as I see myself. Larger than any of them. Head and shoulders above the rest, seeing farther, reaching farther, carrying burdens they could only dream of. In Rotterdam all I cared about was staying alive. But here, well fed, I've found out who I am. What I might be. *They* might think I'm an alien or a robot or something, just because I'm not genetically ordinary. But when I've done the great deeds of my life, they'll be proud to claim me as a human, furious at anyone who questions whether I'm truly one of them.

Greater than Wiggin.

He put the thought out of his mind, or tried to. This wasn't a competition. There was room for two great men in the world at the same time. Lee and Grant were contemporaries, fought against each other. Bismarck and Disraeli. Napoleon and Wellington.

No, that's not the comparison. It's *Lincoln* and Grant. Two great men working together.

It was disconcerting, though, to realize how rare that was. Napoleon could never bear to let any of his lieutenants have real authority. All victories had to be his alone. Who was the great man beside Augustus? Alexander? They had friends, they had rivals, but they never had partners.

That's why Wiggin has kept me down, even though he knows by now from the reports they give to army commanders that I've got a mind better than anybody else in Dragon. Because I'm too obviously a rival. Because I made it clear that first day that I intended to rise, and he's letting me know that it won't happen while I'm with his army.

Someone came into the bathroom. Bean couldn't see who it was because of the fog. Nobody greeted him. Everybody else must have finished here and gone back to get ready.

The newcomer walked through the fog past the opening in Bean's shower stall. It was Wiggin.

Bean just stood there, covered with soap. He felt like an idiot. He was in such a daze he had forgotten to rinse, was just standing in the fog, lost in his thoughts. Hurriedly he moved under the water again.

"Bean?"

"Sir?" Bean turned to face him. Wiggin was standing in the shower entrance.

"I thought I ordered everybody to get down to the gym."

Bean thought back. The scene unfolded in his mind. Yes, Wiggin **had** ordered everybody to bring their flash suits to the gym.

"I'm sorry. I ... was thinking of something else ..."

"Everybody's nervous before their first battle."

Bean hated that. To have Wiggin see him doing something stupid. Not remembering an order -- Bean remembered **everything**. It just hadn't registered. And now he was patronizing him. Everybody's nervous!

"**You** weren't," said Bean.

Wiggin had already stepped away. He came back. "Wasn't I?"

"Bonzo Madrid gave you orders not to take your weapon out. You were supposed to just stay there like a dummy. You weren't nervous about doing **that**."

"No," said Wiggin. "I was pissed."

"Better than nervous."

Wiggin started to leave. Then returned again. "Are **you** pissed?"

"I did that before I showered," said Bean.

Wiggin laughed. Then his smile disappeared. "You're late, Bean, and you're still busy rinsing. I've already got your flash suit down in the gym. All we need now is your ass in it." Wiggin took Bean's towel off its hook. "I'll have this waiting for you down there, too. Now move."

Wiggin left.

Bean turned the water off, furious. That was completely unnecessary, and Wiggin knew it. Making him go through the corridor wet and naked during the time when other armies would be coming back from breakfast. That was low, and it was stupid.

Anything to put me down. Every chance he gets.

Bean, you idiot, you're still standing here. You could have run down to the gym and beaten him there. Instead, you're shooting your stupid self in the stupid foot. And why? None of this makes sense. None of this is going to help you. You want him to make you a toon leader, not think of you

with contempt. So why are you doing things to make yourself look stupid and young and scared and unreliable?

And still you're standing here, frozen.

I'm a coward.

The thought ran through Bean's mind and filled him with terror. But it wouldn't go away.

I'm one of those guys who freezes up or does completely irrational things when he's afraid. Who loses control and goes slack-minded and stupid.

But I didn't do that in Rotterdam. If I had, I'd be dead.

Or maybe I *did* do it. Maybe that's why I didn't call out to Poke and Achilles when I saw them there alone on the dock. He wouldn't have killed her if I'd been there to witness what happened. Instead I ran off until I realized the danger she was in. But why didn't I realize it before? Because I *did* realize it, just as I heard Wiggin tell us to meet in the gym. Realized it, understood it completely, but was too cowardly to act. Too afraid that something would go wrong.

And maybe that's what happened Achilles lay on the ground and I told Poke to kill him. I was wrong and she was right. Because *any* bully she caught that way would probably have held a grudge -- and might easily have acted on it immediately, killing her as soon as they let him up. Achilles was the likeliest one, maybe the only one that would agree to the arrangement Bean had thought up. There was no choice. But I got scared. Kill him, I said, because I wanted it to go away.

And still I'm standing here. The water is off. I'm dripping wet and cold. But I can't move.

Nikolai was standing in the bathroom doorway. "Too bad about your diarrhea," he said.

"What?"

"I told Ender about how you were up with diarrhea in the night. That's why you had to go to the bathroom. You were sick, but you didn't want to tell him because you didn't want to miss the first battle."

"I'm so scared I couldn't take a dump if I wanted to," said Bean.

"He gave me your towel. He said it was stupid of him to take it." Nikolai walked in and gave it to him. "He said he needs you in the battle, so he's glad you're toughing it out."

"He doesn't need me. He doesn't even want me."

"Come on, Bean," said Nikolai. "You can do this."

Bean toweled off. It felt good to be moving. Doing something.

"I think you're dry enough," said Nikolai.

Again, Bean realized he was simply drying and drying himself, over and over.

"Nikolai, what's wrong with me?"

"You're afraid that you'll turn out to be just a little kid. Well, here's a clue: You *are* a little kid."

"So are you."

"So it's OK to be really bad. Isn't that what you keep telling me?" Nikolai laughed. "Come on, if I can do it, bad as I am, so can you."

"Nikolai," said Bean.

"What now?"

"I really *do* have to crap."

"I sure hope you don't expect me to wipe your butt."

"If I don't come out in three minutes, come in after me."

Cold and sweating -- a combination he wouldn't have thought possible. Bean went into the toilet stall and closed the door. The pain in his abdomen was fierce. But he couldn't get his bowel to loosen up and let go.

What am I so *afraid* of?

Finally, his alimentary system triumphed over his nervous system. It felt like everything he'd ever eaten flooded out of him at once.

"Time's up," said Nikolai. "I'm coming in."

"At peril of your life," said Bean. "I'm done, I'm coming out."

Empty now, clean, and humiliated in front of his only real friend, Bean came out of the stall and wrapped his towel around him.

"Thanks for keeping me from being a liar," said Nikolai.

"What?"

"About your having diarrhea."

"For you I'd get dysentery."

"Now that's friendship."

By the time they got to the gym, everybody was already in their flash suits, ready to go. While Nikolai helped Bean get into his suit, Wiggin had the rest of them lie down on the mats and do relaxation exercises. Bean even had time to lie down for a couple of minutes before Wiggin had them get up. 0656. Four minutes to get to the battleroom. He was cutting it pretty fine.

As they ran along the corridor, Wiggin occasionally jumped up to touch the ceiling. Behind him, the rest of the army would jump up and touch the same spot when they reached it. Except the smaller ones. Bean, his heart still burning with humiliation and resentment and fear, did not try. You do that kind of thing when you belong with the group. And he didn't belong. After all his brilliance in class, the truth was out now. He was a coward. He didn't belong in the military at all. If he couldn't even risk playing a game, what would he be worth in combat? The real generals exposed themselves to enemy fire. Fearless, they had to be, an example of courage to their men.

Me, I freeze up, take long showers, and dump a week's rations into the head. Let's see them follow *that* example.

At the gate, Wiggin had time to line them up in toons, then remind them. "Which way is the enemy's gate?"

"Down!" they all answered.

Bean only mouthed the word. Down. Down down down.

What's the best way to get down off a goose?

What are you doing up on a goose in the first place, you fool!

The grey wall in front of them disappeared, and they could see into the battleroom. It was dim -- not dark, but so faintly lighted that the only way they could see the enemy gate was the light of Rabbit Army's flash suits pouring out of it.

Wiggin was in no hurry to get out of the gate. He stood there surveying the room, which was arranged in an open grid, with eight "stars" -- large cubes that served as obstacles, cover, and staging platforms -- distributed fairly evenly if randomly through the space.

Wiggin's first assignment was to C toon. Crazy Tom's toon. The toon Bean belonged to. Word was whispered down the file. "Ender says slide the wall." And then, "Tom says flash your legs and go in on your knees. South wall."

Silently they swung into the room, using the handholds to propel themselves along the ceiling to the east wall. "They're setting up their battle formation. All we want to do is cut them up a little, make them nervous, confused, because they don't know what to do with us. We're raiders. So we

shoot them up, then get behind that star. *Don't* get stuck out in the middle. And *aim*. Make every shot count."

Bean did everything mechanically. It was habit now to get in position, freeze his own legs, and then launch with his body oriented the right way. They'd done it hundreds of times. He did it exactly right; so did the other seven soldiers in the toon. Nobody was looking for anyone to fail. He was right where they expected him to be, doing his job.

They coasted along the wall, always within reach of a handhold. Their frozen legs were dark, blocking the lights of the rest of their flash suits until they were fairly close. Wiggin was doing something up near the gate to distract Rabbit Army's attention, so the surprise was pretty good.

As they got closer, Crazy Tom said, "Split and rebound to the star -- me north, you south."

It was a maneuver that Crazy Tom had practiced with his toon. It was the right time for it, too. It would confuse the enemy more to have two groups to shoot at, heading different directions.

They pulled up on handholds. Their bodies, of course, swung against the wall, and suddenly the lights of their flash suits were quite visible. Somebody in Rabbit saw them and gave the alarm.

But C was already moving, half the toon diagonally south, the other half north, and all angling downward toward the floor. Bean began firing; the enemy was also firing at him. He heard the low whine that said somebody's beam was on his suit, but he was twisting slowly, and far enough from the enemy that none of the beams was in one place long enough to do damage. In the meantime, he found that his arm tracked perfectly, not trembling at all. He had practiced this a lot, and he was good at it. A clean kill, not just an arm or leg.

He had time for a second before he hit the wall and had to rebound up to the rendezvous star. One more enemy hit before he got there, and then he snagged a handhold on the star and said, "Bean here."

"Lost three," said Crazy Tom. "But their formation's all gone to hell."

"What now?" said Dag.

They could tell from the shouting that the main battle was in progress. Bean was thinking back over what he had seen as he approached the star.

"They sent a dozen guys to this star to wipe us out," said Bean. "They'll come around the east and west sides."

They all looked at him like he was insane. How could he know this?

"We've got about one more second," said Bean.

"All south," said Crazy Tom.

They swung up to the south side of the star. There were no Rabbits on that face, but Crazy Tom immediately led them in an attack around to the west face. Sure enough, there were Rabbits there, caught in the act of attacking what they clearly thought of as the "back" of the star -- or, as Dragon Army was trained to think of it, the bottom. So to the Rabbits, the attack seemed to come from below, the direction they were least aware of. In moments, the six Rabbits on that face were frozen and drifting along below the star.

The other half of the attack force would see that and know what had happened.

"Top," said Crazy Tom.

To the enemy, that would be the front of the star -- the position most exposed to fire from the main formation. The last place they'd expect Tom's toon to go.

And once they were there, instead of continuing to attempt to engage the strike force coming against them, Crazy Tom had them shoot at the main Rabbit formation, or what was left of it -- mostly disorganized groups hiding behind stars and firing at Dragons coming down at them from several directions. The five of them in C toon had time to hit a couple of Rabbits each before the strike force found them again.

Without waiting for orders, Bean immediately launched away from the surface of the star so he could shoot downward at the strike force. This close, he was able to do four quick kills before the whining abruptly stopped and his suit went completely stiff and dark. The Rabbit who got him wasn't one of the strike force -- it was somebody from the main force above him. And to his satisfaction, Bean could see that because of his firing, only one soldier from C toon was hit by the strike force sent against them. Then he rotated out of view.

It didn't matter now. He was out. But he had done well. Seven kills that he was sure of, maybe more. And it was more than his personal score. He had come up with the information Crazy Tom needed in order to make a good tactical decision, and then he had taken the bold action that kept the strike force from causing too many casualties. As a result, C toon remained in position to strike at the enemy from behind. Without any place to hide, Rabbit would be wiped out in moments. And Bean was part of it.

I didn't freeze once we got into action. I did what I was trained to do, and I stayed alert, and I thought of things. I can probably do better, move faster, see more. But for a first battle, I did fine. I can do this.

Because C toon was crucial to the victory, Wiggin used the other four toon leaders to press their helmets to the corners of the enemy gate, and gave Crazy Tom the honor of passing through the gate, which is what formally ended the game, bringing the lights on bright.

Major Anderson himself came in to congratulate the winning commander and supervise cleanup. Wiggin quickly unfroze the casualties. Bean was relieved when his suit could move again. Using his hook, Wiggin drew them all together and formed his soldiers into their five toons before he

began unfreezing Rabbit Army. They stood at attention in the air, their feet pointed down, their heads up -- and as Rabbit unfroze, they gradually oriented themselves in the same direction. They had no way of knowing it, but to Dragon, that was when victory became complete -- for the enemy was now oriented as if their *own* gate was down.

Bean and Nikolai were already eating breakfast when Crazy Tom came to their table. "Ender says instead of fifteen minutes for breakfast, we have till 0745. And he'll let us out of practice in time to shower."

That was good news. They could slow down their eating.

Not that it mattered to Bean. His tray had little food on it, and he finished it immediately. Once he was in Dragon Army, Crazy Tom had caught him giving away food. Bean told him that he was always given too much, and Tom took the matter to Ender, and Ender got the nutritionists to stop overfeeding Bean. Today was the first time Bean ever wished for more. And that was only because he was so up from the battle.

"Smart," said Nikolai.

"What?"

"Ender tells us we've got fifteen minutes to eat, which feels rushed and we don't like it. Then right away he sends around the toon leaders, telling us we have till 0745. That's only ten minutes longer, but now it feels like forever. And a shower -- we're supposed to be able to shower right after the game, but now we're grateful."

"*And* he gave the toon leaders the chance to bring good news," said Bean.

"Is that important?" asked Nikolai. "We know it was Ender's choice."

"Most commanders make sure all good news comes from them," said Bean, "and bad news from the toon leaders. But Wiggin's whole technique is building up his toon leaders. Crazy Tom went in there with nothing more than his training and his brains and a single objective -- strike first from the wall and get behind them. All the rest was up to him."

"Yeah, but if his toon leaders screw up, it looks bad on Ender's record," said Nikolai.

Bean shook his head. "The point is that in his very first battle, Wiggin divided his force for tactical effect, and C toon was able to continue attacking even after we ran out of plans, because Crazy Tom was really, truly in charge of us. We didn't sit around wondering what Wiggin wanted us to do."

Nikolai got it, and nodded. "Bacana. That's right."

"Completely right," said Bean. By now everybody at the table was listening. "And that's because Wiggin isn't just thinking about Battle School and standings and merda like that. He keeps watching vids of the Second Invasion, did you know that? He's thinking about how to beat the *Buggers*. And he knows that the way you do that is to have as many commanders ready to fight them as you can get. Wiggin doesn't want to come out of this with Wiggin as the only commander ready to fight the Buggers. He wants to come out of this with him *and* the toon leaders *and* the seconds *and* if he can do it every single one of his soldiers ready to command a fleet against the Buggers if we have to."

Bean knew his enthusiasm was probably giving Wiggin credit for more than he had actually planned, but he was still full of the glow of victory. And besides, what he was saying was true -- Wiggin was no Napoleon, holding on to the reins of control so tightly that none of his commanders was capable of brilliant independent command. Crazy Tom had performed well under pressure. He had made the right decisions -- including the decision to listen to his smallest, most useless-looking soldier. And Crazy Tom had done that because Wiggin had set the example by listening to his toon leaders. You learn, you analyze, you choose, you act.

After breakfast, as they headed for practice, Nikolai asked him, "Why do you call him Wiggin?"

"Cause we're not friends," said Bean.

"Oh, so it's Mr. Wiggin and Mr. Bean, is that it?"

"No. *Bean* is my first name."

"Oh. So it's Mr. Wiggin and Who The Hell Are You."

"Got it."

Everybody expected to have at least a week to strut around and brag about their perfect won-lost record. Instead, the next morning at 0630, Wiggin appeared in the barracks, again brandishing battle orders. "Gentlemen, I hope you learned something yesterday, because today we're going to do it again."

All were surprised, and some were angry -- it wasn't fair, they weren't ready. Wiggin just handed the orders to Fly Molo, who had just been heading out for breakfast. "Flash suits!" cried Fly, who clearly thought it was a cool thing to be the first army ever to fight two in a row like this.

But Hot Soup, the leader of D toon, had another attitude. "Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"I thought you needed the shower," said Wiggin. "Yesterday Rabbit Army claimed we only won because the stink knocked them out."

Everybody within earshot laughed. But Bean was not amused. He knew that the paper hadn't been there first thing, when Wiggin woke up. The teachers planted it late. "Didn't find the paper till you got back from the showers, right?"

Wiggin gave him a blank look. "Of course. I'm not as close to the floor as you."

The contempt in his voice struck Bean like a blow. Only then did he realize that Wiggin had taken his question as a criticism -- that Wiggin had been inattentive and hadn't *noticed* the orders. So now there was one more mark against Bean in Wiggin's mental dossier. But Bean couldn't let that upset him. It's not as if Wiggin didn't have him tagged as a coward. Maybe Crazy Tom told Wiggin about how Bean contributed to the victory yesterday, and maybe not. It wouldn't change what Wiggin had seen with his own eyes -- Bean malingering in the shower. And now Bean apparently taunting him for making them all have to rush for their second battle. Maybe I'll be made toon leader on my thirtieth birthday. And then only if everybody else is drowned in a boat accident.

Wiggin was still talking, of course, explaining how they should expect battles any time, the old rules were coming apart. "I can't pretend I like the way they're screwing around with us, but I do like one thing -- that I've got an army that can handle it."

As he put on his flash suit, Bean thought through the implications of what the teachers were doing. They were pushing Wiggin faster and also making it harder for him. And this was only the beginning. Just the first few sprinkles of a snotstorm.

Why? Not because Wiggin was so good he needed the testing. On the contrary -- Wiggin was training his army well, and the Battle School would only benefit from giving him plenty of time to do it. So it had to be something outside Battle School.

Only one possibility, really. The Bugger invaders were getting close. Only a few years away. They had to get Wiggin through training.

Wiggin. Not all of us, just Wiggin. Because if it were everybody, then everybody's schedule would be stepped up like this. Not just ours.

So it's already too late for me. Wiggin's the one they've chosen to rest their hopes on. Whether I'm toon leader or not will never matter. All that matters is: Will Wiggin be ready?

If Wiggin succeeds, there'll still be room for me to achieve greatness in the aftermath. The League will come apart. There'll be war among humans. Either I'll be used by the I.F. to help keep the peace, or maybe I can get into some army on Earth. I've got plenty of life ahead of me. Unless Wiggin commands our fleet against the invading Buggers and loses. Then none of us has any life at all.

All I can do right now is my best to help Wiggin learn everything he can learn here. The trouble is, I'm not close enough to him for me to have any effect on him at all.

The battle was with Petra Arkanian, commander of Phoenix Army. Petra was sharper than Carn Carby had been; she also had the advantage of hearing how Wiggin worked entirely without formations and used little raiding parties to disrupt formations ahead of the main combat. Still, Dragon finished with only three soldiers flashed and nine partially disabled. A crushing defeat. Bean could see that Petra didn't like it, either. She probably felt like Wiggin had poured it on, deliberately setting her up for humiliation. But she'd get it, soon enough -- Wiggin simply turned his toon leaders loose, and each of them pursued total victory, as he had trained them. Their system worked better, that's all, and the old way of doing battle was doomed.

Soon enough, all the other commanders would start adapting, learning from what Wiggin did. Soon enough, Dragon Army would be facing armies that were divided into five toons, not four, and that moved in a free-ranging style with a lot more discretion given to the toon leaders. The kids didn't get to Battle School because they were idiots. The only reason the techniques worked a second time was because there'd only been a day since the first battle, and nobody expected to have to face Wiggin again so soon. Now they'd know that changes would have to be made fast. Bean guessed that they'd probably never see another formation.

What then? Had Wiggin emptied his magazine, or would he have new tricks up his sleeve? The trouble was, innovation never resulted in victory over the long term. It was too easy for the enemy to imitate and improve on your innovations. The real test for Wiggin would be what he did when he was faced with slugfests between armies using similar tactics.

And the real test for me will be seeing if I can stand it when Wiggin makes some stupid mistake and I have to sit here as an ordinary soldier and watch him do it.

The third day, another battle. The fourth day, another. Victory. Victory. But each time, the score was closer. Each time, Bean gained more confidence as a soldier -- and became more frustrated that the most he could contribute, beyond his own good aim, was occasionally making a suggestion to Crazy Tom, or reminding him of something Bean had noticed and remembered.

Bean wrote to Dimak about it, explaining how he was being underused and suggesting that he would be getting better trained by working with a worse commander, where he'd have a better chance of getting his own toon.

The answer was short. "Who else would want you? Learn from Ender."

Brutal but true. No doubt even Wiggin didn't really want him. Either he was forbidden to transfer any of his soldiers, or he had tried to trade Bean away and no one would take him.

It was free time of the evening after their fourth battle. Most of the others were trying to keep up with their classwork -- the battles were really taking it out of them, especially because they could all see that they needed to practice hard to stay ahead. Bean, though, coasted through classwork like always, and when Nikolai told him he didn't need any more damned help with his assignments, Bean decided that he should take a walk.

Passing Wiggin's quarters -- a space even smaller than the cramped quarters the teachers had, just space for a bunk, one chair, and a tiny table -- Bean was tempted to knock on the door and sit down and have it out with Wiggin once and for all. Then common sense prevailed over frustration and vanity, and Bean wandered until he came to the arcade.

It wasn't as full as it used to be. Bean figured that was because everyone was holding extra practices now, trying to implement whatever they thought it was Wiggin was doing before they actually had to face him in battle. Still, a few were still willing to fiddle with the controllers and make things move on screens or in holodisplays.

Bean found a flat-screen game that had, as its hero, a mouse. No one was using it, so Bean started maneuvering it through a maze. Quickly the maze gave way to the wallspaces and crawlspaces of an old house, with traps set here and there, easy stuff. Cats chased him -- ho hum. He jumped up onto a table and found himself face to face with a giant.

A giant who offered him a drink.

This was the fantasy game. This was the psychological game that everybody else played on their desks all the time. No wonder no one was playing it here. They all recognized it and that wasn't the game they came here to play.

Bean was well aware that he was the only kid in the school who had never played the fantasy game. They had tricked him into playing this once, but he doubted that anything important could be learned from what he had done so far. So screw 'em. They could trick him into playing up to a point, but he didn't have to go further.

Except that the giant's face had changed. It was Achilles.

Bean stood there in shock for a moment. Frozen, frightened. How did they know? Why did they do it? To put him face-to-face with Achilles, by surprise like that. Those bastards.

He walked away from the game.

Moments later, he turned around and came back. The giant was no longer on the screen. The mouse was running around again, trying to get out of the maze.

No, I won't play. Achilles is far away and he does not have the power to hurt me. Or Poke either, not anymore. I don't have to think about him and I sure as hell don't have to drink anything he offers me.

Bean walked away again, and this time did not come back.

He found himself down by the mess. It had just closed, but Bean had nothing better to do, so he sat down in the corridor beside the mess hall door and rested his forehead on his knees and thought about Rotterdam and sitting on top of a garbage can watching Poke working with her crew and how

she was the most decent crew boss he'd seen, the way she listened to the little kids and gave them a fair share and kept them alive even if it meant not eating so much herself and that's why he chose her, because she had mercy-mercy enough that she just might listen to a child.

Her mercy killed her.

I killed her when I chose her.

There better be a God. So he can damn Achilles to hell forever.

Someone kicked at his foot.

"Go away," said Bean, "I'm not bothering you."

Whoever it was kicked again, knocking Bean's feet out from under him. With his hands he caught himself from falling over. He looked up. Bonzo Madrid loomed over him.

"I understand you're the littlest dingleberry clinging to the butt hairs of Dragon Army," said Bonzo.

He had three other guys with him. Big guys. They all had bully faces.

"Hi, Bonzo."

"We need to talk, pinprick."

"What is this, espionage?" asked Bean. "You're not supposed to talk to soldiers in other armies."

"I don't need espionage to find out how to beat Dragon Army," said Bonzo.

"So you're just looking for the littlest Dragon soldiers wherever you can find them, and then you'll push them around a little till they cry?"

Bonzo's face showed his anger. Not that it didn't always show anger.

"Are you begging to eat out of your own asshole, pinprick?"

Bean didn't like bullies right now. And since, at the moment, he felt guilty of murdering Poke, he didn't really care if Bonzo Madrid ended up being the one to administer the death penalty. It was time to speak his mind.

"You're at least three times my weight," said Bean, "except inside your skull. You're a second-rater who somehow got an army and never could figure out what to do with it. Wiggin is going to grind you into the ground and he isn't even going to have to try. So does it really matter what you do to me? I'm the smallest and weakest soldier in the whole school. Naturally *I'm* the one you choose to kick around."

"Yeah, the smallest and weakest," said one of the other kids.

Bonzo didn't say anything, though. Bean's words had stung. Bonzo had his pride, and he knew now that if he harmed Bean it would be a humiliation, not a pleasure.

"Ender Wiggin isn't going to beat me with that collection of launchies and rejects that he calls an army. He may have psyched out a bunch of dorks like Carn and ... *Petra*." He spat her name. "But whenever *we* find crap my army can pound it flat."

Bean affixed him with his most withering glare. "Don't you get it, Bonzo? The teachers have picked Wiggin. He's the best. The best ever. They didn't give him the worst army. They gave him the *best* army. Those veterans you call rejects -- they were soldiers so good that the *stupid* commanders couldn't get along with them and tried to transfer them away. Wiggin knows how to use good soldiers, even if you don't. That's why Wiggin is winning. He's smarter than you. And his soldiers are all smarter than your soldiers. The deck is stacked against you, Bonzo. You might as well give up now. When your pathetic little Salamander Army faces us, you'll be so whipped you'll have to pee sitting down."

Bean might have said more -- it's not like he had a plan, and there was certainly a lot more he could have said -- but he was interrupted. Two of Bonzo's friends scooped him up and held him high against the wall, higher than their own heads. Bonzo put one hand around his throat, just under his jaw, and pressed back. The others let go. Bean was hanging by his neck, and he couldn't breathe. Reflexively he kicked, struggling to get some purchase with his feet. But long-armed Bonzo was too far away for any of Bean's kicking to land on him.

"The game is one thing," Bonzo said quietly. "The teachers can rig that and give it to their little Wiggin catamite. But there'll come a time when it isn't a game. And when that time comes, it won't be a frozen flash suit that makes it so Wiggin can't move. Comprendes?"

What answer was he hoping for? It was a sure thing Bean couldn't nod or speak.

Bonzo just stood there, smiling maliciously, as Bean struggled.

Everything started turning black around the edges of Bean's vision before Bonzo finally let him drop to the floor. He lay there, coughing and gasping.

What have I done? I goaded Bonzo Madrid. A bully with none of Achilles's subtlety. When Wiggin beats him, Bonzo isn't going to take it. He won't stop with a demonstration, either. His hatred for Wiggin runs deep.

As soon as he could breathe again, Bean headed back to the barracks. Nikolai noticed the marks on his neck at once. "Who was choking you?"

"I don't know," said Bean.

"Don't give me that," said Nikolai. "He was facing you, look at the fingermarks."

"I don't remember."

"You remember the pattern of arteries on your own placenta."

"I'm not going to tell you," said Bean. To that, Nikolai had no answer, though he didn't like it.

Bean signed on as ^Graff and wrote a note to Dimak, even though he knew it would do no good.

"Bonzo is insane. He could kill somebody, and Wiggin's the one he hates the most."

The answer came back quickly, almost as if Dimak had been waiting for the message. "Clean up your own messes. Don't go crying to mama."

The words stung. It wasn't Bean's mess, it was Wiggin's. And, ultimately, the teachers', for having put Wiggin in Bonzo's army to begin with. And then to taunt him because he didn't have a mother - when did the teachers become the enemy here? They were supposed to protect us from crazy kids like Bonzo Madrid. How do they think I'm going to clean this mess up?

The only thing that will stop Bonzo Madrid is to kill him.

And then Bean remembered standing there looking down at Achilles, saying, "You got to kill him."

Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut? Why did I have to goad Bonzo Madrid? Wiggin is going to end up like Poke. And it will be my fault again.

CHAPTER 16 -- COMPANION

"So you see, Anton, the key you found has been turned, and it may be the salvation of the human race."

"But the poor boy. To live his life so small, and then die as a giant."

"Perhaps he'll be ... amused at the irony."

"How strange to think that my little key might turn out to be the salvation of the human race. From the invading beasts, anyway. Who will save us when we become our own enemy again?"

"We are not enemies, you and I."

"Not many people are enemies to anyone. But the ones full of greed or hate, pride or fear -- their passion is strong enough to lever all the world into war."

"If God can raise up a great soul to save us from one menace, might he not answer our prayers by raising up another when we need him?"

"But Sister Carlotta, you know the boy you speak of was not raised up by God. He was created by a kidnapper, a baby-killer, an outlaw scientist."

"Do you know why Satan is so angry all the time? Because whenever he works a particularly clever bit of mischief, God uses it to serve his own righteous purposes."

"So God uses wicked people as his tools."

"God gives us the freedom to do great evil, if we choose. Then he uses his own freedom to create goodness out of that evil, for that is what he chooses."

"So in the long run, God always wins."

"Yes."

"In the short run, though, it *can* be uncomfortable."

"And when, in the past, would you have preferred to die, instead of being alive here today?"

"There it is. We get used to everything. We find hope in anything."

"That's why I've never understood suicide. Even those suffering from great depression or guilt -- don't they feel Christ the Comforter in their hearts, giving them hope?"

"You're asking me?"

"God not being convenient, I ask a fellow mortal."

"In my view, suicide is not really the wish for life to end."

"What is it, then?"

"It is the only way a powerless person can find to make everybody else look away from his shame. The wish is not to die, but to hide."

"As Adam and Eve hid from the Lord."

"Because they were naked."

"If only Such sad people could remember: Everyone is naked. Everyone wants to hide. But life is still sweet. Let it go on."

"You don't believe that the Formics are the beast of the Apocalypse, then, Sister?"

"No, Anton. I believe they are also children of God."

"And yet you found this boy specifically so he could grow up to destroy them."

"*Defeat* them. Besides, if God does not want them to die, they will not die."

"And if God wants *us* to die, we will. Why do you work so hard, then?"

"Because these hands of mine, I gave them to God, and I serve him as best I can. If he had not wanted me to find Bean, I would not have found him."

"And if God wants the Formics to prevail?"

"He'll find some other hands to do it. For that job, he can't have mine."

Lately, while the toon leaders drilled the soldiers, Wiggin had taken to disappearing. Bean used his ^Graff log-on to find what he was doing. He'd gone back to studying the vids of Mazer Rackham's victory, much more intensely and single-mindedly than ever before. And this time, because Wiggin's army was playing games daily and winning them all, the other commanders and many toon leaders and common soldiers as well began to go to the library and watch the same vids, trying to make sense of them, trying to see what Wiggin saw.

Stupid, thought Bean. Wiggin isn't looking for anything to use here in Battle School -- he's created a powerful, versatile army and he'll figure out what to do with them on the spot. He's studying those vids in order to figure out how to beat the Buggers. Because he knows now: He will face them someday. The teachers would not be wrecking the whole system here in Battle School if they were not nearing the crisis, if they did not need Ender Wiggin to save us from the invading Buggers. So Wiggin studies the Buggers, desperate for some idea of what they want, how they fight, how they die.

Why don't the teachers see that Wiggin is done? He's not even thinking about Battle School anymore. They should take him out of here and move him into Tactical School, or whatever the next stage of his training will be. Instead, they're pushing him, making him tired.

Us too. We're tired.

Bean saw it especially in Nikolai, who was working harder than the others just to keep up. If we were an ordinary army, thought Bean, most of us would be like Nikolai. As it is, many of us are -- Nikolai was not the first to show his weariness. Soldiers drop silverware or food trays at mealtimes. At least one has wet his bed. We argue more at practice. Our classwork is suffering. Everyone has limits. Even me, even genetically-altered Bean the thinking machine, I need time to relubricate and refuel, and I'm not getting it.

Bean even wrote to Colonel Graff about it, a snippy little note saying only, "It is one thing to train soldiers and quite another to wear them out." He got no reply.

Late afternoon, with a half hour before mess call. They had already won a game that morning and then practiced after class, though the toon leaders, at Wiggin's suggestion, had let their soldiers go early. Most of Dragon Army was now dressing after showers, though some had already gone on to kill time in the game room or the video room ... or the library. Nobody was paying attention to classwork now, but a few still went through the motions.

Wiggin appeared in the doorway, brandishing the new orders.

A second battle on the *same day*.

"This one's hot and there's no time," said Wiggin. "They gave Bonzo notice about twenty minutes ago, and by the time we get to the door they'll have been inside for a good five minutes at least."

He sent the four soldiers nearest the door -- all young, but not launches anymore, they were veterans now -- to bring back the ones who had left. Bean dressed quickly -- he had learned how to do it by himself now, but not without hearing plenty of jokes about how he was the only soldier who had to practice getting dressed, and it was still slow.

As they dressed, there was plenty of complaining about how this was getting stupid, Dragon Army should have a break now and then. Fly Molo was the loudest, but even Crazy Tom, who usually laughed at everything, was pissed about it. When Tom said, "Same day nobody ever do two battles!" Wiggin answered, "Nobody ever beat Dragon Army, either. This be your big chance to lose?"

Of course not. Nobody intended to lose. They just wanted to complain about it.

It took a while, but finally they were gathered in the corridor to the battleroom. The gate was already open. A few of the last arrivals were still putting on their flash suits. Bean was right behind Crazy Tom, so he could see down into the room. Bright light. No stars, no grid, no hiding place of any kind. The enemy gate was open, and yet there was not a Salamander soldier to be seen.

"My heart," said Crazy Tom. "They haven't come out yet, either."

Bean rolled his eyes. Of course they were out. But in a room without cover, they had simply formed themselves up on the ceiling, gathered around Dragon Army's gate, ready to destroy everybody as they came out.

Wiggin caught Bean's facial expression and smiled as he covered his own mouth to signal them all to be silent. He pointed all around the gate, to let them know where Salamander was gathered, then motioned for them to move back.

The strategy was simple and obvious. Since Bonzo Madrid had kindly pinned his army against a wall, ready to be slaughtered, it only remained to find the right way to enter the battleroom and carry out the massacre.

Wiggin's solution -- which Bean liked -- was to transform the larger soldiers into armored vehicles by having them kneel upright and freeze their legs. Then a smaller soldier knelt on each big kid's calves, wrapped one arm around the bigger soldier's waist, and prepared to fire. The largest soldiers were used as launchers, throwing each pair into the battleroom.

For once being small had its advantages. Bean and Crazy Tom were the pair Wiggin used to demonstrate what he wanted them all to do. As a result, when the first two pairs were thrown into the room, Bean got to begin the slaughter. He had three kills almost at once -- at such close range, the beam was tight and the kills came fast. And as they began to go out of range, Bean climbed around Crazy Tom and launched off of him, heading east and somewhat up while Tom went even faster toward the far side of the room. When other Dragons saw how Bean had managed to stay within firing range, while moving sideways and therefore remaining hard to hit, many of them did the same. Eventually Bean was disabled, but it hardly mattered -- Salamander was wiped out to the last man, and without a single one of them getting off the wall. Even when it was obvious they were easy, stationary targets, Bonzo didn't catch on that he was doomed until he himself was already frozen, and nobody else had the initiative to countermand his original order and start moving so they wouldn't be so easy to hit. Just one more example of why a commander who ruled by fear and made all the decisions himself would always be beaten, sooner or later.

The whole battle had taken less than a full minute from the time Bean rode Crazy Tom through the door until the last Salamander was frozen.

What surprised Bean was that Wiggin, usually so calm, was pissed off and showing it. Major Anderson didn't even have a chance to give the official congratulations to the victor before Wiggin shouted at him, "I thought you were going to put us against an army that could match us in a fair fight."

Why would he think that? Wiggin must have had some kind of conversation with Anderson, must have been promised something that hadn't been delivered.

But Anderson explained nothing. "Congratulations on the victory, commander."

Wiggin wasn't going to have it. It wasn't going to be business as usual. He turned to his army and called out to Bean by name. "If you had commanded Salamander Army, what would you have done?"

Since another Dragon had used him to shove off in midair, Bean was now drifting down near the enemy gate, but he heard the question -- Wiggin wasn't being subtle about this. Bean didn't want to answer, because he knew what a serious mistake this was, to speak slightingly of Salamander and call on the smallest Dragon soldier to correct Bonzo's stupid tactics. Wiggin hadn't had Bonzo's hand around his throat the way Bean had. Still, Wiggin was commander, and Bonzo's tactics had been stupid, and it was fun to say so.

"Keep a shifting pattern of movement going in front of the door," Bean answered, loudly, so every soldier could hear him -- even the Salamanders, still clinging to the ceiling. "You never hold still when the enemy knows exactly where you are."

Wiggin turned to Anderson again. "As long as you're cheating, why don't you train the other army to cheat intelligently!"

Anderson was still calm, ignoring Wiggin's outburst. "I suggest that you remobilize your army."

Wiggin wasn't wasting time with rituals today. He pressed the buttons to thaw both armies at once. And instead of forming up to receive formal surrender, he shouted at once, "Dragon Army dismissed!"

Bean was one of those nearest the gate, but he waited till nearly last, so that he and Wiggin left together. "Sir," said Bean. "You just humiliated Bonzo and he's --"

"I know," said Wiggin. He jogged away from Bean, not wanting to hear about it.

"He's dangerous!" Bean called after him. Wasted effort. Either Wiggin already knew he'd provoked the wrong bully, or he didn't care.

Did he do it deliberately? Wiggin was always in control of himself, always carrying out a plan. But Bean couldn't think of any plan that required yelling at Major Anderson and shaming Bonzo Madrid in front of his whole army.

Why would Wiggin do such a stupid thing?

It was almost impossible to think of geometry, even though there was a test tomorrow. Classwork was utterly unimportant now, and yet they went on taking the tests and turning in or failing to turn in their assignments. The last few days, Bean had begun to get less-than-perfect scores. Not that he didn't know the answers, or at least how to figure them out. It's that his mind kept wandering to things that mattered more -- new tactics that might surprise an enemy; new tricks that the teachers might pull in the way they set things up; what might be, must be going on in the larger war, to cause the system to start breaking apart like this; what would happen on Earth and in the I.F. once the Buggers were defeated. If they were defeated. Hard to care about volumes, areas, faces, and dimensions of solids. On a test yesterday, working out problems of gravity near planetary and stellar masses, Bean finally gave up and wrote:

$2 + 2 = \pi \cdot \sqrt{2+n}$: When you know the value of n, I'll finish this test.

He knew that the teachers all knew what was going on, and if they wanted to pretend that classwork still mattered, fine, let them, but he didn't have to play.

At the same time, he knew that the problems of gravity mattered to someone whose only likely future was in the International Fleet. He also needed a thorough grounding in geometry, since he had a pretty good idea of what math was yet to come. He wasn't going to be an engineer or artilleryman or rocket scientist or even, in all likelihood, a pilot. But he had to know what they knew better than they knew it, or they'd never respect him enough to follow him.

Not tonight, that's all, thought Bean. Tonight I can rest. Tomorrow I'll learn what I need to learn. When I'm not so tired.

He closed his eyes.

He opened them again. He opened his locker and took out his desk.

Back on the streets of Rotterdam he had been tired, worn out by hunger and malnutrition and despair. But he kept watching. Kept thinking. And therefore he was able to stay alive. In this army everyone was getting tired, which meant that there would be more and more stupid mistakes. Bean, of all of them, could least afford to become stupid. Not being stupid was the only asset he had.

He signed on. A message appeared in his display.

See me at once -- Ender

It was only ten minutes before lights out. Maybe Wiggin sent the message three hours ago. But better late than never. He slid off his bunk, not bothering with shoes, and padded out into the corridor in his stocking feet. He knocked at the door marked

COMMANDER

DRAGON ARMY

"Come in," said Wiggin.

Bean opened the door and came inside. Wiggin looked tired in the way that Colonel Graff usually looked tired. Heavy skin around the eyes, face slack, hunched in the shoulders, but eyes still bright and fierce, watching, thinking. "Just saw your message," said Bean.

"Fine."

"It's near lights-out."

"I'll help you find your way in the dark."

The sarcasm surprised Bean. As usual, Wiggin had completely misunderstood the purpose of Bean's comment. "I just didn't know if you knew what time it was --"

"I always know what time it is."

Bean sighed inwardly. It never failed. Whenever he had any conversation with Wiggin, it turned into some kind of pissing contest, which Bean always lost even when it was Wiggin whose deliberate misunderstanding caused the whole thing. Bean hated it. He recognized Wiggin's genius and honored him for it. Why couldn't he see anything good in Bean?

But Bean said nothing. There was nothing he could say that would improve the situation. Wiggin had called him in. Let Wiggin move the meeting forward.

"Remember four weeks ago, Bean? When you told me to make you a toon leader?"

"Eh."

"I've made five toon leaders and five assistants since then. And none of them was you." Wiggin raised his eyebrows. "Was I right?"

"Yes, sir." But only because you didn't bother to give me a chance to prove myself before you made the assignments.

"So tell me how you've done in these eight battles."

Bean wanted to point out how time after time, his suggestions to Crazy Tom had made C toon the most effective in the army. How his tactical innovations and creative responses to flowing situations had been imitated by the other soldiers. But that would be brag and borderline insubordination. It wasn't what a soldier who wanted to be an officer would say. Either Crazy Tom had reported Bean's contribution or he hadn't. It wasn't Bean's place to report on anything about himself that wasn't public record. "Today was the first time they disabled me so early, but the computer listed me as getting eleven hits before I had to stop. "I've never had less than five hits in a battle. I've also completed every assignment I've been given."

"Why did they make you a soldier so young, Bean?"

"No younger than you were." Technically not true, but close enough.

"But why?"

What was he getting at? It was the teachers' decision. Had he found out that Bean was the one who composed the roster? Did he know that Bean had chosen himself? "I don't know."

"Yes you do, and so do I."

No, Wiggin wasn't asking specifically about why *Bean* was made a soldier. He was asking why launchies were suddenly getting promoted so young. "I've tried to guess, but they're just guesses." Not that Bean's guesses were ever just guesses -- but then, neither were Wiggin's. "You're -- very good. They knew that, they pushed you ahead --"

"Tell me *why*, Bean."

And now Bean understood the question he was really asking. "Because they need us, that's why." He sat on the floor and looked, not into Wiggin's face, but at his feet. Bean knew things that he wasn't supposed to know. That the teachers didn't know he knew. And in all likelihood, there were teachers monitoring this conversation. Bean couldn't let his face give away how much he really understood. "Because they need somebody to beat the Buggers. That's the only thing they care about."

"It's important that you know that, Bean."

Bean wanted to demand, Why is it important that *I* know it? Or are you just saying that people in general should know it? Have you finally seen and understood who I am? That I'm *you*, only smarter and less likable, the better strategist but the weaker commander? That if you fail, if you break, if you get sick and die, then I'm the one? Is that why I need to know this?

"Because," Wiggin went on, "most of the boys in this school think the game is important *for itself*, but it isn't. It's only important because it helps them find kids who might grow up to be real commanders, in the real war. But as for the game, screw that. That's what they're doing. Screwing up the game."

"Funny," said Bean. "I thought they were just doing it to us." No, if Wiggin thought Bean needed to have this explained to him, he did *not* understand who Bean really was. Still, it was Bean in Wiggin's quarters, having this conversation with him. That was something.

"A game nine weeks earlier than it should have come. A game every day. And now two games in the same day. Bean, I don't know what the teachers are doing, but my army is getting tired, and I'm getting tired, and they don't care at all about the rules of the game. I've pulled the old charts up from the computer. No one has ever destroyed so many enemies and kept so many of his own soldiers whole in the history of the game."

What was this, brag? Bean answered as brag was meant to be answered. "You're the best, Ender."

Wiggin shook his head. If he heard the irony in Bean's voice, he didn't respond to it. "Maybe. But it was no accident that I got the soldiers I got. Launchies, rejects from other armies, but put them together and my worst soldier could be a toon leader in another army. They've loaded things my way, but now they're loading it all against me. Bean, they want to break us down."

So Wiggin did understand how his army had been selected, even if he didn't know who had done the selecting. Or maybe he knew everything, and this was all that he cared to show Bean at this time. It was hard to guess how much of what Wiggin did was calculated and how much merely intuitive. "They can't break you."

"You'd be surprised." Wiggin breathed sharply, suddenly, as if there were a stab of pain, or he had to catch a sudden breath in a wind; Bean looked at him and realized that the impossible was happening. Far from baiting him, Ender Wiggin was actually confiding in him. Not much. But a

little. Ender was letting Bean see that he was human. Bringing him into the inner circle. Making him ... what? A counselor? A confidant?

"Maybe you'll be surprised," said Bean.

"There's a limit to how many clever new ideas I can come up with every day. Somebody's going to come up with something to throw at me that I haven't thought of before, and I won't be ready."

"What's the worst that could happen?" asked Bean. "You lose one game."

"Yes. That's the worst that could happen. I can't lose **any** games. Because if I lose **any** ..."

He didn't complete the thought. Bean wondered what Ender imagined the consequences would be. Merely that the legend of Ender Wiggin, perfect soldier, would be lost? Or that his army would lose confidence in him, or in their own invincibility? Or was this about the larger war, and losing a game here in Battle School might shake the confidence of the teachers that Ender was the commander of the future, the one to lead the fleet, if he could be made ready before the Bugger invasion arrived?

Again, Bean did not know how much the teachers knew about what Bean had guessed about the progress of the wider war. Better to keep silence.

"I need you to be clever, Bean," said Ender. "I need you to think of solutions to problems we haven't seen yet. I want you to try things that no one has ever tried because they're absolutely stupid."

So what is this about, Ender? What have you decided about me, that brings me into your quarters tonight? "Why me?"

"Because even though there are some better soldiers than you in Dragon Army -- not many, but some -- there's nobody who can think better and faster than you."

He **had** seen. And after a month of frustration, Bean realized that it was better this way. Ender had seen his work in battle, had judged him by what he did, not by his reputation in classes or the rumors about his having the highest scores in the history of the school. Bean had earned this evaluation, and it had been given him by the only person in this school whose high opinion Bean longed for.

Ender held out his desk for Bean to see. On it were twelve names. Two or three soldiers from each toon. Bean immediately knew how Ender had chosen them. They were all good soldiers, confident and reliable. But not the flashy ones, the stunts, the show-offs. They were, in fact, the ones that Bean valued most highly among those who were not toon leaders. "Choose five of these," said Ender. "One from each toon. They're a special squad, and you'll train them. Only during the extra practice sessions. Talk to me about what you're training them to do. Don't spend too long on any one thing. Most of the time you and your squad will be part of the whole army, part of your regular

toons. But when I need you. When there's something to be done that only you can do."

There was something else about these twelve. "These are all new. No veterans."

"After last week, Bean, all our soldiers are veterans. Don't you realize that on the individual soldier standings, all forty of our soldiers are in the top fifty? That you have to go down seventeen places to find a soldier who **isn't** a Dragon?"

"What if I can't think of anything?" asked Bean.

"Then I was wrong about you."

Bean grinned. "You weren't wrong."

The lights went out.

"Can you find your way back, Bean?"

"Probably not."

"Then stay here. If you listen very carefully, you can hear the good fairy come in the night and leave our assignment for tomorrow."

"They won't give us another battle tomorrow, will they?" Bean meant it as a joke, but Ender didn't answer.

Bean heard him climb into bed.

Ender was still small for a commander. His feet didn't come near the end of the bunk. There was plenty of room for Bean to curl up at the foot of the bed. So he climbed up and then lay still, so as not to disturb Ender's sleep. If he was sleeping. If he was not lying awake in the silence, trying to make sense of ... what?

For Bean, the assignment was merely to think of the unthinkable -- stupid ploys that might be used against them, and ways to counter them; equally stupid innovations they might introduce in order to sow confusion among the other armies and, Bean suspected, get them sidetracked into imitating completely nonessential strategies. Since few of the other commanders understood why Dragon Army was winning, they kept imitating the nonce tactics used in a particular battle instead of seeing the underlying method Ender used in training and organizing his army. As Napoleon said, the only thing a commander ever truly controls is his own army -- training, morale, trust, initiative, command and, to a lesser degree, supply, placement, movement, loyalty, and courage in battle. What the enemy will do and what chance will bring, those defy all planning. The commander must be able to change his plans abruptly when obstacles or opportunities appear. If his army isn't ready and willing to respond to his will, his cleverness comes to nothing.

The less effective commanders didn't understand this. Failing to recognize that Ender won because he and his army responded fluidly and instantly to change, they could only think to imitate the specific tactics they saw him use. Even if Bean's creative gambits were irrelevant to the outcome of the battle, they would lead other commanders to waste time imitating irrelevancies. Now and then something he came up with might actually be useful. But by and large, he was a sideshow.

That was fine with Bean. If Ender wanted a sideshow, what mattered was that he had chosen Bean to create that show, and Bean would do it as well as it could be done.

But if Ender was lying awake tonight, it was not because he was concerned about Dragon Army's battles tomorrow and the next day and the next. Ender was thinking about the Buggers and how he would fight them when he got through his training and was thrown into war, with the real lives of real men depending on his decisions, with the survival of humanity depending on the outcome.

In that scheme, what is my place? thought Bean. I'm glad enough that the burden is on Ender, not because I could not bear it -- maybe I could -- but because I have more confidence that Ender can bring it off than that I could. Whatever it is that makes men love the commander who decides when they will die, Ender has that, and if I have it no one has yet seen evidence of it. Besides, even without genetic alteration, Ender has abilities that the tests didn't measure for, that run deeper than mere intellect.

But he shouldn't have to bear all this alone. I can help him. I can forget geometry and astronomy and all the other nonsense and concentrate on the problems he faces most directly. I'll do research into the way other animals wage war, especially swarming hive insects, since the Formics resemble ants the way we resemble primates.

And I can watch his back.

Bean thought again of Bonzo Madrid. Of the deadly rage of bullies in Rotterdam.

Why have the teachers put Ender in this position? He's an obvious target for the hatred of the other boys. Kids in Battle School had war in their hearts. They hungered for triumph. They loathed defeat. If they lacked these attributes, they would never have been brought here. Yet from the start, Ender had been set apart from the others -- younger but smarter, the leading soldier and now the commander who makes all other commanders look like babies. Some commanders responded to defeat by becoming submissive -- Carn Carby, for instance, now praised Ender behind his back and studied his battles to try to learn how to win, never realizing that you had to study Ender's training, not his battles, to understand his victories. But most of the other commanders were resentful, frightened, ashamed, angry, jealous, and it was in their character to translate such feelings into violent action ... if they were sure of victory.

Just like the streets of Rotterdam. Just like the bullies, struggling for supremacy, for rank, for respect. Ender has stripped Bonzo naked. It cannot be borne. He'll have his revenge, as surely as Achilles avenged his humiliation.

And the teachers understand this. They intend it. Ender has clearly mastered every test they set for him -- whatever Battle School usually taught, he was done with. So why didn't they move him on to the next level? Because there was a lesson they were trying to teach, or a test they were trying to get him to pass, which was not within the usual curriculum. Only this particular test could end in death. Bean had felt Bonzo's fingers around his throat. This was a boy who, once he let himself go, would relish the absolute power that the murderer achieves at his victim's moment of death.

They're putting Ender into a street situation. They're testing him to see if he can survive.

They don't know what they're doing, the fools. The street is not a test. The street is a lottery.

I came out a winner -- I was alive. But Ender's survival won't depend on his ability. Luck plays too large a role. Plus the skill and resolve and power of the opponent.

Bonzo may be unable to control the emotions that weaken him, but his presence in Battle School means that he is not without skill. He was made a commander because a certain type of soldier will follow him into death and horror. Ender is in mortal danger. And the teachers, who think of us as children, have no idea how quickly death can come. Look away for only a few minutes, step away far enough that you can't get back in time, and your precious Ender Wiggin, on whom all your hopes are pinned, will be quite, quite dead. I saw it on the streets of Rotterdam. It can happen just as easily in your nice clean rooms here in space.

So Bean set aside classwork for good that night, lying at Ender's feet. Instead, he had two new courses of study. He would help Ender prepare for the war he cared about, with the Buggers. But he would also help him in the street fight that was being set up for him.

It wasn't that Ender was oblivious, either. After some kind of fracas in the battleroom during one of Ender's early freetime practices, Ender had taken a course in self-defense, and knew something about fighting man to man. But Bonzo would not come at him man to man. He was too keenly aware of having been beaten. Bonzo's purpose would not be a rematch, it would not be vindication. It would be punishment. It would be elimination. He would bring a gang.

And the teachers would not realize the danger until it was too late. They still didn't think of anything the children did as "real."

So after Bean thought of clever, stupid things to do with his new squad, he also tried to think of ways to set Bonzo up so that, in the crunch, he would have to take on Ender Wiggin alone or not at all. Strip away Bonzo's support. Destroy the morale, the reputation of any bully who might go along with him.

This is one job Ender **can't** do. But it can be done.

PART FIVE -- LEADER

CHAPTER 17 -- DEADLINE

"I don't even know how to interpret this. The mind game had only one shot at Bean, and it puts up this one kid's face, and he goes off the charts with -- what, fear? Rage? Isn't there anybody who knows how this so-called game works? It ran Ender through a wringer, brought in those pictures of his brother that it couldn't possibly have had, only it got them. And this one -- was it some deeply insightful gambit that leads to powerful new conclusions about Bean's psyche? Or was it simply the only person Bean knew whose picture was already in the Battle School files?"

"Was that a rant, or is there any particular one of those questions you want answered?"

"What I want you to answer is this question: How the hell can you tell me that something was 'very significant' if you have no idea what it signifies!"

"If someone runs after your car, screaming and waving his arms, you know that something significant is intended, even if you can't hear a word he's saying."

"So that's what this was? Screaming?"

"That was an analogy. The image of Achilles was extraordinarily important to Bean."

"Important positive, or important negative?"

"That's too cut-and-dried. If it was negative, are his negative feelings because Achilles caused some terrible trauma in Bean? Or negative because having been torn away from Achilles was traumatic, and Bean longs to be restored to him?"

"So if we have an independent source of information that tells us to keep them apart ..."

"Then either that independent source is really really right ..."

"Or really really wrong."

"I'd be more specific if I could. We only had a minute with him."

"That's disingenuous. You've had the mind game linked to all his work with his teacher-identity."

"And we've reported to you about that. It's partly his hunger to have control -- that's how it began - - but it has since become a way of taking responsibility. He has, in a way, *become* a teacher. He has also used his inside information to give himself the illusion of belonging to the community."

"He does belong."

"He has only one close friend, and that's more of a big brother, little brother thing."

"I have to decide whether I can put Achilles into Battle School while Bean is there, or give up one of them in order to keep the other. Now, from Bean's response to Achilles's face, what counsel can you give me."

"You won't like it."

"Try me."

"From that incident, we can tell you that putting them together will be either a really really bad thing, or --"

"I'm going to have to take a long, hard look at your budget."

"Sir, the whole purpose of the program, the way it works, is that the computer makes connections we would never think of, and gets responses we weren't looking for. It's not actually under our control."

"Just because a program isn't out of control doesn't mean intelligence is present, either in the program or the programmer."

"We don't use the word 'intelligence' with software. We regard that as a naive idea. We say that it's 'complex.' Which means that we don't always understand what it's doing. We don't always get conclusive information."

"Have you *ever* gotten conclusive information about anything?"

"*I* chose the wrong word this time. 'Conclusive' isn't ever the goal when we are studying the human mind."

"Try 'useful.' Anything useful?"

"Sir, I've told you what we know. The decision was yours before we reported to you, and it's still your decision now. Use our information or not, but is it sensible to shoot the messenger?"

"When the messenger won't tell you what the hell the message *is*, my trigger finger gets twitchy. Dismissed."

Nikolai's name was on the list that Ender gave him, but Bean ran into problems immediately.

"I don't want to," said Nikolai.

It had not occurred to Bean that anyone would refuse.

"I'm having a hard enough time keeping up as it is."

"You're a good soldier."

"By the skin of my teeth. With a big helping of luck."

"That's how **all** good soldiers do it."

"Bean, if I lose one practice a day from my regular toon, then I'll fall behind. How can I make it up? And one practice a day with you won't be enough. I'm a smart kid, Bean, but I'm not Ender. I'm not you. That's the thing that I don't think you really get. How it feels **not** to be you. Things just aren't as easy and clear."

"It's not easy for me, either."

"Look, I know that, Bean. And there are some things I can do for you. This isn't one of them. Please."

It was Bean's first experience with command, and it wasn't working. He found himself getting angry, wanting to say Screw you and go on to someone else. Only he couldn't be angry at the only true friend he had. And he also couldn't easily take no for an answer. "Nikolai, what we're doing won't be hard. Stunts and tricks."

Nikolai closed his eyes. "Bean, you're making me feel bad."

"I don't want you to feel bad, Sinterklaas, but this is the assignment I was given, because Ender thinks Dragon Army needs this. You were on the list, his choice not mine."

"But you don't have to choose me."

"So I ask the next kid, and he says, 'Nikolai's on this squad, right?' and I say, No, he didn't want to. That makes them all feel like they can say no. And they'll **want** to say no, because nobody wants to be taking orders from me."

"A month ago, sure, that would have been true. But they know you're a solid soldier. I've heard people talk about you. They respect you."

Again, it would have been so easy to do what Nikolai wanted and let him off the hook on this. And, as a friend, that would be the **right** thing to do. But Bean couldn't think as a friend. He had to deal with the fact that he had been given a command and he had to make it work.

Did he really need Nikolai?

"I'm just thinking out loud, Nikolai, because you're the only one I can say this to, but see, I'm scared. I wanted to lead a toon, but that's because I didn't know anything about what leaders do. I've had a week of battles to see how Crazy Tom holds the group of us together, the voice he uses for

command. To see how Ender trains us and trusts us, and it's a dance, tiptoe, leap, spin, and I'm afraid that I'll fail, and there isn't *time* to fail, I have to make this work, and when you're with me, I know there's at least one person who isn't halfway hoping for this smart little kid to fail."

"Don't kid yourself," said Nikolai. "As long as we're being honest."

That stung. But a leader had to take that, didn't he? "No matter what you feel, Nikolai, you'll give me a chance," said Bean. "And because you're giving me a chance, the others will, too. I need ... loyalty."

"So do I, Bean."

"You need my loyalty as a friend, in order to let you, personally, be happy," said Bean. "I need loyalty as a leader, in order to fulfil the assignment given to us by our commander."

"That's mean," said Nikolai.

"Eh," said Bean. "Also true."

"You're mean, Bean."

"Help me, Nikolai."

"Looks like our friendship goes only one way."

Bean had never felt like this before -- this knife in his heart, just because of the words he was hearing, just because somebody else was angry with him. It wasn't just because he wanted Nikolai to think well of him. It was because he knew that Nikolai was at least partly right. Bean was using his friendship against him.

It wasn't because of that pain, however, that Bean decided to back off. It was because a soldier who was with him against his will would not serve him well. Even if he was a friend. "Look, if you won't, you won't. I'm sorry I made you mad. I'll do it without you. And you're right, I'll do fine. Still friends, Nikolai?"

Nikolai took his offered hand, held it. "Thank you," he whispered.

Bean went immediately to Shovel, the only one on Ender's list who was also from C toon. Shovel wasn't Bean's first choice -- he had just the slightest tendency to delay, to do things halfheartedly. But because he was in C toon, Shovel had been there when Bean advised Crazy Tom. He had observed Bean in action.

Shovel set aside his desk when Bean asked if they could talk for a minute. As with Nikolai, Bean clambered up onto the bunk to sit beside the larger boy. Shovel was from Cagnes-sur-Mer, a little town on the French Riviera, and he still had that open-faced friendliness of Provence. Bean liked him. Everybody liked him.

Quickly Bean explained what Ender had asked him to do -- though he didn't mention that it was just a sideshow. Nobody would give up a daily practice for a something that wouldn't be crucial to victory. "You were on the list Ender gave me, and I'd like you to --"

"Bean, what are you doing?"

Crazy Tom stood in front of Shovel's bunk.

At once Bean realized his mistake. "Sir," said Bean, "I should have talked to you first. I'm new at this and I just didn't think."

"New at what?"

Again Bean laid out what he had been asked to do by Ender.

"And Shovel's on the list?"

"Right."

"So I'm going to lose you *and* Shovel from my practices?"

"Just one practice per day."

"I'm the only toon leader who loses two."

"Ender said one from each toon. Five, plus me. Not my choice."

"Merda," said Crazy Tom. "You and Ender just didn't think of the fact that this is going to hit me harder than any of the other toon leaders. Whatever you're doing, why can't you do it with five instead of six? You and four others -- one from each of the other toons?"

Bean wanted to argue, but realized that going head to head wasn't going to get him anywhere. "You're right, I didn't think of that, and you're right that Ender might very well change his mind when he realizes what he's doing to your practices. So when he comes in this morning, why don't you talk to him and let me know what the two of you decide? In the meantime, though, Shovel might tell me no, and then the question doesn't matter anymore, right?"

Crazy Tom thought about it. Bean could see the anger ticking away in him. But leadership had changed Crazy Tom. He no longer blew up the way he used to. He caught himself. He held it in. He waited it out.

"OK, I'll talk to Ender. If Shovel wants to do it."

They both looked at Shovel.

"I think it'd be OK," said Shovel. "To do something weird like this."

"I won't let up on either of you," said Crazy Tom. "And you don't talk about your wacko toon during my practices. You keep it outside."

They both agreed to that. Bean could see that Crazy Tom was wise to insist on that. This special assignment would set the two of them apart from the others in C toon. If they rubbed their noses in it, the others could feel shut out of an elite. That problem wouldn't show up as much in any of the other toons, because there'd only be one kid from each toon in Bean's squad. No chat. Therefore no nose-rubbing.

"Look, I don't have to talk to Ender about this," said Crazy Tom. "Unless it becomes a problem. OK?"

"Thanks," said Bean.

Crazy Tom went back to his own bunk.

I did that OK, thought Bean. I didn't screw up.

"Bean?" said Shovel.

"Eh?"

"One thing."

"Eh."

"Don't call me Shovel."

Bean thought back. Shovel's real name was Ducheval. "You prefer 'Two Horses'? Sounds kind of like a Sioux warrior."

Shovel grinned. "That's better than sounding like the tool you use to clean the stable."

"Ducheval," said Bean. "From now on."

"Thanks. When do we start?"

"Freetime practice today."

"Bacana."

Bean almost danced away from Ducheval's bunk. He had done it. He had handled it. Once, anyway.

And by the time breakfast was over, he had all five on his team. With the other four, he checked with their team leaders first. No one turned him down. And he got his squad to promise to call Ducheval by his right name from then on.

Graff had Dimak and Dap in his makeshift office in the battleroom bridge when Bean came. It was the usual argument between Dimak and Dap -- that is, it was about nothing, some trivial question of one violating some minor protocol or other, which escalated quickly into a flurry of formal complaints. Just another skirmish in their rivalry, as Dap and Dimak tried to gain some advantage for their proteges, Ender and Bean, while at the same time trying to keep Graff from putting them in the physical danger that both saw looming. When the knock came at the door, voices had been raised for some time, and because the knock was not loud, it occurred to Graff to wonder what might have been overheard.

Had names been mentioned? Yes. Both Bean and Ender. And also Bonzo. Had Achilles's name come up? No. He had just been referred to as "another irresponsible decision endangering the future of the human race, all because of some insane theory about games being one thing and genuine life-and-death struggles being another, completely unproven and unprovable except in the blood of some child!" That was Dap, who had a tendency to wax eloquent.

Graff, of course, was already sick at heart, because he agreed with both teachers, not only in their arguments against each other, but also in their arguments against his own policy. Bean was demonstrably the better candidate on all tests; Ender was just as demonstrably the better candidate based on his performance in actual leadership situations. And Graff *was* being irresponsible to expose both boys to physical danger.

But in both cases, the child had serious doubts about his own courage. Ender had his long history of submission to his older brother, Peter, and the mind game had shown that in Ender's unconscious, Peter was linked to the Buggers. Graff knew that Ender had the courage to strike, without restraint, when the time came for it. That he could stand alone against an enemy, without anyone to help him, and destroy the one who would destroy him. But Ender didn't know it, and he had to know.

Bean, for his part, had shown physical symptoms of panic before his first battle, and while he ended up performing well, Graff didn't need any psychological tests to tell him that the doubt was there. The only difference was, in Bean's case Graff shared his doubt. There *was* no proof that Bean would strike.

Self-doubt was the one thing that neither candidate could afford to have. Against an enemy that did not hesitate -- that *could* not hesitate -- there could be no pause for reflection. The boys had to face their worst fears, knowing that no one would intervene to help. They had to know that when failure would be fatal, they would not fail. They had to pass the test and know that they had passed it. And both boys were so perceptive that the danger could not be faked. It had to *be* real.

Exposing them to that risk was utterly irresponsible of Graff. Yet he knew that it would be just as irresponsible not to. If Graff played it safe, no one would blame him if, in the actual war, Ender or Bean failed. That would be small consolation, though, given the consequences of failure. Whichever way he guessed, if he was wrong, everybody on Earth might pay the ultimate price. The only thing that made it possible was that if either of them was killed, or damaged physically or mentally, the other was still there to carry on as the sole remaining candidate.

If both failed, what then? There were many bright children, but none who were that much better than commanders already in place, who had graduated from Battle School many years ago.

Somebody has to roll the dice. Mine are the hands that hold those dice. I'm not a bureaucrat, placing my career above the larger purpose I was put here to serve. I will not put the dice in someone else's hands, or pretend that I don't have the choice I have.

For now, all Graff could do was listen to both Dap and Dimak, ignore their bureaucratic attacks and maneuvers against him, and try to keep them from each other's throats in their vicarious rivalry.

That small knock at the door -- Graff knew before the door opened who it would be.

If he had heard the argument, Bean gave no sign. But then, that was Bean's specialty, giving no sign. Only Ender managed to be more secretive -- and he, at least, had played the mind game long enough to give the teachers a map of his psyche.

"Sir," said Bean.

"Come in, Bean." Come in, Julian Delphiki, longed-for child of good and loving parents. Come in, kidnapped child, hostage of fate. Come and talk to the Fates, who are playing such clever little games with your life.

"I can wait," said Bean.

"Captain Dap and Captain Dimak can hear what you have to say, can't they?" asked Graff.

"If you say so, sir. It's not a secret. I would like to have access to station supplies."

"Denied."

"That's not acceptable, sir."

Graff saw how both Dap and Dimak glanced at him. Amused at the audacity of the boy? "Why do you think so?"

"Short notice, games every day, soldiers exhausted and yet still being pressured to perform in class -- fine, Ender's dealing with it and so are we. But the only possible reason you could be doing this is to test our resourcefulness. So I want some resources."

"I don't remember your being commander of Dragon Army," said Graff. "I'll listen to a requisition for specific equipment from your commander."

"Not possible," said Bean. "He doesn't have time to waste on foolish bureaucratic procedures."

Foolish bureaucratic procedures. Graff had used that exact phrase in the argument just a few minutes ago. But Graff's voice had **not** been raised. How long **had** Bean been listening outside the door? Graff cursed himself silently. He had moved his office up here specifically because he knew Bean was a sneak and a spy, gathering intelligence however he could. And then he didn't even post a guard to stop the boy from simply walking up and listening at the door.

"And you do?" asked Graff.

"I'm the one he assigned to think of stupid things you might do to rig the game against us, and think of ways to deal with them."

"What do you think you're going to find?"

"I don't know," said Bean. "I just know that the only things we ever see are our uniforms and flash suits, our weapons and our desks. There are other supplies here. For instance, there's paper. We never get any except during written tests, when our desks are closed to us."

"What would you do with paper in the battleroom?"

"I don't know," said Bean. "Wad it up and throw it around. Shred it and make a cloud of dust out of it."

"And who would clean this up?"

"Not my problem," said Bean.

"Permission denied."

"That's not acceptable, sir," said Bean.

"I don't mean to hurt your feelings, Bean, but it matters less than a cockroach's fart whether you accept my decision or not."

"I don't mean to hurt **your** feelings, sir, but you clearly have no idea what you're doing. You're improvising. Screwing with the system. The damage you're doing is going to take years to undo, and you don't care. That means that it doesn't matter what condition this school is in a year from now. That means that everybody who matters is going to be graduated soon. Training is being accelerated because the Buggers are getting too close for delays. So you're pushing. And you're especially pushing Ender Wiggin."

Graff felt sick. He knew that Bean's powers of analysis were extraordinary. So, also, were his powers of deception. Some of Bean's guesses weren't right -- but was that because he didn't know the truth, or because he simply didn't want them to know how much he knew, or how much he guessed? I never wanted you here, Bean, because you're too dangerous.

Bean was still making his case. "When the day comes that Ender Wiggin is looking for ways to stop the Buggers from getting to Earth and scouring the whole planet the way they started to back in the First Invasion, are you going to give him some bullshit answer about what resources he can or cannot use?"

"As far as you're concerned, the ship's supplies don't exist."

"As far as I'm concerned," said Bean, "Ender is *this* close to telling you to fry up your game and eat it. He's sick of it -- if you can't see that, you're not much of a teacher. He doesn't care about the standings. He doesn't care about beating other kids. All he cares about is preparing to fight the Buggers. So how hard do you think it will be for me to persuade him that your program here is crocked, and it's time to quit playing?"

"All right," said Graff. "Dimak, prepare the brig. Bean is to be confined until the shuttle is ready to take him back to Earth. This boy is out of Battle School."

Bean smiled slightly. "Go for it, Colonel Graff. I'm done here anyway. I've got everything *I* wanted here -- a first-rate education. I'll never have to live on the street again. I'm home free. Let me out of your game, right now, I'm ready."

"You won't be free on Earth, either. Can't risk having you tell these wild stories about Battle School," said Graff.

"Right. Take the best student you ever had here and put him in jail because he asked for access to the supply closet and you didn't like it. Come on, Colonel Graff. Swallow hard and back down. You need my cooperation more than I need yours."

Dimak could barely conceal his smile.

If only confronting Graff like this were sufficient proof of Bean's courage. And for all that Graff had doubts about Bean, he didn't deny that he was good at maneuver. Graff would have given almost anything not to have Dimak and Dap in the room at this moment.

"It was your decision to have this conversation in front of witnesses," said Bean.

What, was the kid a mind reader?

No, Graff had glanced at the two teachers. Bean simply knew how to read his body language. The kid missed nothing. That's why he was so valuable to the program.

Isn't this why we pin our hopes on these kids? Because they're good at maneuver?

And if I know anything about command, don't I know this -- that there are times when you cut your losses and leave the field?

"All right, Bean. One scan through supply inventory."

"With somebody to explain to me what it all is."

"I thought you already knew everything."

Bean was polite in victory; he did not respond to taunting. The sarcasm gave Graff a little compensation for having to back down. He knew that's all it was, but this job didn't have many perks.

"Captain Dimak and Captain Dap will accompany you," said Graff. "One scan, and either one of them can veto anything you request. They will be responsible for the consequences of any injuries resulting from your use of any item they let you have."

"Thank you, sir," said Bean. "In all likelihood I won't find anything useful. But I appreciate your fair-mindedness in letting us search the station's resources to further the educational objectives of the Battle School."

The kid had the jargon down cold. All those months of access to the student data, with all the notations in the files, Bean had clearly learned more than just the factual contents of the dossiers. And now Bean was giving him the spin that he should use in writing up a report about his decision. As if Graff were not perfectly capable of creating his own spin.

The kid is patronizing me. Little bastard thinks that he's in control.

Well, I have some surprises for him, too.

"Dismissed," said Graff. "All of you."

They got up, saluted, left.

Now, thought Graff, I have to second-guess all my future decisions, wondering how much my choices are influenced by the fact that this kid really pisses me off.

As Bean scanned the inventory list, he was really searching primarily for something, anything, that might be made into a weapon that Ender or some of his army could carry to protect him from physical attack by Bonzo. But there was nothing that would be both concealable from the teachers and powerful enough to give smaller kids sufficient leverage over larger ones.

It was a disappointment, but he'd find other ways to neutralize the threat. And now, as long as he was scanning the inventory, *was* there anything that he might be able to use in the battleroom? Cleaning supplies weren't very promising. Nor would the hardware stocks make much sense in the battleroom. What, throw a handful of screws?

The safety equipment, though ...

"What's a deadline?" asked Bean.

Dimak answered. "Very fine, strong cord that's used to secure maintenance and construction workers when they're working outside the station."

"How long?"

"With links, we can assemble several kilometers of secure deadline," said Dimak. "But each coil unspools to a hundred meters."

"I want to see it."

They took him into parts of the station that children never went to. The decor was far more utilitarian here. Screws and rivets were visible in the plates on the walls. The intake ducts were visible instead of being hidden inside the ceiling. There were no friendly lightstripes for a child to touch and get directions to his barracks. All the palm pads were too high for a child to comfortably use. And the staff they passed saw Bean and then looked at Dap and Dimak as if they were crazy.

The coil was amazingly small. Bean hefted it. Light, too. He unspooled a few decameters of it. It was almost invisible. "This will hold?"

"The weight of two adults," said Dimak.

"It's so fine. Will it cut?"

"Rounded so smoothly it can't cut anything. Wouldn't do us any good if it went slicing through things. Like spacesuits."

"Can I cut it into short lengths?"

"With a blowtorch," said Dimak.

"This is what I want."

"Just one?" asked Dap, rather sarcastically.

"And a blowtorch," said Bean.

"Denied," said Dimak.

"I was joking," said Bean. He walked out of the supply room and started jogging down the corridor, retracing the route they had just taken.

They jogged after him. "Slow down!" Dimak called out.

"Keep up!" Bean answered. "I've got a toon waiting for me to train them with this."

"Train them to do what!"

"I don't know!" He got to the pole and slid down. It passed him right through to the student levels. Going this direction, there was no security clearance at all.

His toon was waiting for him in the battleroom. They'd been working hard for him the past few days, trying all kinds of lame things. Formations that could explode in midair. Screens. Attacks without guns, disarming enemies with their feet. Getting into and out of spins, which made them almost impossible to hit but also kept them from shooting at anybody else.

The most encouraging thing was the fact that Ender spent almost the entire practice time watching Bean's squad whenever he wasn't actually responding to questions from leaders and soldiers in the other toons. Whatever they came up with, Ender would know about it and have his own ideas about when to use it. And, knowing that Ender's eyes were on them, Bean's soldiers worked all the harder. It gave Bean more stature in their eyes, that Ender really did care about what they did.

Ender's good at this, Bean realized again for the hundredth time. He knows how to form a group into the shape he wants it to have. He knows how to get people to work together. And he does it by the most minimal means possible.

If Graff were as good at this as Ender, I wouldn't have had to act like such a bully in there today.

The first thing Bean tried with the deadline was to stretch it across the battleroom. It reached, with barely enough slack to allow knots to be tied at both ends. But a few minutes of experimentation showed that it would be completely ineffective as a tripwire. Most enemies would simply miss it; those that did run into it might be disoriented or flipped around, but once it was known that it was there, it could be used like part of a grid, which meant it would work to the advantage of a creative enemy.

The deadline was designed to keep a man from drifting off into space. What happens when you get to the end of the line?

Bean left one end fastened to a handhold in the wall, but coiled the other end around his waist several times. The line was now shorter than the width of the battleroom's cube. Bean tied a knot in the line, then launched himself toward the opposite wall.

As he sailed through the air, the deadline tautening behind him, he couldn't help thinking: I hope they were right about this wire not being capable of cutting. What a way to end -- sliced in half in the battleroom. *That* would be an interesting mess for them to clean up.

When he was a meter from the wall, the line went taut. Bean's forward progress was immediately halted at his waist. His body jackknifed and he felt like he'd been kicked in the gut. But the most surprising thing was the way his inertia was translated from forward movement into a sideways arc that whipped him across the battleroom toward where D toon was practicing. He hit the wall so hard he had what was left of his breath knocked out of him.

"Did you see that!" Bean screamed, as soon as he could breathe. His stomach hurt -- he might not have been sliced in half, but he would have a vicious bruise, he knew that at once, and if he hadn't had his flash suit on, he could well believe there would have been internal injuries. But he'd be OK, and the deadline had let him change directions abruptly in midair. "Did you see it! Did you see it!"

"Are you all right!" Ender shouted.

He realized that Ender thought he was injured. Slowing down his speech, Bean called out again, "Did you see how fast I went! Did you see how I changed direction!"

The whole army stopped practice to watch as Bean played more with the deadline. Tying two soldiers together got interesting results when one of them stopped, but it was hard to hold on. More effective was when Bean had Ender use his hook to pull a star out of the wall and put it into the middle of the battleroom. Bean tied himself and launched from the star; when the line went taut, the edge of the star acted as a fulcrum, shortening the length of the line as he changed direction. And as the line wrapped around the star, it shortened even more upon reaching each edge. At the end, Bean was moving so fast that he blacked out for a moment upon hitting the star. But the whole of Dragon Army was stunned at what they had seen. The deadline was completely invisible, so it looked as though this little kid had launched himself and then suddenly started changing direction and speeding up in midflight. It was seriously disturbing to see it.

"Let's do it again, and see if I can shoot while I'm doing it," said Bean.

Evening practice didn't end till 2140, leaving little time before bed. But having seen the stunts Bean's squad was preparing, the army was excited instead of weary, fairly scampering through the corridors. Most of them probably understood that what Bean had come up with were stunts, nothing that would be decisive in battle. It was fun anyway. It was new. And it was Dragon.

Bean started out leading the way, having been given that honor by Ender. A time of triumph, and even though he knew he was being manipulated by the system -- behavior modification through public honors -- it still felt good.

Not so good, though, that he let up his alertness. He hadn't gone far along the corridor until he realized that there were too many Salamander uniforms among the other boys wandering around in

this section. By 2140, most armies were in their barracks, with only a few stragglers coming back from the library or the vids or the game room. Too many Salamanders, and the other soldiers were often big kids from armies whose commanders bore no special love toward Ender. It didn't take a genius to recognize a trap.

Bean jogged back and tagged Crazy Tom, Vlad, and Hot Soup, who were walking together. "Too many Salamanders," Bean said. "Stay back with Ender." They got it at once -- it was public knowledge that Bonzo was breathing out threats about what "somebody" ought to do to Ender Wiggin, just to put him in his place. Bean continued his shambling, easygoing run toward the back of the army, ignoring the smaller kids but tagging the other two toon leaders and all the seconds -- the older kids, the ones who might have some chance of standing up to Bonzo's crew in a fight. Not *much* of a chance, but all that was needed was to keep them from getting at Ender until the teachers intervened. No way could the teachers stand aloof if an out-and-out riot erupted. Or could they?

Bean passed right by Ender, got behind him. He saw, coming up quickly, Petra Arkanian in her Phoenix Army uniform. She called out. "Ho, Ender!"

To Bean's disgust, Ender stopped and turned around. The boy was too trusting.

Behind Petra, a few Salamanders fell into step. Bean looked the other way, and saw a few more Salamanders and a couple of set-faced boys from other armies, drifting down the corridor past the last of the Dragons. Hot Soup and Crazy Tom were coming quickly, with more toon leaders and the rest of the larger Dragons coming behind them, but they weren't moving fast enough. Bean beckoned, and he saw Crazy Tom pick up his pace. The others followed suit.

"Ender, can I talk to you," said Petra.

Bean was bitterly disappointed. Petra was the Judas. Setting Ender up for Bonzo -- who would have guessed? She *hated* Bonzo when she was in his army.

"Walk with me," said Ender.

"It's just for a moment," said Petra.

Either she was a perfect actress or she was oblivious, Bean realized. She only seemed aware of the other Dragon uniforms, never as much as glancing at anybody else. She isn't in on it after all, thought Bean. She's just an idiot.

At last, Ender seemed to be aware of his exposed position. Except for Bean, all the other Dragons were past him now, and that was apparently enough -- at last -- to make him uncomfortable. He turned his back on Petra and walked away, briskly, quickly closing the gap between him and the older Dragons.

Petra was angry for a moment, then jogged quickly to catch up with him. Bean stood his ground, looking at the oncoming Salamanders. They didn't even glance at him. They just picked up their pace, continuing to gain on Ender almost as fast as Petra was.

Bean took three steps and slapped the door of Rabbit Army barracks. Somebody opened it. Bean had only to say, "Salamander's making a move against Ender," and at once Rabbits started to pour out the door into the corridor. They emerged just as the Salamanders reached them, and started following along.

Witnesses, thought Bean. And helpers, too, if the fight seemed unfair.

Ahead of him, Ender and Petra were talking, and the larger Dragons fell in step around them. The Salamanders continued to follow closely, and the other thugs joined them as they passed. But the danger was dissipating. Rabbit Army and the older Dragons had done the job. Bean breathed a little easier. For the moment, at least, the danger was over.

Bean caught up with Ender in time to hear Petra angrily say, "How can you think I did? Don't you know who your friends are?" She ran off, ducked into a ladderway, scrambled upward.

Carn Carby of Rabbit caught up with Bean. "Everything OK?"

"I hope you don't mind my calling out your army."

"They came and got me. We seeing Ender safely to bed?"

"Eh."

Carn dropped back and walked along with the bulk of his soldiers. The Salamander thugs were now outnumbered about three to one. They backed off even more, and some of them peeled away and disappeared up ladderways or down poles.

When Bean caught up with Ender again, he was surrounded by his toon leaders. There was nothing subtle about it now -- they were clearly his bodyguards, and some of the younger Dragons had realized what was happening and were filling out the formation. They got Ender to the door of his quarters and Crazy Tom pointedly entered before him, then allowed him to go in when he certified that no one was lying in wait. As if one of them could palm open a commander's door. But then, the teachers had been changing a lot of the rules lately. Anything could happen.

Bean lay awake for a while, trying to think what he could do. There was no way they could be with Ender every moment. There was classwork -- armies were deliberately broken up then. Ender was the only one who could eat in the commanders' mess, so if Bonzo jumped him there ... but he wouldn't, not with so many other commanders around him. Showers. Toilet stalls. And if Bonzo assembled the right group of thugs, they'd slap Ender's toon leaders aside like balloons.

What Bean had to do was try to peel away Bonzo's support. Before he slept, he had a half-assed little plan that might help a little, or might make things work [sic -- should be worse], but at least it

was something, and it would be public, so the teachers couldn't claim after the fact, in their typical bureaucrat cover-my-butt way that they hadn't known anything was going on.

He thought he could do something at breakfast, but of course there was a battle first thing in the morning. Pol Slattery, Badger Army. The teachers had found a new way to mess with the rules, too. When Badgers were flashed, instead of staying frozen till the end of the game they thawed after five minutes, the way it worked in practice. But Dragons, once hit, stayed rigid. Since the battleroom was packed with stars -- plenty of hiding places -- it took a while to realize that they were having to shoot the same soldiers more than once as they maneuvered through the stars, and Dragon Army came closer to losing than it ever had. It was all hand to hand, with a dozen of the remaining Dragons having to watch batches of frozen Badgers, reshooting them periodically and meanwhile frantically looking around for some other Badger sneaking up from behind.

The battle took so long that by the time they got out of the battleroom, breakfast was over. Dragon Army was pissed off -- the ones who had been frozen early on, before they knew the trick, had spent more than an hour, some of them, floating in their rigid suits, growing more and more frustrated as the time wore on. The others, who had been forced to fight outnumbered and with little visibility against enemies who kept reviving, they were exhausted. Including Ender.

Ender gathered his army in the corridor and said, "Today you know everything. No practice. Get some rest. Have some fun. Pass a test."

They were all grateful for the reprieve, but still, they weren't getting any breakfast today and nobody felt like cheering. As they walked back to the barracks, some of them grumbled, "Bet they're serving breakfast to Badger Army right now."

"No, they got them up and served them breakfast before."

"No, they ate breakfast and then five minutes later they get to eat another."

Bean, however, was frustrated because he hadn't had a chance to carry out his plan at breakfast. It would have to wait till lunch.

The good thing was that because Dragon wasn't practicing, Bonzo's guys wouldn't know where to lie in wait for him. The bad thing was that if Ender went off by himself, there'd be nobody to protect him.

So Bean was relieved when he saw Ender go into his quarters. In consultation with the other toon leaders, Bean set up a watch on Ender's door. One Dragon sat outside the barracks for a half-hour shift, then knocked on the door and his replacement came out. No way was Ender going to go wandering off without Dragon Army knowing it.

But Ender never came out and finally it was lunchtime. All the toon leaders sent the soldiers on ahead and then detoured past Ender's door. Fly Molo knocked loudly -- actually, he slapped the door hard five times. "Lunch, Ender."

"I'm not hungry." His voice was muffled by the door. "Go on and eat."

"We can wait," said Fly. "Don't want you walking to the commanders' mess alone."

"I'm not going to eat any lunch at all," said Ender. "Go on and I'll see you after."

"You heard him," said Fly to the others. "He'll be safe in here while we eat."

Bean had noticed that Ender did not promise to stay in his room throughout lunch. But at least Bonzo's people wouldn't know where he was. Unpredictability was helpful. And Bean wanted to get the chance to make his speech at lunch.

So he ran to the messroom and did not get in line, but instead bounded up onto a table and clapped his hands loudly to get attention. "Hey, everybody!"

He waited until the group went about as close to silent as it was going to get.

"There's some of you here who need a reminder of a couple of points of I.F. law. If a soldier is ordered to do something illegal or improper by his commanding officer, he has a responsibility to refuse the order and report it. A soldier who obeys an illegal or improper order is fully responsible for the consequences of his actions. Just in case any of you here are too dim to know what that means, the law says that if some commander orders you to commit a crime, that's no excuse. You are forbidden to obey."

Nobody from Salamander would meet Bean's gaze, but a thug in Rat uniform answered in a surly tone. "You got something in mind, here, pinprick?"

"I've got *you* in mind, Lighter. Your scores are pretty much in the bottom ten percent in the school, so I thought you might need a little extra help."

"You can shut your facehole right now, that's the help I need!"

"Whatever Bonzo had you set to do last night, Lighter, you and about twenty others, what I'm telling you is *if* you'd actually tried something, every single one of you would have been out of Battle School on his ass. Iced. A complete failure, because you listened to Bonehead Madrid. Can I be any more clear than that?"

Lighter laughed -- it sounded forced, but then, he wasn't the only one laughing. "You don't even know what's going on, pinprick," one of them said.

"I know Bonehead's trying to turn you into a street crew, you pathetic losers. He can't beat Ender in the battleroom, so he's going to get a dozen tough guys to beat up one little kid. You all hear that? You know what Ender is -- the best damn commander ever to come through here. He might be the only one able to do what Mazer Rackham did and beat the Buggers when they come back, did you think of that? And these guys are so *smart* they want to beat his brains out. So when the Buggers come, and we've only got pus-brains like Bonzo Madrid to lead our fleets to defeat, then as

the Buggers scour the Earth and kill every last man, woman, and child, the survivors will all know that *these* fools are the ones who got rid of the one guy who could have led us to victory!"

The whole place was dead silent now, and Bean could see, looking at the ones he recognized as having been with Bonzo's group last night, that he was getting through to them.

"Oh, you *forgot* the Buggers, is that it? You forgot that this Battle School wasn't put here so you could write home to Mommy about your high standings on the scoreboard. So you go ahead and help Bonzo out, and while you're at it, why not just slit your own throats, too, cause that's what you're doing if you hurt Ender Wiggin. But for the rest of us -- well, how many here think that Ender Wiggin is the one commander we would all want to follow into battle? Come on, how many of you!"

Bean began to clap his hands slowly, rhythmically. Immediately, all the Dragons joined in. And very quickly, most of the rest of the soldiers were also clapping. The ones who weren't were conspicuous and could see how the others looked at them with scorn or hate.

Pretty soon, the whole room was clapping. Even the food servers.

Bean thrust both his hands straight up in the air. "The butt-faced Buggers are the only enemy! Humans are all on the same side! Anybody who raises a hand against Ender Wiggin is a Bugger-lover!"

They responded with cheers and applause, leaping to their feet.

It was Bean's first attempt at rabble-rousing. He was pleased to see that, as long as the cause was right, he was pretty damn good at it.

Only later, when he had his food and was sitting with C toon, eating it, did Lighter himself come up to Bean. He came up from behind, and the rest of C toon was on their feet, ready to take him on, before Bean even knew he was there. But Lighter motioned them to sit down, then leaned over and spoke right into Bean's ear. "Listen to this, Queen Stupid. The soldiers who are planning to take Wiggin apart aren't even *here*. So much for your stupid speech."

Then he was gone.

And, a moment later, so was Bean, with C toon gathering the rest of Dragon Army to follow behind him.

Ender wasn't in his quarters, or at least he didn't answer. Fly Molo, as A toon commander, took charge and divided them into groups to search the barracks, the game room, the vid room, the library, the gym.

But Bean called out for his squad to follow him. To the bathroom. That's the one place that Bonzo and his boys could plan on Ender having to go, eventually.

By the time Bean got there, it was all over. Teachers and medical staff were clattering down the halls. Dink Meeker was walking with Ender, his arm across Ender's shoulder, away from the bathroom. Ender was wearing only his towel. He was wet, and there was blood all over the back of his head and dripping down his back. It took Bean only a moment to realize that it was not his blood. The others from Bean's squad watched as Dink led Ender back to his quarters and helped him inside. But Bean was already on his way to the bathroom.

The teachers ordered him out of the way, out of the corridor. But Bean saw enough. Bonzo lying on the floor, medical staff doing CPR. Bean knew that you don't do that to somebody whose heart is beating. And from the inattentive way the others were standing around, Bean knew it was only a formality. Nobody expected Bonzo's heart to start again. No surprise. His nose had been jammed up inside his head. His face was a mass of blood. Which explained the bloody back of Ender's head.

All our efforts didn't amount to squat. But Ender won anyway. He knew this was coming. He learned self-defense. He used it, and he didn't do a half-assed job of it, either.

If Ender had been Poke's friend, Poke wouldn't have died.

And if Ender had depended on Bean to save him, he'd be just as dead as Poke.

Rough hands dragged Bean off his feet, pushed him against a wall. "What did you see!" demanded Major Anderson.

"Nothing," said Bean. "Is that Bonzo in there? Is he hurt?"

"This is none of your business. Didn't you hear us order you away?"

Colonel Graff arrived then, and Bean could see that the teachers around him were furious at him -- yet couldn't say anything, either because of military protocol or because one of the children was present.

"I think Bean has stuck his nose into things once too often," said Anderson.

"Are you going to send Bonzo home?" asked Bean. "Cause he's just going to try it again."

Graff gave him a withering glance. "I heard about your speech in the mess hall," said Graff. "I didn't know we brought you up here to be a politician."

"If you don't ice Bonzo and get him *out* of here, Ender's never going to be safe, and we won't stand for it!"

"Mind your own business, little boy," said Graff. "This is men's work here."

Bean let himself be dragged away by Dimak. Just in case they still wondered whether Bean saw that Bonzo was dead, he kept the act going just a little longer. "He's going to come after me, too," he said. "I don't want Bonzo coming after me."

"He's not coming after you," said Dimak. "He's going home. Count on it. But don't talk about this to anyone else. Let them find out when the official word is given out. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," said Bean.

"And where did you get all that nonsense about not obeying a commander who gives illegal orders?"

"From the Uniform Code of Military Conduct," said Bean.

"Well, here's a little fact for you -- nobody has ever been prosecuted for obeying orders."

"That," said Bean, "is because nobody's done anything so outrageous that the general public got involved."

"The Uniform Code doesn't apply to students, at least not that part of it."

"But it applies to teachers," said Bean. "It applies to *you*. Just in case you obeyed any illegal or improper orders today. By ... what, I don't know ... standing by while a fight broke out in a bathroom? Just because your commanding officer told you to let a big kid beat up on a little kid."

If that information bothered Dimak, he gave no sign. He stood in the corridor and watched as Bean went into the Dragon Army barracks.

It was crazy inside. Dragon Army felt completely helpless and stupid, furious and ashamed. Bonzo Madrid had outsmarted them! Bonzo had gotten Ender alone! Where were Ender's soldiers when he needed them?

It took a long time for things to calm down. Through it all, Bean just sat on his bunk, thinking his own thoughts. Ender didn't just win his fight. Didn't just protect himself and walk away. Ender killed him. Struck a blow so devastating that his enemy will never, never come after him again.

Ender Wiggin, you're the one who was born to be commander of the fleet that defends Earth from the Third Invasion. Because that's what we need -- someone who'll strike the most brutal blow possible, with perfect aim and with no regard for consequences. Total war.

Me, I'm no Ender Wiggin. I'm just a street kid whose only skill was staying alive. Somehow. The only time I was in real danger, I ran like a squirrel and took refuge with Sister Carlotta. Ender went alone into battle. I go alone into my hidey-hole. I'm the guy who makes big brave speeches standing on tables in the mess hall. Ender's the guy who meets the enemy naked and overpowers him against all odds.

Whatever genes they altered to make me, they weren't the ones that mattered.

Ender almost died because of me. Because I goaded Bonzo. Because I failed to keep watch at the crucial time. Because I didn't stop and think like Bonzo and figure out that he'd wait for Ender to be alone in the shower.

If Ender had died today, it would have been my fault all over again.

He wanted to kill somebody.

Couldn't be Bonzo. Bonzo was already dead.

Achilles. That's the one he needed to kill. And if Achilles had been there at that moment, Bean would have tried. Might have succeeded, too, if violent rage and desperate shame were enough to beat down any advantage of size and experience Achilles might have had. And if Achilles killed Bean anyway, it was no worse than Bean deserved, for having failed Ender Wiggin so completely.

He felt his bed bounce. Nikolai had jumped the gap between the upper bunks.

"It's OK," murmured Nikolai, touching Bean's shoulder.

Bean rolled onto his back, to face Nikolai.

"Oh," said Nikolai. "I thought you were crying."

"Ender won," said Bean. "What's to cry about?"

CHAPTER 18 -- FRIEND

"This boy's death was not necessary."

"This boy's death was not foreseen."

"But it was foreseeable."

"You can always foresee things that already happened. These are children, after all. We did *not* anticipate this level of violence."

"I don't believe you. I believe that this is precisely the level of violence you anticipated. This is what you set up. You think that the experiment succeeded."

"I can't control your opinions. I can merely disagree with them."

"Ender Wiggin is ready to move on to Command School. That is my report."

"I have a separate report from Dap, the teacher assigned to watch him most closely. And that report -- for which there are to be *no* sanctions against Captain Dap -- tells me that Andrew Wiggin is 'psychologically unfit for duty.'"

"*If* he is, which I doubt, it is only temporary."

"How much time do you think we have? No, Colonel Graff, for the time being we have to regard your course of action regarding Wiggin as a failure, and the boy as ruined not only for our purposes but quite possibly for any other as well. So, if it can be done without further killings, I want the other one pushed forward. I want him here in Command School as close to immediately as possible."

"Very well, sir. Though I must tell you that I regard Bean as unreliable."

"Why, because you haven't turned him into a killer yet?"

"Because he is not human, sir."

"The genetic difference is well within the range of ordinary variation."

"He was manufactured, and the manufacturer was a criminal, not to mention a certified loon."

"I could see some danger if his *father* were a criminal. Or his mother. But his *doctor*? The boy is exactly what we need, as quickly as we can get him."

"He is unpredictable."

"And the Wiggin boy is not?"

"Less unpredictable, sir."

"Very carefully answered, considering that you just insisted that the murder today was 'not foreseeable.'"

"*Not* murder, sir!"

"Killing, then."

"The mettle of the Wiggin boy is proved, sir, while Bean's is not."

"I have Dimak's report -- for which, again, he is not to be --"

"Punished, I know, sir."

"Bean's behavior throughout this set of events has been exemplary."

"Then Captain Dimak's report was incomplete. Didn't he inform you that it was Bean who may have pushed Bonzo over the edge to violence by breaking security and informing him that Ender's army was composed of exceptional students?"

"That **was** an act with unforeseeable consequences."

"Bean was acting to save his own life, and in so doing he shunted the danger onto Ender Wiggin's shoulders. That he later tried to ameliorate the danger does not change the fact that when Bean is under pressure, he turns traitor."

"Harsh language!"

"This from the man who just called an obvious act of self-defense 'murder'?"

"Enough of this! You are on leave of absence from your position as commander of Battle School for the duration of Ender Wiggin's so-called rest and recuperation. If Wiggin recovers enough to come to Command School, you may come with him and continue to have influence over the education of the children we bring here. If he does not, you may await your court-martial on Earth."

"I am relieved effective when?"

"When you get on the shuttle with Wiggin. Major Anderson will stand in as acting commander."

"Very well, sir. Wiggin **will** return to training, sir."

"**If** we still want him."

"When you are over the dismay we all feel at the unfortunate death of the Madrid boy, you will realize that I am right, and Ender is the only viable candidate, all the more now than before."

"I allow you that Parthian shot. And, if you are right, I wish you Godspeed on your work with the Wiggin boy. Dismissed."

Ender was still wearing only his towel when he stepped into the barracks. Bean saw him standing there, his face a rictus of death, and thought: He knows that Bonzo is dead, and it's killing him.

"Ho, Ender," said Hot Soup, who was standing near the door with the other toon leaders.

"There gonna be a practice tonight?" asked one of the younger soldiers.

Ender handed a slip of paper to Hot Soup.

"I guess that means not," said Nikolai softly.

Hot Soup read it. "Those sons of bitches! Two at once?"

Crazy Tom looked over his shoulder. "Two armies!"

"They'll just trip over each other," said Bean. What appalled him most about the teachers was not the stupidity of trying to combine armies, a ploy whose ineffectiveness had been proved time after time throughout history, but rather the get-back-on-the-horse mentality that led them to put **more** pressure on Ender at this of all times. Couldn't they see the damage they were doing to him? Was their goal to train him or break him? Because he was trained long since. He should have been promoted out of Battle School the week before. And now they give him one more battle, a completely meaningless one, when he's already over the edge of despair?

"I've got to clean up," said Ender. "Get them ready, get everybody together, I'll meet you there, at the gate." In his voice, Bean heard a complete lack of interest. No, something deeper than that. Ender doesn't **want** to win this battle.

Ender turned to leave. Everyone saw the blood on his head, his shoulders, down his back. He left.

They all ignored the blood. They had to. "Two fart-eating armies!" cried Crazy Tom. "We'll whip their butts!"

That seemed to be the general consensus as they got into their flash suits.

Bean tucked the coil of deadline into the waist of his flash suit. If Ender ever needed a stunt, it would be for this battle, when he was no longer interested in winning.

As promised, Ender joined them at the gate before it opened -- just barely before. He walked down the corridor lined with his soldiers, who looked at him with love, with awe, with trust. Except Bean, who looked at him with anguish. Ender Wiggin was not larger than life, Bean knew. He was exactly life-sized, and so his larger-than-life burden was too much for him. And yet he was bearing it. So far.

The gate went transparent.

Four stars had been combined directly in front of the gate, completely blocking their view of the battleroom. Ender would have to deploy his forces blind. For all he knew, the enemy had already been let into the room fifteen minutes ago. For all he could possibly know, they were deployed just as Bonzo had deployed his army, only this time it would be completely effective, to have the gate ringed with enemy soldiers.

But Ender said nothing. Just stood there looking at the barrier.

Bean had halfway expected this. He was ready. What he did wasn't all that obvious -- he only walked forward to stand directly beside Ender at the gate. But he knew that was all it would take. A reminder.

"Bean," said Ender. "Take your boys and tell me what's on the other side of this star."

"Yes *sir*," said Bean. He pulled the coil of deadline from his waist, and with his five soldiers he made the short hop from the gate to the star. Immediately the gate he had just come through became the ceiling, the star their temporary floor. Bean tied the deadline around his waist while the other boys unspooled the line, arranging it in loose coils on the star. When it was about one-third played out, Bean declared it to be sufficient. He was guessing that the four stars were really eight -- that they made a perfect cube. If he was wrong, then he had way too much deadline and he'd crash into the ceiling instead of making it back behind the star. Worse things could happen.

He slipped out beyond the edge of the star. He was right, it was a cube. It was too dim in the room to see well what the other armies were doing, but they seemed to be deploying. There had been no head start this time, apparently. He quickly reported this to Ducheval, who would repeat it to Ender while Bean did his stunt. Ender would no doubt start bringing out the rest of the army at once, before the time clicked down to zero.

Bean launched straight down from the ceiling. Above him, his toon was holding the other end of the deadline secure, making sure it fed out properly and stopped abruptly.

Bean did not enjoy the wrenching of his gut when the deadline went taut, but there was kind of a thrill to the increase of speed as he suddenly moved south. He could see the distant flashing of the enemy firing up at him. Only soldiers from one half of the enemy's area were firing.

When the deadline reached the next edge of the cube, his speed increased again, and now he was headed upward in an arc that, for a moment, looked like it was going to scrape him against the ceiling. Then the last edge bit, and he scooted in behind the star and was caught deftly by his toon. Bean wiggled his arms and legs to show that he was none the worse for his ride. What the enemy was thinking about his magical maneuvers in midair he could only guess. What mattered was that Ender had *not* come through the gate. The timer must be nearly out.

Ender came alone through the gate. Bean made his report as quickly as possible. "It's really dim, but light enough you can't follow people easily by the lights on their suits. Worst possible for seeing. It's all open space from this star to the enemy side of the room. They've got eight stars making a square around their door. I didn't see anybody except the ones peeking around the boxes. They're just sitting there waiting for us."

In the distance, they heard the enemy begin catcalls. "Hey! We be hungry, come and feed us! Your ass is draggin'! Your ass is Dragon!"

Bean continued his report, but had no idea if Ender was even listening. "They fired at me from only one half their space. Which means that the two commanders are *not* agreeing and neither one has been put in supreme command."

"In a real war," said Ender, "any commander with brains at all would retreat and save this army."

"What the hell," said Bean. "It's only a game."

"It stopped being a game when they threw away the rules."

This wasn't good, thought Bean. How much time did they have to get their army through the gate? "So, you throw 'em away, too." He looked Ender in the eye, demanding that he wake up, pay attention, *act*.

The blank look left Ender's face. He grinned. It felt damn good to see that. "OK. Why not. Let's see how they react to a formation."

Ender began calling the rest of the army through the gate. It was going to get crowded on the top of that star, but there was no choice.

As it turned out, Ender's plan was to use another of Bean's stupid ideas, which he had watched Bean practice with his toon. A screen formation of frozen soldiers, controlled by Bean's toon, who remained unfrozen behind them. Having once told Bean what he wanted him to do, Ender joined the formation as a common soldier and left everything up to Bean to organize. "It's your show," he said.

Bean had never expected Ender to do any such thing, but it made a kind of sense. What Ender wanted was not to have this battle; allowing himself to be part of a screen of frozen soldiers, pushed through the battle by someone else, was as close to sleeping through it as he could get.

Bean set to work at once, constructing the screen in four parts consisting of one toon each. Each of toons A through C lined up four and three, arms interlocked with the men beside them, the upper row of three with toes hooked under the arms of the four soldiers below. When everybody was clamped down tight, Bean and his toon froze them. Then each of Bean's men took hold of one section of the screen and, careful to move very slowly so that inertia would not carry the screen out of their control, they maneuvered them out from above the star and slowly moved them down until they were just under it. Then they joined them back together into a single screen, with Bean's squad forming the interlock.

"When did you guys practice this?" asked Dumper, the leader of E toon.

"We've never done this before," Bean answered truthfully. "We've done bursting and linking with one-man screens, but seven men each? It's all new to us."

Dumper laughed. "And there's Ender, plugged into the screen like anybody. That's trust, Bean old boy."

That's despair, thought Bean. But he didn't feel the need to say *that* aloud.

When all was ready, E toon got into place behind the screen and, on Bean's command, pushed off as hard as they could.

The screen drifted down toward the enemy's gate at a pretty good clip. Enemy fire, though it was intense, hit only the already-frozen soldiers in front. E toon and Bean's squad kept moving, very slightly, but enough that no stray shot could freeze them. And they managed to do some return fire, taking out a few of the enemy soldiers and forcing them to stay behind cover.

When Bean figured they were as far as they could get before Griffin or Tiger launched an attack, he gave the word and his squad burst apart, causing the four sections of the screen also to separate and angle slightly so they were drifting now toward the corners of the stars where Griffin and Tiger were gathered. E toon went with the screens, firing like crazy, trying to make up for their tiny numbers.

After a count of three, the four members of Bean's squad who had gone with each screen pushed off again, this time angling to the middle and downward, so that they rejoined Bean and Ducheval, with momentum carrying them straight toward the enemy gate.

They held their bodies rigid, **not** firing a shot, and it worked. They were all small; they were clearly drifting, not moving with any particular purpose; the enemy took them for frozen soldiers if they were noticed at all. A few were partially disabled with stray shots, but even when under fire they never moved, and the enemy soon ignored them.

When they got to the enemy gate, Bean slowly, wordlessly, got four of them with their helmets in place at the corners of the gate. They pressed, just as in the end-of-game ritual, and Bean gave Ducheval a push, sending him through the gate as Bean drifted upward again.

The lights in the battleroom went on. The weapons all went dead. The battle was over.

It took a few moments before Griffin and Tiger realized what had happened. Dragon only had a few soldiers who weren't frozen or disabled, while Griffin and Tiger were mostly unscathed, having played conservative strategies. Bean knew that if either of them had been aggressive, Ender's strategy wouldn't have worked. But having seen Bean fly around the star, doing the impossible, and then watching this weird screen approach so slowly, they were intimidated into inaction. Ender's legend was such that they dared not commit their forces for fear of falling into a trap. Only ... that **was** the trap.

Major Anderson came into the room through the teachergate. "Ender," he called.

Ender was frozen; he could only answer by grunting loudly through clenched jaws. That was a sound that victorious commanders rarely had to make.

Anderson, using the hook, drifted over to Ender and thawed him. Bean was half the battleroom away, but he heard Ender's words, so clear was his speech, so silent was the room. "I beat you again, sir."

Bean's squad members glanced at him, obviously wondering if he was resentful at Ender for claiming credit for a victory that was engineered and executed entirely by Bean. But Bean understood what Ender was saying. He wasn't talking about the victory over Griffin and Tiger

armies. He was talking about a victory over the teachers. And *that* victory *was* the decision to turn the army over to Bean and sit it out himself. If they thought they were putting Ender to the ultimate test, making him fight two armies right after a personal fight for survival in the bathroom, he beat them -- he sidestepped the test.

Anderson knew what Ender was saying, too. "Nonsense, Ender," said Anderson. He spoke softly, but the room was so silent that his words, too, could be heard. "Your battle was with Griffin and Tiger."

"How stupid do you think I am?" said Ender.

Damn right, said Bean silently.

Anderson spoke to the group at large. "After that little maneuver, the rules are being revised to require that all of the enemy's soldiers must be frozen or disabled before the gate can be reversed."

"Rules?" murmured Ducheval as he came back through the gate. Bean grinned at him.

"It could only work once anyway," said Ender.

Anderson handed the hook to Ender. Instead of thawing his soldiers one at a time, and only then thawing the enemy, Ender entered the command to thaw everyone at once, then handed the hook back to Anderson, who took it and drifted away toward the center, where the end-of-game rituals usually took place.

"Hey!" Ender shouted. "What is it next time? My army in a cage without guns, with the rest of the Battle School against them? How about a little equality?"

So many soldiers murmured their agreement that the sound of it was loud, and not all came from Dragon Army. But Anderson seemed to pay no attention.

It was William Bee of Griffin Army who said what almost everyone was thinking. "Ender, if you're on one side of the battle, it won't be equal no matter what the conditions are."

The armies vocally agreed, many of the soldiers laughing, and Talo Momoe, not to be outclassed by Bee, started clapping his hands rhythmically. "Ender Wiggin!" he shouted. Other boys took up the chant.

But Bean knew the truth -- knew, in fact, what Ender knew. That no matter how good a commander was, no matter how resourceful, no matter how well-prepared his army, no matter how excellent his lieutenants, no matter how courageous and spirited the fight, victory almost always went to the side with the greater power to inflict damage. Sometimes David kills Goliath, and people never forget. But there were a lot of little guys Goliath had already mashed into the ground. Nobody sang songs about *those* fights, because they knew that was the likely outcome. No, that was the *inevitable* outcome, except for the miracles.

The Buggers wouldn't know or care how legendary a commander Ender might be to his own men. The human ships wouldn't have any magical tricks like Bean's deadline to dazzle the Buggers with, to put them off their stride. Ender knew that. Bean knew that. What if David hadn't had a sling, a handful of stones, and the time to throw? What good would the excellence of his aim have done him then?

So yes, it was good, it was right for the soldiers of all three armies to cheer Ender, to chant his name as he drifted toward the enemy gate, where Bean and his squad waited for him. But in the end it meant nothing, except that everyone would have too much hope in Ender's ability. It only made the burden on Ender heavier.

I would carry some of it if I could, Bean said silently. Like I did today, you can turn it over to me and I'll do it, if I can. You don't have to do this alone.

Only even as he thought this, Bean knew it wasn't true. If it could be done, Ender was the one who would have to do it. All those months when Bean refused to see Ender, hid from him, it was because he couldn't bear to face the fact that Ender was what Bean only wished to be -- the kind of person on whom you could put all your hopes, who could carry all your fears, and he would not let you down, would not betray you.

I want to be the kind of boy you are, thought Bean. But I don't want to go through what you've been through to get there.

And then, as Ender passed through the gate and Bean followed behind him, Bean remembered falling into line behind Poke or Sergeant or Achilles on the streets of Rotterdam, and he almost laughed as he thought, I don't want to have to go through what *I've* gone through to get here, either.

Out in the corridor, Ender walked away instead of waiting for his soldiers. But not fast, and soon they caught up with him, surrounded him, brought him to a stop through their sheer ebullience. Only his silence, his impassivity, kept them from giving full vent to their excitement.

"Practice tonight?" asked Crazy Tom.

Ender shook his head.

"Tomorrow morning then?"

"No."

"Well, when?"

"Never again, as far as I'm concerned."

Not everyone had heard, but those who did began to murmur to each other.

"Hey, that's not fair," said a soldier from B toon. "It's not our fault the teachers are screwing up the game. You can't just stop teaching us stuff because --"

Ender slammed his hand against the wall and shouted at the kid. "I don't care about the game anymore!" He looked at other soldiers, met their gaze, refused to let them pretend they didn't hear. "Do you understand that?" Then he whispered. "The game is over."

He walked away.

Some of the boys wanted to follow him, took a few steps. But Hot Soup grabbed a couple of them by the neck of their flash suits and said, "Let him be alone. Can't you see he wants to be alone?"

Of course he wants to be alone, thought Bean. He killed a kid today, and even if he doesn't know the outcome, he knows what was at stake. These teachers were willing to let him face death without help. Why should he play along with them anymore? Good for you, Ender.

Not so good for the rest of us, but it's not like you're our father or something. More like a brother, and the thing with brothers is, you're supposed to take turns being the keeper. Sometimes you get to sit down and be the brother who is kept.

Fly Molo led them back to the barracks. Bean followed along, wishing he could go with Ender, talk to him, assure him that he agreed completely, that he understood. But that was pathetic, Bean realized. Why should Ender care whether I understand him or not? I'm just a kid, just one of his army. He knows me, he knows how to use me, but what does he care whether I know him?

Bean climbed to his bunk and saw a slip of paper on it.

{Transfer -- Bean -- Rabbit Army -- Commander}

That was Carn Carby's army. Carn was being removed from command? He was a good guy -- not a great commander, but why couldn't they wait till he graduated?

Because they're through with this school, that's why. They're advancing everybody they think needs some experience with command, and they're graduating other students to make room for them. I might have Rabbit Army, but not for long, I bet.

He pulled out his desk, meaning to sign on as ^Graff and check the rosters. Find out what was happening to everybody. But the ^Graff log-in didn't work. Apparently they no longer considered it useful to permit Bean to keep his inside access.

From the back of the room, the older boys were raising a hubbub. Bean heard Crazy Tom's voice rising above the rest. "You mean I'm supposed to figure out how to beat Dragon Army?" Word soon filtered to the front. The toon leaders and seconds had all received transfer orders. Every single one of them was being given command of an army. Dragon had been stripped.

After about a minute of chaos, Fly Molo led the other toon leaders along between the bunks, heading toward the door. Of course -- they had to go tell Ender what the teachers had done to him now.

But to Bean's surprise, Fly stopped at his bunk and looked up at him, then glanced at the other toon leaders behind him.

"Bean, somebody's got to tell Ender."

Bean nodded.

"We thought ... since you're his friend ..."

Bean let nothing show on his face, but he was stunned. Me? Ender's friend? No more than anyone else in this room.

And then he realized. In this army, Ender had everyone's love and admiration. And they all knew they had Ender's trust. But only Bean had been taken inside Ender's confidence, when Ender assigned him his special squad. And when Ender wanted to stop playing the game, it was Bean to whom he had turned over his army. Bean was the closest thing to a friend they had seen Ender have since he got command of Dragon.

Bean looked across at Nikolai, who was grinning his ass off. Nikolai saluted him and mouthed the word *commander*.

Bean saluted Nikolai back, but could not smile, knowing what this would do to Ender. He nodded to Fly Molo, then slid off the bunk and went out the door.

He didn't go straight to Ender's quarters, though. Instead, he went to Carn Carby's room. No one answered. So he went on to Rabbit barracks and knocked. "Where's Carn?" he asked.

"Graduated," said It£ [Itu], the leader of Rabbit's A toon. "He found out about half an hour ago."

"We were in a battle."

"I know -- two armies at once. You won, right?"

Bean nodded. "I bet Carn wasn't the only one graduated early."

"A lot of commanders," said It£ [Itu]. "More than half."

"Including Bonzo Madrid? I mean, he graduated?"

"That's what the official notice said." It£ [Itu] shrugged. "Everybody knows that if anything, Bonzo was probably iced. I mean, they didn't even list his assignment. Just 'Cartagena.' His hometown. Is that iced or what? But let the teachers call it what they want."

"I'll bet the total who graduated was nine," said Bean. "Neh?"

"Eh," said It£ [Itu]. "Nine. So you know something?"

"Bad news, I think," said Bean. He showed It£ [Itu] his transfer orders.

"Santa merda," said It£ [Itu]. Then he saluted. Not sarcastically, but not enthusiastically, either.

"Would you mind breaking it to the others? Give them a chance to get used to the idea before I show up for real? I've got to go talk to Ender. Maybe he already knows they've just taken his entire leadership and given them armies. But if he doesn't, I've got to tell him."

"*Every* Dragon toon leader?"

"And every second." He thought of saying, Sorry Rabbit got stuck with me. But Ender would never have said anything self-belittling like that. And if Bean was going to be a commander, he couldn't start out with an apology. "I think Carn Carby had a good organization," said Bean, "so I don't expect to change any of the toon leadership for the first week, anyway, till I see how things go in practice and decide what shape we're in for the kind of battles we're going to start having now that most of the commanders are kids trained in Dragon."

It£ [Itu] understood immediately. "Man, that's going to be strange, isn't it? Ender trained all you guys, and now you've got to fight each other."

"One thing's for sure," said Bean. "I have no intention of trying to turn Rabbit into a copy of Ender's Dragon. We're not the same kids and we won't be fighting the same opponents. Rabbit's a good army. We don't have to copy anybody."

It£ [Itu] grinned. "Even if that's just bullshit, sir, it's first-rate bullshit. I'll pass it on." He saluted.

Bean saluted back. Then he jogged to Ender's quarters.

Ender's mattress and blankets and pillow had been thrown out into the corridor. For a moment Bean wondered why. Then he saw that the sheets and mattress were still damp and bloody. Water from Ender's shower. Blood from Bonzo's face. Apparently Ender didn't want them in his room.

Bean knocked on the door.

"Go away," said Ender softly.

Bean knocked again. Then again.

"Come in," said Ender.

Bean palmed the door open.

"Go away, Bean," said Ender.

Bean nodded. He understood the sentiment. But he had to deliver his message. So he just looked at his shoes and waited for Ender to ask him his business. Or yell at him. Whatever Ender wanted to do. Because the other toon leaders were wrong. Bean didn't have any special relationship with Ender. Not outside the game.

Ender said nothing. And continued to say nothing.

Bean looked up from the ground and saw Ender gazing at him. Not angry. Just ... watching. What does he see in me, Bean wondered. How well does he know me? What does he think of me? What do I amount to in his eyes?

That was something Bean would probably never know. And he had come here for another purpose. Time to carry it out.

He took a step closer to Ender. He turned his hand so the transfer slip was visible. He didn't offer it to Ender, but he knew Ender would see it.

"You're transferred?" asked Ender. His voice sounded dead. As if he'd been expecting it.

"To Rabbit Army," said Bean.

Ender nodded. "Carn Carby's a good man. I hope he recognizes what you're worth."

The words came to Bean like a longed-for blessing. He swallowed the emotion that welled up inside him. He still had more of his message to deliver.

"Carn Carby was graduated today," said Bean. "He got his notice while we were fighting our battle."

"Well," said Ender. "Who's commanding Rabbit then?" He didn't sound all that interested. The question was expected, so he asked it.

"Me," said Bean. He was embarrassed; a smile came inadvertently to his lips.

Ender looked at the ceiling and nodded. "Of course. After all, you're only four years younger than the regular age."

"It isn't funny," said Bean. "I don't know what's going on here." Except that the system seems to be running on sheer panic. "All the changes in the game. And now this. I wasn't the only one transferred, you know. They graduated half the commanders, and transferred a lot of our guys to command their armies."

"Which guys?" Now Ender did sound interested.

"It looks like -- every toon leader and every assistant."

"Of course. If they decide to wreck my army, they'll cut it to the ground. Whatever they're doing, they're thorough."

"You'll still win, Ender. We all know that. Crazy Tom, he said, 'You mean I'm supposed to figure out how to beat Dragon Army?' Everybody knows you're the best." His words sounded empty even to himself. He wanted to be encouraging, but he knew that Ender knew better. Still he babbled on. "They can't break you down, no matter what they --"

"They already have."

They've broken trust, Bean wanted to say. That's not the same thing. *You* aren't broken. *They're* broken. But all that came out of his mouth were empty, limping words. "No, Ender, they can't --"

"I don't care about their game anymore, Bean," said Ender. "I'm not going to play it anymore. No more practices. No more battles. They can put their little slips of paper on the floor all they want, but I won't go. I decided that before I went through the door today. That's why I had you go for the gate. I didn't think it would work, but I didn't care. I just wanted to go out in style."

I know that, thought Bean. You think I didn't know that? But if it comes down to style, you certainly got that. "You should've seen William Bee's face. He just stood there trying to figure out how he had lost when you only had seven boys who could wiggle their toes and he only had three who couldn't."

"Why should I want to see William Bee's face?" said Ender. "Why should I want to beat anybody?"

Bean felt the heat of embarrassment in his face. He'd said the wrong thing. Only ... he didn't know what the right thing was. Something to make Ender feel better. Something to make him understand how much he was loved and honored.

Only that love and honor were part of the burden Ender bore. There was nothing Bean could say that would not make it all the heavier on Ender. So he said nothing.

Ender pressed his palms against his eyes. "I hurt Bonzo really bad today, Bean. I really hurt him bad."

Of course. All this other stuff, that's nothing. What weighs on Ender is that terrible fight in the bathroom. The fight that your friends, your army, did nothing to prevent. And what hurts you is not the danger you were in, but the harm you did in protecting yourself.

"He had it coming," said Bean. He winced at his own words. Was that the best he could come up with? But what else could he say? No problem, Ender. Of course, he looked dead to *me*, and I'm

probably the only kid in this school who actually knows what death looks like, but ... no problem! Nothing to worry about! He had it coming!

"I knocked him out standing up," said Ender. "It was like he was dead, standing there. And I kept hurting him."

So he did know. And yet ... he didn't actually *know*. And Bean wasn't about to tell him. There were times for absolute honesty between friends, but this wasn't one of them.

"I just wanted to make sure he never hurt me again."

"He won't," said Bean. "They sent him home."

"Already?"

Bean told him what It£ [Itu] had said. All the while, he felt like Ender could see that he was concealing something. Surely it was impossible to deceive Ender Wiggin.

"I'm glad they graduated him," said Ender.

Some graduation. They're going to bury him, or cremate him, or whatever they're doing with corpses in Spain this year.

Spain. Pablo de Noches, who saved his life, came from Spain. And now a body was going back there, a boy who turned killer in his heart, and died for it.

I must be losing it, thought Bean. What does it matter that Bonzo was Spanish and Pablo de Noches was Spanish? What does it matter that anybody is anything?

And while these thoughts ran through Bean's mind, he babbled, trying to talk like someone who didn't know anything, trying to reassure Ender but knowing that if Ender believed that he knew nothing, then his words were meaningless, and if Ender realized that Bean was only faking ignorance, then his words were all lies. "Was it true he had a whole bunch of guys gang up on you?" Bean wanted to run from the room, he sounded so lame, even to himself.

"No," said Ender. "It was just him and me. He fought with honor."

Bean was relieved. Ender was turned so deeply inward right now that he didn't even register what Bean was saying, how false it was.

"I didn't fight with honor," said Ender. "I fought to win."

Yes, that's right, thought Bean. Fought the only way that's worth fighting, the only way that has any point. "And you did. Kicked him right out of orbit." It was as close as Bean could come to telling him the truth.

There was a knock on the door. Then it opened, immediately, without waiting for an answer. Before Bean could turn to see who it was, he knew it was a teacher -- Ender looked up too high for it to be a kid.

Major Anderson and Colonel Graff.

"Ender Wiggin," said Graff.

Ender rose to his feet. "Yes sir." The deadness had returned to his voice.

"Your display of temper in the battleroom today was insubordinate and is not to be repeated."

Bean couldn't believe the stupidity of it. After what Ender had been through -- what the teachers had *put* him through -- and they have to keep playing this oppressive game with him? Making him feel utterly alone even *now*? These guys were relentless.

Ender's only answer was another lifeless "Yes sir." But Bean was fed up. "I think it was about time somebody told a teacher how we felt about what you've been doing."

Anderson and Graff didn't show a sign they'd even heard him. Instead, Anderson handed Ender a full sheet of paper. Not a transfer slip. A full-fledged set of orders. Ender was being transferred out of the school.

"Graduated?" Bean asked.

Ender nodded.

"What took them so long?" asked Bean. "You're only two or three years early. You've already learned how to walk and talk and dress yourself. What will they have left to teach you?" The whole thing was such a joke. Did they really think anybody was fooled? You reprimand Ender for insubordination, but then you graduate him because you've got a war coming and you don't have a lot of time to get him ready. He's your hope of victory, and you treat him like something you scrape off your shoe.

"All I know is, the game's over," said Ender. He folded the paper. "None too soon. Can I tell my army?"

"There isn't time," said Graff. "Your shuttle leaves in twenty minutes. Besides, it's better not to talk to them after you get your orders. It makes it easier."

"For them or for you?" Ender asked.

He turned to Bean, took his hand. To Bean, it was like the touch of the finger of God. It sent light all through him. Maybe I am his friend. Maybe he feels toward me some small part of the ... feeling I have for him.

And then it was over. Ender let go of his hand. He turned toward the door.

"Wait," said Bean. "Where are you going? Tactical? Navigational? Support?"

"Command School," said Ender.

"*Pre*-command?"

"Command." Ender was out the door.

Straight to Command School. The elite school whose location was even a secret. Adults went to Command School. The battle must be coming very soon, to skip right past all the things they were supposed to learn in Tactical and Pre-Command.

He caught Graff by the sleeve. "Nobody goes to Command School until they're sixteen!" he said.

Graff shook off Bean's hand and left. If he caught Bean's sarcasm, he gave no sign of it.

The door closed. Bean was alone in Ender's quarters.

He looked around. Without Ender in it, the room was nothing. Being here meant nothing. Yet it was only a few days ago, not even a week, when Bean had stood here and Ender told him he was getting a toon after all.

For some reason what came into Bean's mind was the moment when Poke handed him six peanuts. It was life that she handed to him then.

Was it life that Ender gave to Bean? Was it the same thing?

No. Poke gave him life. Ender gave it meaning.

When Ender was here, this was the most important room in Battle School. Now it was no more than a broom closet.

Bean walked back down the corridor to the room that had been Carn Carby's until today. Until an hour ago. He palmed it -- it opened. Already programmed in.

The room was empty. Nothing in it.

This room is mine, thought Bean.

Mine, and yet still empty.

He felt powerful emotions welling up inside him. He should be excited, proud to have his own command. But he didn't really care about it. As Ender said, the game was nothing. Bean would do a

decent job, but the reason he'd have the respect of his soldiers was because he would carry some of Ender's reflected glory with him, a shrimpy little Napoleon flumping around wearing a man's shoes while he barked commands in a little tiny child's voice. Cute little Caligula, "Little Boot," the pride of Germanicus's army. But when he was wearing his father's boots, those boots were empty, and Caligula knew it, and nothing he ever did could change that. Was that his madness?

It won't drive *me* mad, thought Bean. Because I don't covet what Ender has or what he is. It's enough that *he* is Ender Wiggin. I don't have to be.

He understood what this feeling was, welling up in him, filling his throat, making tears stand out in his eyes, making his face burn, forcing a gasp, a silent sob. He bit on his lip, trying to let pain force the emotion away. It didn't help. Ender was gone.

Now that he knew what the feeling was, he could control it. He lay down on the bunk and went into the relaxing routine until the need to cry had passed. Ender had taken his hand to say good-bye. Ender had said, "I hope he recognizes what you're worth." Bean didn't really have anything left to prove. He'd do his best with Rabbit Army because maybe at some point in the future, when Ender was at the bridge of the flagship of the human fleet, Bean might have some role to play, some way to help. Some stunt that Ender might need him to pull to dazzle the Buggers. So he'd please the teachers, impress the hell out of them, so that they would keep opening doors for him, until one day a door would open and his friend Ender would be on the other side of it, and he could be in Ender's army once again.

CHAPTER 19 -- REBEL

"Putting in Achilles was Graff's last act, and we know there were grave concerns. Why not play it safe and at least change Achilles to another army?"

"This is not necessarily a Bonzo Madrid situation for Bean."

"But we have no assurance that it's not, sir. Colonel Graff kept a lot of information to himself. A lot of conversations with Sister Carlotta, for instance, with no memo of what was said. Graff knows things about Bean and, I can promise you, about Achilles as well. I think he's laid a trap for us."

"Wrong, Captain Dimak. If Graff laid a trap, it was not for us."

"You're sure of that?"

"Graff doesn't play bureaucratic games. He doesn't give a damn about you and me. If he laid a trap, it's for Bean."

"Well that's my point!"

"I understand your point. But Achilles stays."

"Why?"

"Achilles' tests show him to be of a remarkably even temperament. He is no Bonzo Madrid. Therefore Bean is in no physical danger. The stress seems to be psychological. A test of character. And that is precisely the area where we have the very least data about Bean, given his refusal to play the mind game and the ambiguity of the information we got from his playing with his teacher log-in. Therefore I think this forced relationship with his bugbear is worth pursuing."

"Bugbear or nemesis, sir?"

"We will monitor closely. I will **not** be keeping adults so far removed that we can't get there to intervene in time, the way Graff arranged it with Ender and Bonzo. Every precaution will be taken. I am not playing Russian roulette the way Graff was."

"Yes you are, sir. The only difference is that he knew he had only one empty chamber, and you don't know how many chambers are empty because he loaded the gun."

On his first morning as commander of Rabbit Army, Bean woke to see a paper lying on his floor. For a moment he was stunned at the thought that he would be given a battle before he even met his army, but to his relief the note was about something much more mundane.

{Because of the number of new commanders, the tradition of not joining the commanders' mess until after the first victory is abolished. You are to dine in the commanders' mess starting immediately.}

It made sense. Since they were going to accelerate the battle schedule for everyone, they wanted to have the commanders in a position to share information right from the start. And to be under social pressure from their peers, as well.

Holding the paper in his hand, Bean remembered how Ender had held his orders, each impossible new permutation of the game. Just because this order made sense did not make it a good thing. There was nothing sacred about the game itself that made Bean resent changes in the rules and customs, but the way the teachers were manipulating them **did** bother him.

Cutting off his access to student information, for instance. The question wasn't why they cut it off, or even why they let him have it for so long. The question was why the other commanders didn't have that much information all along. If they were supposed to be learning to lead, then they should have the tools of leadership.

And as long as they were changing the system, why not get rid of the really pernicious, destructive things they did? For instance, the scoreboards in the mess halls. Standings and scores! Instead of fighting the battle at hand, those scores made soldiers and commanders alike more cautious, less willing to experiment. That's why the ludicrous custom of fighting in formations had lasted so long

-- Ender can't have been the first commander to see a better way. But nobody wanted to rock the boat, to be the one who innovated and paid the price by dropping in the rankings. Far better to treat each battle as a completely separate problem, and to feel free to engage in battles as if they were *play* rather than work. Creativity and challenge would increase drastically. And commanders wouldn't have to worry when they gave an order to a toon or an individual whether they were causing a particular soldier to sacrifice his standing for the good of the army.

Most important, though, was the challenge inherent in Ender's decision to reject the game. The fact that he graduated before he could really go on strike didn't change the fact that if he had done so, Bean would have supported him in it.

Now that Ender was gone, a boycott of the game didn't make sense. Especially if Bean and the others were to advance to a point where they might be part of Ender's fleet when the real battles came. But they could take charge of the game, use it for their own purposes.

So, dressed in his new -- and ill-fitting -- Rabbit Army uniform, Bean soon found himself once again standing on a table, this time in the much smaller officers' mess. Since Bean's speech the day before was already the stuff of legend, there was laughter and some catcalling when he got up.

"Do people where you come from eat with their feet, Bean?"

"Instead of getting up on tables, why don't you just *grow*, Bean?"

"Put some stilts on so we can keep the tables clean!"

But the other new commanders who had, until yesterday, been toon leaders in Dragon Army, made no catcalls and did not laugh. Their respectful attention to Bean soon prevailed, and silence fell over the room.

Bean flung up an arm to point to the scoreboard that showed the standings. "Where's Dragon Army?" he asked.

"They dissolved it," said Petra Arkanian. "The soldiers have been folded into the other armies. Except for you guys who used to be Dragon."

Bean listened, keeping his opinion of her to himself. All he could think of, though, was two nights before, when she was, wittingly or not, the judas who was supposed to lure Ender into a trap.

"Without Dragon up there," said Bean, "that board means nothing. Whatever standing any of us gets would not be the same if Dragon were still there."

"There's not a hell of a lot we can do about it," said Dink Meeker.

"The problem isn't that Dragon is missing," said Bean. "The problem is that we shouldn't have that board at all. *We're* not each other's enemies. The *Buggers* are the only enemy. *We're* supposed to be allies. We should be learning from each other, sharing information and ideas. We

should feel free to experiment, trying new things without being afraid of how it will affect our standings. That board up there, that's the *teachers'* game, getting us to turn against each other. Like Bonzo. Nobody here is as crazy with jealousy as he was, but come on, he was what those standings were bound to create. He was all set to beat in the brains of our best commander, our best hope against the next Bugger invasion, and why? Because Ender humiliated him in the *standings* . Think about that! The standings were more important to him than the war against the Formics!"

"Bonzo was crazy," said William Bee.

"So let's *not* be crazy," said Bean. "Let's get those standings out of the game. Let's take each battle one at a time, a clean slate. Try anything you can think of to win. And when the battle is over, both commanders sit down and explain what they were thinking, why they did what they did, so we can learn from each other. No secrets! Everybody try everything! And screw the standings!"

There were murmurs of assent, and not just from the former Dragons.

"That's easy for you to say," said Shen. "*Your* standing right now is tied for last."

"And there's the problem, right there," said Bean. "You're suspicious of my motives, and why? Because of the standings. But aren't we all supposed to be commanders in the same fleet someday? Working together? Trusting each other? How sick would the I.F. be, if all the ship captains and strike force commanders and fleet admirals spent all their time worrying about their standings instead of working together to try to beat the Formics! I want to learn from you, Shen. I don't want to *compete* with you for some empty rank that the teachers put up on that wall in order to manipulate us."

"I'm sure you guys from Dragon are all concerned about learning from us losers," said Petra.

There it was, out in the open.

"Yes! Yes, I *am* concerned. Precisely because I've been in Dragon Army. There are nine of us here who know pretty much only what we learned from Ender. Well, brilliant as he was, he's not the only one in the fleet or even in the school who knows anything. I need to learn how *you* think. I don't need you keeping secrets from me, and you don't need me keeping secrets from you. Maybe part of what made Ender so good was that he kept all his toon leaders talking to each other, free to try things but only as long as we shared what we were doing."

There was more assent this time. Even the doubters were nodding thoughtfully.

"So what I propose is this. A unanimous rejection of that board up there, not only the one in here but the one in the soldiers' mess, too. We all agree not to pay attention to it, period. We ask the teachers to disconnect the things or leave them blank. If they refuse, we bring in sheets to cover it, or we throw chairs until we break it. We don't have to play *their* game. We can take charge of our own education and get ready to fight the *real* enemy. We have to remember, always, who the real enemy is."

"Yeah, the teachers," said Dink Meeker.

Everybody laughed. But then Dink Meeker stood up on the table beside Bean. "I'm the senior commander here, now they've graduated all the oldest guys. I'm probably the oldest soldier left in Battle School. So I propose that we adopt Bean's proposal right now, and I'll go to the teachers to demand that the boards be shut off. Is there anyone opposed?"

Not a sound.

"That makes it unanimous. If the boards are still on at lunch, let's bring sheets to cover them up. If they're still on at dinner, then forget using chairs to vandalize, let's just refuse to take our armies to any battles until the boards are off."

Alai spoke up from where he stood in the serving line. "*That'll* shoot our standings all to ..."

Then Alai realized what he was saying, and laughed at himself. "Damn, but they've got us brainwashed, haven't they!"

Bean was still flushed with victory when, after breakfast, he made his way to Rabbit barracks in order to meet his soldiers officially for the first time. Rabbit was on a midday practice schedule, so he only had about half an hour between breakfast and the first classes of the morning. Yesterday, when he talked to It£ [Itu], his mind had been on other things, with only the most cursory attention to what was going on inside Rabbit barracks. But now he realized that, unlike Dragon Army, the soldiers in Rabbit were all of the regular age. Not one was even close to Bean's height. He looked like somebody's doll, and worse, he felt like that too, walking down the corridor between the bunks, seeing all these huge boys -- and a couple of girls -- looking down at him.

Halfway down the bunks, he turned to face those he had already passed. Might as well address the problem immediately.

"The first problem I see," said Bean loudly, "is that you're all way too tall."

Nobody laughed. Bean died a little. But he had to go on.

"I'm growing as fast as I can. Beyond that, I don't know what I can do about it."

Only now did he get a chuckle or two. But that was a relief, that even a few were willing to meet him partway.

"Our first practice together is at 1030. As to our first battle together, I can't predict that, but I can promise you this -- the teachers are *not* going to give me the traditional three months after my assignment to a new army. Same with all the other new commanders just appointed. They gave Ender Wiggin only a few weeks with Dragon before they went into battle -- and Dragon was a new

army, constructed out of nothing. Rabbit is a good army with a solid record. The only new person here is me. I expect the battles to begin in a matter of days, a week at most, and I expect battles to come frequently. So for the first couple of practices, you'll really be training me in your existing system. I need to see how you work with your toon leaders, how the toons work with each other, how you respond to orders, what commands you use. I'll have a couple of things to say that are more about attitude than tactics, but by and large, I want to see you doing things as you've always done them under Carn. It would help me, though, if you practiced with intensity, so I can see you at your sharpest. Are there any questions?"

None. Silence.

"One other thing. Day before yesterday, Bonzo and some of his friends were stalking Ender Wiggin in the halls. I saw the danger, but the soldiers in Dragon Army were mostly too small to stand up against the crew Bonzo had assembled. It wasn't an accident that when I needed help for my commander, I came to the door of Rabbit Army. This wasn't the closest barracks. I came to you because I knew that you had a fair-minded commander in Carn Carby, and I believed that his army would have the same attitude. Even if you didn't have any particular love for Ender Wiggin or Dragon Army, I knew that you would not stand by and let a bunch of thugs pound on a smaller kid that they couldn't beat fair and square in battle. And I was right about you. When you poured out of this barracks and stood as witnesses in the corridor, I was proud of what you stood for. I'm proud now to be one of you."

That did it. Flattery rarely fails, and never does if it's sincere. By letting them know they had already earned his respect, he dissipated much of the tension, for of course they were worried that as a former Dragon he would have contempt for the first army that Ender Wiggin beat. Now they knew better, and so he'd have a chance to win their respect as well.

It£ [Itu] started clapping, and the other boys joined in. It wasn't a long ovation, but it was enough to let him know the door was open, at least a crack.

He raised his hands to silence the applause -- just in time, since it was already dying down. "I'd like to speak to the toon leaders for a few minutes in my quarters. The rest of you are dismissed till practice."

Almost at once, It£ [Itu] was beside him. "Good job," he said. "Only one mistake."

"What was that?"

"You aren't the only new person here."

"They assigned one of the Dragon soldiers to Rabbit?" For a moment, Bean allowed himself to hope that it would be Nikolai. He could use a reliable friend.

No such luck.

"No, a Dragon soldier would be a veteran! I mean this guy is *new*. He just got to Battle School yesterday afternoon and he was assigned here last night, after you came by."

"A launchy? Assigned straight to an army?"

"Oh, we asked him about that, and he's had a lot of the same classwork. He went through a bunch of surgeries down on Earth, and he studied through it all, but --"

"You mean he's recovering from surgery, too?"

"No, he walks fine, he's -- look, why don't you just meet him? All I need to know is, do you want to assign him to a toon or what?"

"Eh, let's see him."

It£ [Itu] led him to the back of the barracks. There he was, standing beside his bunk, several inches taller than Bean remembered, with legs of even length now, both of them straight. The boy he had last seen fondling Poke, minutes before her dead body went into the river.

"Ho, Achilles," said Bean.

"Ho, Bean," said Achilles. He grinned winningly. "Looks like you're the big guy here."

"So to speak," said Bean.

"You two know each other?" said It£ [Itu].

"We knew each other in Rotterdam," said Achilles.

They can't have assigned him to me by accident. I never told anybody but Sister Carlotta about what he did, but how can I guess what she told the I.F.? Maybe they put him here because they thought both of us being from the Rotterdam streets, from the same crew -- the same family -- I might be able to help him get into the mainstream of the school faster. Or maybe they knew that he was a murderer who was able to hold a grudge for a long, long time, and strike when least expected. Maybe they knew that he planned for my death as surely as he planned for Poke's. Maybe he's here to be my Bonzo Madrid.

Except that I haven't taken any personal defense classes. And I'm half his size -- I couldn't jump high enough to hit him in the nose. Whatever they were trying to accomplish by putting Ender's life at risk, Ender always had a better chance of surviving than I will.

The only thing in my favor is that Achilles wants to survive and prosper more than he wants vengeance. Since he can hold a grudge forever, he's in no hurry to act on it. And, unlike Bonzo, he'll never allow himself to be goaded into striking under circumstances where he'd be identifiable as the killer. As long as he thinks he needs me and as long as I'm never alone, I'm probably safe.

Safe. He shuddered. Poke felt safe, too.

"Achilles was *my* commander there," said Bean. "He kept a group of us kids alive. Got us into the charity kitchens."

"Bean is too modest," said Achilles. "The whole thing was his idea. He basically taught us the whole idea of working together. I've studied a lot since then, Bean. I've had a year of nothing but books and classes -- when they weren't cutting into my legs and pulverizing and regrowing my bones. And I finally know enough to understand just what a leap you helped us make. From barbarism into civilization. Bean here is like a replay of human evolution."

Bean was not so stupid as to fail to recognize when flattery was being used on him. At the same time, it was more than a little useful to have this new boy, straight from Earth, already know who Bean was and show respect for him.

"The evolution of the pygmies, anyway," said Bean.

"Bean was the toughest little bastard you ever saw on the street, I got to tell you."

No, this was not what Bean needed right now. Achilles had just crossed the line from flattery into possession. Stories about Bean as a "tough little bastard" would, of necessity, set Achilles up as Bean's superior, able to evaluate him. The stories might even be to Bean's credit -- but they would serve more to validate Achilles, make him an insider far faster than he would otherwise have been. And Bean did not want Achilles to be inside yet.

Achilles was already going on, as more soldiers gathered closer to hear. "The way I got recruited into Bean's crew was --"

"It wasn't my crew," said Bean, cutting him off. "And here in Battle School, we don't tell stories about home and we don't listen to them either. So I'd appreciate it if you never spoke again of anything that happened Rotterdam, not while you're in my army."

He'd done the nice bit during his opening speech. But now was the time for authority.

Achilles didn't show any sign of embarrassment at the reprimand. "I get it. No problem."

"It's time for you to get ready to go to class," said Bean to the soldiers. "I need to confer with my toon leaders only." Bean pointed to Ambul, a Thai soldier who, according to what Bean read in the student reports, would have been a toon leader long ago, except for his tendency to disobey stupid orders. "You, Ambul. I assign you to get Achilles to and from his correct classes and acquaint him with how to wear a flash suit, how it works, and the basics of movement in the battleroom. Achilles, you are to obey Ambul like God until I assign you to a regular toon."

Achilles grinned. "But I don't obey God."

You think I don't know that? "The correct answer to an order from me is 'Yes sir.'"

Achilles's grin faded. "Yes sir."

"I'm glad to have you here," Bean lied.

"Glad to be here, sir," said Achilles. And Bean was reasonably sure that while Achilles was *not* lying, his reason for being glad was very complicated, and certainly included, by now, a renewed desire to see Bean die.

For the first time, Bean understood the reason Ender had almost always acted as if he was oblivious to the danger from Bonzo. It was a simple choice, really. Either he could act to save himself, or he could act to maintain control over his army. In order to hold real authority, Bean had to insist on complete obedience and respect from his soldiers, even if it meant putting Achilles down, even if it meant increasing his personal danger.

And yet another part of him thought: Achilles wouldn't be here if he didn't have the ability to be a leader. He performed extraordinarily well as our papa in Rotterdam. It's my responsibility now to get him up to speed as quickly as possible, for the sake of his potential usefulness to the I.F. I can't let my personal fear interfere with that, or my hatred of him for what he did to Poke. So even if Achilles is evil incarnate, my job is to turn him into a highly effective soldier with a good shot at becoming a commander.

And in the meantime, I'll watch my back.

CHAPTER 20 -- TRIAL AND ERROR

"You brought him up to Battle School, didn't you?"

"Sister Carlotta, I'm on a leave of absence right now. That means I've been sacked, in case you don't understand how the I.F. handles these things."

"Sacked! A miscarriage of justice. You ought to be shot."

"If the Sisters of St. Nicholas had convents, your abbess would make you do serious penance for that un-Christian thought."

"You took him out of the hospital in Cairo and directly into space. Even though I warned you."

"Didn't you notice that you telephoned me on a regular exchange? I'm on Earth. Someone else is running Battle School."

"He's a serial murderer now, you know. Not just the girl in Rotterdam. There was a boy there, too, the one Helga called Ulysses. They found his body a few weeks ago."

"Achilles has been in medical care for the past year."

"The coroner estimates that the killing took place at least that long ago. The body was hidden behind some long-term storage near the fish market. It covered the smell, you see. And it goes on. A teacher at the school I put him in."

"Ah. That's right. *You* put him in a school long before I did."

"The teacher fell to his death from an upper story."

"No witnesses. No evidence."

"Exactly."

"You see a trend here?"

"But that's *my* point. Achilles does not kill carelessly. Nor does he choose his victims at random. Anyone who has seen him helpless, crippled, beaten -- he can't bear the shame. He has to expunge it by getting absolute power over the person who dared to humiliate him."

"You're a psychologist now?"

"I laid the facts before an expert."

"The supposed facts."

"I'm not in court, Colonel. I'm talking to the man who put this killer in school with the child who came up with the original plan to humiliate him. Who called for his death. My expert assured me that the chance of Achilles *not* striking against Bean is zero."

"It's not as easy as you think, in space. No dock, you see."

"Do you know how I knew you had taken him into space?"

"I'm sure you have your sources, both mortal and heavenly."

"My dear friend, Dr. Vivian Delamar, was the surgeon who reconstructed Achilles's leg."

"As I recall, you recommended her."

"Before I knew what Achilles really was. When I found out, I called her. Warned her to be careful. Because my expert also said that she was in danger."

"The one who restored his leg? Why?"

"No one has seen him more helpless than the surgeon who cuts into him as he lies there drugged to the gills. Rationally, I'm sure he knew it was wrong to harm this woman who did him so much good. But then, the some would apply to Poke, the first time he killed. *If* it was the first time."

"So ... Dr. Vivian Delamar. You alerted her. What did she see? Did he murmur a confession under anaesthetic?"

"We'll never know. He killed her."

"You're joking."

"I'm in Cairo. Her funeral is tomorrow. They were calling it a heart attack until I urged them to look for a hypodermic insertion mark. Indeed they found one, and now it's on the books as a murder. Achilles *does* know how to read. He learned which drugs would do the job. How he got her to sit still for it, I don't know."

"How can I believe this, Sister Carlotta? The boy is generous, gracious, people are drawn to him, he's a born leader. People like that don't kill."

"Who are the dead? The teacher who mocked him for his ignorance when he first arrived in the school, showed him up in front of the class. The doctor who saw him laid out under anaesthetic. The street girl whose crew took him down. The street boy who vowed to kill him and made him go into hiding. Maybe the coincidence argument would sway a jury, but it shouldn't sway you."

"Yes, you've convinced me that the danger might well be real. But I already alerted the teachers at Battle School that there might be some danger. And now I really am not in charge of Battle School."

"You're still in *touch*. If you give them a more urgent warning, they'll take steps."

"I'll give the appropriate warning."

"You're lying to me."

"You can tell that over the phone?"

"You *want* Bean exposed to danger!"

"Sister ... yes, I do. But not this much of it. Whatever I can do, I'll do."

"If you let Bean come to harm, God will have an accounting from you."

"He'll have to get in line, Sister Carlotta. The I.F. court-martial takes precedence."

Bean looked down into the air vent in his quarters and marveled that he had ever been small enough to fit in there. What was he then, the size of a rat?

Fortunately, with a room of his own now he wasn't limited to the outflow vents. He put his chair on top of his table and climbed up to the long, thin intake vents along the wall on the corridor side of his room. The vent trim pried out as several long sections. The paneling above it was separate from the riveted wall below. And it, too, came off fairly easily. Now there was room enough for almost any kid in Battle School to shinny in to the crawl space over the corridor ceiling.

Bean stripped off his clothes and once again crawled into the air system.

It was more cramped this time -- it was surprising how much he'd grown. He made his way quickly to the maintenance area near the furnaces. He found how the lighting systems worked, and carefully went around removing lightbulbs and wall glow units in the areas he'd be needing. Soon there was a wide vertical shaft that was utterly dark when the door was closed, with deep shadows even when it was open. Carefully he laid his trap.

Achilles never ceased to be astonished at how the universe bent to his will. Whatever he wished seemed to come to him. Poke and her crew, raising him above the other bullies. Sister Carlotta, bringing him to the priests' school in Bruxelles. Dr. Delamar, straightening his leg so he could *run*, so he looked no different from any other boy his age. And now here he was in Battle School, and who should be his first commander but little Bean, ready to take him under his wing, help him rise within this school. As if the universe were created to serve him, with all the people in it tuned to resonate with his desires.

The battleroom was cool beyond belief. War in a box. Point the gun, the other kid's suit freezes. Of course, Ambul had made the mistake of demonstrating this by freezing Achilles and then laughing at his consternation at floating in the air, unable to move, unable to change the direction of his drift. People shouldn't do that. It was wrong, and it always gnawed at Achilles until he was able to set things right. There should be more kindness and respect in the world.

Like Bean. It looked so promising at first, but then Bean started putting him down. Making sure the others saw that Achilles *used* to be Bean's papa, but now he was just a soldier in Bean's army. There was no need for that. You don't go putting people down. Bean had changed. Back when Poke first put Achilles on his back, shaming him in front of all those little children, it was Bean who showed him respect. "Kill him," Bean had said. He knew, then, that tiny boy, he knew that even on his back, Achilles was dangerous. But he seemed to have forgotten that now. In fact, Achilles was pretty sure that Bean must have told Ambul to freeze his flash suit and humiliate him in the practice room, setting him up for the others to laugh at him.

I was your friend and protector, Bean, because you showed respect for me. But now I have to weigh that in the balance with your behavior here in Battle School. No respect for me at all.

The trouble was, the students in Battle School were given nothing that could be used as a weapon, and everything was made completely safe. No one was ever alone, either. Except the commanders. Alone in their quarters. That was promising. But Achilles suspected that the teachers had a way of tracking where every student was at any given time. He'd have to learn the system, learn how to evade it, before he could start setting things to rights.

But he knew this: He'd learn what he needed to learn. Opportunities would appear. And he, being Achilles, would see those opportunities and seize them. Nothing could interrupt his rise until he held all the power there was to hold within his hands. Then there would be perfect justice in the world, not this miserable system that left so many children starving and ignorant and crippled on the streets while others lived in privilege and safety and health. All those adults who had run things for thousands of years were fools or failures. But the universe obeyed Achilles. He and he alone could correct the abuses.

On his third day in Battle School, Rabbit Army had its first battle with Bean as commander. They lost. They would not have lost if Achilles had been commander. Bean was doing some stupid touchy-feely thing, leaving things up to the toon leaders. But it was obvious that the toon leaders had been badly chosen by Bean's predecessor. If Bean was to win, he needed to take tighter control. When he tried to suggest this to Bean, the child only smiled knowingly -- a maddeningly superior smile -- and told him that the key to victory was for each toon leader and, eventually, each soldier to see the whole situation and act independently to bring about victory. It made Achilles want to slap him, it was so stupid, so wrongheaded. The one who knew how to order things did not leave it up to others to create their little messes in the corners of the world. He took the reins and pulled, sharp and hard. He whipped his men into obedience. As Frederick the Great said: The soldier must fear his officers more than he fears the bullets of the enemy. You could not rule without the naked exercise of power. The followers must bow their heads to the leader. They must *surrender* their heads, using only the mind and will of the leader to rule them. No one but Achilles seemed to understand that this was the great strength of the Buggers. They had no individual minds, only the mind of the hive. They submitted perfectly to the queen. We cannot defeat the Buggers until we learn from them, become like them.

But there was no point in explaining this to Bean. He would not listen. Therefore he would never make Rabbit Army into a hive. He was working to create chaos. It was unbearable.

Unbearable -- yet, just when Achilles thought he couldn't bear the stupidity and waste any longer, Bean called him to his quarters.

Achilles was startled, when he entered, to find that Bean had removed the vent cover and part of the wall panel, giving him access to the air-duct system. This was not at all what Achilles had expected.

"Take your clothes off," said Bean.

Achilles smelled an attempt at humiliation.

Bean was taking off his own uniform. "They track us through the uniforms," said Bean. "If you aren't wearing one, they don't know where you are, except in the gym and the battleroom, where they have really expensive equipment to track each warm body. We aren't going to either of those places, so strip."

Bean was naked. As long as Bean went first, Achilles could not be shamed by doing the same.

"Ender and I used to do this," said Bean. "Everybody thought Ender was such a brilliant commander, but the truth is he knew all the plans of the other commanders because we'd go spying through the air ducts. And not just the commanders, either. We found out what the teachers were planning. We always knew it in advance. Not hard to win that way."

Achilles laughed. This was too cool. Bean might be a fool, but this Ender that Achilles had heard so much about, *he* knew what he was doing.

"It takes two people, is that it?"

"To get where I can spy on the teachers, there's a wide shaft, pitch black. I can't climb down. I need somebody to lower me down and haul me back up. I didn't know who in Rabbit Army I could trust, and then ... there you were. A friend from the old days."

It was happening again. The universe, bending to his will. He and Bean would be alone. No one would be tracking where they were. No one would know what had happened.

"I'm in," said Achilles.

"Boost me up," said Bean. "You're tall enough to climb up alone."

Clearly, Bean had come this way many times before. He scampered through the crawl space, his feet and butt flashing in the spill from the corridor lights. Achilles noted where he put his hands and feet, and soon was as adept at Bean at picking his way through. Every time he used his leg, he marveled at the use of it. It went where he wanted it to go, and had the strength to hold him. Dr. Delamar might be a skilled surgeon, but even she said that she had never seen a body respond to the surgery as Achilles' did. His body knew how to be whole, expected to be strong. All the time before, those crippled years, had been the universe's way of teaching Achilles the unbearability of disorder. And now Achilles was perfect of body, ready to move ahead in setting things to rights.

Achilles very carefully noted the route they took. If the opportunity presented itself, he would be coming back alone. He could not afford to get lost, or give himself away. No one could know that he had ever been in the air system. As long as he gave them no reason, the teachers would never suspect him. All they knew was that he and Bean were friends. And when Achilles grieved for the child, his tears would be real. They always were, for there was a nobility to these tragic deaths. A grandeur as the great universe worked its will through Achilles's adept hands.

The furnaces roared as they came into a room where the framing of the station was visible. Fire was good. It left so little residue. People died when they accidentally fell into fire. It happened all the time. Bean, crawling around alone ... it would be good if they went near the furnace.

Instead, Bean opened a door into a dark space. The light from the opening showed a black gap not far inside. "Don't step over the edge of that," Bean said cheerfully. He picked up a loop of very fine cord from the ground. "It's a deadline. Safety equipment. Keeps workmen from drifting off into space when they're working on the outside of the station. Ender and I set it up -- it goes over a beam up there and keeps me centered in the shaft. You can't grip it in your hands, it cuts too easily if it slides across your skin. So you loop it tight around your body -- no sliding, see? -- and brace yourself. The gravity's not that intense, so I just jump off. We measured it out, so I stop right at the level of the vents leading to the teachers' quarters."

"Doesn't it hurt when you stop?"

"Like a bitch," said Bean. "No pain no gain, right? I take off the deadline, I snag it on a flap of metal and it stays there till I get back. I'll tug on it three times when I get it back on. Then you pull me back up. But *not* with your hands. You go out the door and walk out there. When you get to place where we came in, go around the beam there and go till you touch the wall. Just wait there until I can get myself swinging and land back here on this ledge. Then I unloop myself and you come back in and we leave the deadline for next time. Simple, see?"

"Got it," said Achilles.

Instead of walking to the wall, it would be simple enough to just keep walking. Get Bean floating in the air where he couldn't get hold of anything. Plenty of time, then, to find a way to tie it off inside that dark room. With the roar of the furnaces and fans, nobody would hear Bean calling for help. Then Achilles would have time to explore. Figure out how to get into the furnaces. Swing Bean back, strangle him, carry the body to the fire. Drop the deadline down the shaft. Nobody would find it. Quite possibly no one would ever find Bean, or if they did, his soft tissues would be consumed. All evidence of strangulation would be gone. Very neat. There'd be some improvisation, but there always was. Achilles could handle little problems as they came up.

Achilles looped the deadline over his head, then drew it tight under his arms as Bean climbed into the loop at the other end.

"Set," said Achilles.

"Make sure it's tight, so it doesn't have any slack to cut you when I hit bottom."

"Yes, it's tight."

But Bean had to check. He got a finger under the line. "Tighter," said Bean.

Achilles tightened it more.

"Good," said Bean. "That's it. Do it."

Do it? Bean was the one who was supposed to do it.

Then the deadline went taut and Achilles was lifted off his feet. With a few more yanks, he hung in the air in the dark shaft. The deadline dug harshly into his skin.

When Bean said "do it" he was talking to someone else. Someone who was already here, lying in wait. The traitorous little bastard.

Achilles said nothing, however. He reached up to see if he could touch the beam above him, but it was out of reach. Nor could he climb the line, not with bare hands, not with the line drawn taut by his own body weight.

He wriggled on the line, starting himself swinging. But no matter how far he went in any direction, he touched nothing. No wall, no place where he might find purchase.

Time to talk.

"What's this about, Bean?"

"It's about Poke," said Bean.

"She's dead, Bean."

"You kissed her. You killed her. You put her in the river."

Achilles felt the blood run hot into his face. No one saw that. He was guessing. But then ... how did he know that Achilles had kissed her first, unless he saw?

"You're wrong," said Achilles.

"How sad if I am. Then the wrong man will die for the crime."

"Die? Be serious, Bean. You aren't a killer."

"But the hot dry air of the shaft will do it for me. You'll dehydrate in a day. Your mouth's already a little dry, isn't it? And then you'll just keep hanging here, mummifying. This is the intake system, so the air gets filtered and purified. Even if your body stinks for a while, nobody will smell it. Nobody will see you -- you're above where the light shines from the door. And nobody comes in here anyway. No, the disappearance of Achilles will be the mystery of Battle School. They'll tell ghost stories about you to frighten the launchies."

"Bean, I didn't do it."

"I saw you, Achilles, you poor fool. I don't care what you say, I saw you. I never thought I'd have the chance to make you pay for what you did to her. Poke did nothing but good to you. I told her to kill you, but she had mercy. She made you king of the streets. And for that you killed her?"

"I didn't kill her."

"Let me lay it out for you, Achilles, since you're clearly too stupid to see where you are. First thing is, you forgot where you were. Back on Earth, you were used to being a lot smarter than everybody around you. But here in Battle School, **everybody** is as smart as you, and most of us are smarter. You think Ambul didn't see the way you looked at him? You think he didn't know he was marked for death after he laughed at you? You think the other soldiers in Rabbit doubted me when I told them about you? They'd already seen that there was something wrong with you. The adults might have missed it, they might buy into the way you suck up to them, but **we** didn't. And since we just had a case of one kid trying to kill another, nobody was going to put up with it again. Nobody was going to wait for you to strike. Because here's the thing -- we don't give a shit about fairness here. We're soldiers. Soldiers do not give the other guy a sporting chance. Soldiers shoot in the back, lay traps and ambushes, lie to the enemy and outnumber the other bastard every chance they get. Your kind of murder only works among civilians. And you were too cocky, too stupid, too insane to realize that."

Achilles knew that Bean was right. He had miscalculated grossly. He had forgotten that when Bean said for Poke to kill him, he had not just been showing respect for Achilles. He had also been trying to get Achilles killed.

This just wasn't working out very well.

"So you have only two ways for this to end. One way, you just hang there, we take turns watching to make sure you don't figure some way out of this, until you're dead and then we leave you and go about our lives. The other way, you confess to everything -- and I mean everything, not just what you think I already know -- and you keep confessing. Confess to the teachers. Confess to the psychiatrists they send you to. Confess your way into a mental hospital back on Earth. We don't care which you choose. All that matters is that you never again walk freely through the corridors of Battle School. Or anywhere else. So ... what will it be? Dry out on the line, or let the teachers know just how crazy you are?"

"Bring me a teacher, I'll confess."

"Didn't you hear me explain how stupid we're not? You confess now. Before witnesses. With a recorder. We don't bring some teacher up here to see you hanging there and feel all squishy sorry for you. Any teacher who comes here will know exactly what you are, and there'll be about six marines to keep you subdued and sedated because, Achilles, they don't play around here. They don't give people chances to escape. You've got no rights here. You don't get rights again until you're back on Earth. Here's your last chance. Confession time."

Achilles almost laughed out loud. But it was important for Bean to think that he had won. As, for the moment, he had. Achilles could see now that there was no way for him to remain in Battle

School. But Bean wasn't smart enough just to kill him and have done. No, Bean was, completely unnecessarily, allowing him to live. And as long as Achilles was alive, then time would move things his way. The universe would bend until the door was opened and Achilles went free. And it would happen sooner rather than later.

You shouldn't have left a door open for me, Bean. Because I **will** kill you someday. You and everyone else who has seen me helpless here.

"All right," said Achilles. "I killed Poke. I strangled her and put her in the river."

"Go on."

"What more? You want to know how she wet herself and took a shit while she was dying? You want to know how her eyes bugged out?"

"One murder doesn't get you psychiatric confinement, Achilles. You know you've killed before."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because it didn't bother you."

It never bothered, not even the first time. You just don't understand power. If it **bothers** you, you aren't fit to **have** power. "I killed Ulysses, of course, but just because he was a nuisance."

"And?"

"I'm not a mass murderer, Bean."

"You live to kill, Achilles. Spill it all. And then convince me that it really **was** all."

But Achilles had just been playing. He had already decided to tell it all.

"The most recent was Dr. Vivian Delamar," he said. "I told her not to do the operations under total anaesthetic. I told her to leave me alert, I could take it even if there was pain. But she had to be in control. Well, if she really loved control so much, why did she turn her back on me? And why was she so stupid as to think I really had a gun? By pressing hard in her back, I made it so she didn't even feel the needle go in right next to where the tongue depressors were poking her. Died of a heart attack right there in her own office. Nobody even knew I'd been in there. You want more?"

"I want it all, Achilles."

It took twenty minutes, but Achilles gave them the whole chronicle, all seven times he had set things right. He liked it, actually, telling them like this. Nobody had ever had a chance to understand how powerful he was till now. He wanted to see their faces, that's the only thing that was missing. He wanted to see the disgust that would reveal their weakness, their inability to look power in the face. Machiavelli understood. If you intend to rule, you don't shrink from killing.

Saddam Hussein knew it -- you have to be willing to kill with your own hand. You can't stand back and let others do it for you all the time. And Stalin understood it, too -- you can never be loyal to anybody, because that only weakens you. Lenin was good to Stalin, gave him his chance, raised him out of nothing to be the keeper of the gate to power. But that didn't stop Stalin from imprisoning Lenin and then killing him. That's what these fools would never understand. All those military writers were just armchair philosophers. All that military history -- most of it was useless. War was just one of the tools that the great men used to get and keep their power. And the only way to stop a great man was the way Brutus did it.

Bean, you're no Brutus.

Turn on the light. Let me see the faces,

But the light did not go on. When he was finished, when they left, there was only the light through the door, silhouetting them as they left. Five of them. All naked, but carrying the recording equipment. They even tested it, to make sure it had picked up Achilles's confession. He heard his own voice, strong and unwavering. Proud of what he'd done. That would prove to the weaklings that he was "insane." They would keep him alive. Until the universe bent things to his will yet again, and set him free to reign with blood and horror on Earth. Since they hadn't let him see their faces, he'd have no choice. When all the power was in his hands, he'd have to kill everyone who was in Battle School at this time. That would be a good idea, anyway. Since all the brilliant military minds of the age had been assembled here at one time or another, it was obvious that in order to rule safely, Achilles would have to get rid of everyone whose name had ever been on a Battle School roster. Then there'd be no rivals. And he'd keep testing children as long as he lived, finding any with the slightest spark of military talent. Herod understood how you stay in power.

PART SIX -- VICTOR

CHAPTER 21 -- GUESSWORK

"We're not waiting any longer for Colonel Graff to repair the damage done to Ender Wiggin. Wiggin doesn't need Tactical School for the job he'll be doing. And we need the others to move on at once. *They* have to get the feel of what the old ships can do before we bring them here and put them on the simulators, and that takes time."

"They've only had a few games."

"I shouldn't have allowed them as much time as I have. ISL is two months away from you, and by the time they're done with Tactical, the voyage from there to FleetCom will be four months. That gives them only three months in Tactical before we have to bring them to Command School. Three months in which to compress three years of training."

"I should tell you that Bean seems to have passed Colonel Graff's last test."

"Test? When I relieved Colonel Graff, I thought his sick little testing program ended as well."

"We didn't know how dangerous this Achilles was. We had been warned of *some* danger, but ... he seemed so likable ... I'm not faulting Colonel Graff, you understand, *he* had no way of knowing."

"Knowing what?"

"That Achilles is a serial killer."

"That should make Graff happy. Ender's count is up to two."

"I'm not joking, sir. Achilles has seven murders on his tally."

"And he passed the screening?"

"He knew how to answer the psychological tests."

"Please tell me that none of the seven took place at Battle School."

"Number eight would have. But Bean got him to confess."

"Bean's a priest now?"

"Actually, sir, it was deft strategy. He outmaneuvered Achilles -- led him into an ambush, and confession was the only escape."

"So Ender, the nice middle-class American boy, kills the kid who wants to beat him up in the bathroom. And Bean, the hoodlum street kid, turns a serial killer over to law enforcement."

"The more significant thing for our purposes is that Ender was good at building teams, but he beat Bonzo hand to hand, one on one. And then Bean, a loner who had almost no friends after a year in the school, he beats Achilles by assembling a team to be his defense and his witnesses. I have no idea if Graff predicted these outcomes, but the result was that his tests got each boy to act not only against our expectations, but also against his own predilections."

"Predilections. Major Anderson."

"It will all be in my report."

"Try to write the entire thing without using the word *predilection* once."

"Yes, sir."

"I've assigned the destroyer Condor to take the group."

"How many do you want, sir?"

"We have need of a maximum of eleven at any one time. We have Carby, Bee, and Momoe on their way to Tactical already, but Graff tells me that of those three, only Carby is likely to work well with Wiggin. We do need to hold a slot for Ender, but it wouldn't hurt to have a spare. So send ten."

"*Which* ten?"

"How the hell should I know? Well ... Bean, him for sure. And the nine others that you think would work best with either Bean or Ender in command, whichever one it turns out to be."

"One list for both possible commanders?"

"With Ender as the first choice. We want them all to train together. Become a team."

The orders came at 1700. Bean was supposed to board the Condor at 1800. It's not as if he had anything to pack. An hour was more time than they gave Ender. So Bean went and told his army what was happening, where he was going.

"We've only had five games," said It£ [Itu].

"Got to catch the bus when it comes to the stop, neh?" said Bean.

"Eh," said It£ [Itu].

"Who else?" asked Ambul.

"They didn't tell me. Just ... Tactical School."

"We don't even know where it is."

"Somewhere in space," said It£ [Itu].

"No, really?" It was lame, but they laughed. It wasn't all that hard a good-bye. He'd only been with Rabbit for eight days.

"Sorry we didn't win any for you," said It£ [Itu].

"We would have won, if I'd wanted to," said Bean.

They looked at him like he was crazy.

"I was the one who proposed that we get rid of the standings, stop caring who wins. How would it look if we do that and I win every time?"

"It would look like you really did care about the standings," said It£ [Itu].

"That's not what bothers me," said another toon leader. "Are you telling me you set us up to *lose*?"

"No, I'm telling you I had a different priority. What do we learn from beating each other? Nothing. We're never going to have to fight human children. We're going to have to fight Buggers. So what do we need to learn? How to coordinate our attacks. How to respond to each other. How to feel the course of the battle, and take responsibility for the whole thing even if you don't have command. *That's* what I was working on with you guys. And if we *won*, if we went in and mopped up the walls with them, using *my* strategy, what does that teach *you*? You already worked with a good commander. What you needed to do was work with each other. So I put you in tough situations and by the end you were finding ways to bail each other out. To make it work."

"We never made it work well enough to win."

"That's not how I measured it. You made it work. When the Buggers come again, they're going to make things go wrong. Besides the normal friction of war, they're going to be doing stuff we couldn't think of because they're not human, they don't think like us. So plans of attack, what good are they then? We try, we do what we can, but what really counts is what you do when command breaks down. When it's just you with your squadron, and you with your transport, and you with your beat-up strike force that's got only five weapons among eight ships. How do you help each other? How do you make do? That's what I was working on. And then I went back to the officers' mess and told them what I learned. What you guys showed me. I learned stuff from them, too. I told you all the stuff I learned from them, right?"

"Well, you could have told us what you were teaming from us," said It£ [Itu]. They were all still a bit resentful.

"I didn't have to *tell* you. You learned it."

"At least you could have told us it was OK not to win."

"But you were supposed to *try* to win. I didn't tell you because it only works if you think it counts. Like when the Buggers come. It'll count then, for real. That's when you get really smart, when losing means that you and everybody you ever cared about, the whole human race, will die. Look, I didn't think we'd have long together. So I made the best use of the time, for you and for me. You guys are all ready to take command of armies."

"What about you, Bean?" asked Ambul. He was smiling, but there was an edge to it. "You ready to command a fleet?"

"I don't know. It depends on whether they want to win." Bean grinned.

"Here's the thing, Bean," said Ambul. "Soldiers don't like to lose."

"And *that*," said Bean, "is why losing is a much more powerful teacher than winning."

They heard him. They thought about it. Some of them nodded.

"*If* you live," Bean added. And grinned at them.

They smiled back.

"I gave you the best thing I could think of to give you during this week," said Bean. "And learned from you as much as I was smart enough to learn. Thank you." He stood and saluted them.

They saluted back.

He left.

And went to Rat Army barracks.

"Nikolai just got his orders," a toon leader told him.

For a moment Bean wondered if Nikolai would be going to Tactical School with him. His first thought was, No way is he ready. His second thought was, I wish he could come. His third thought was, I'm not much of a friend, to think first how he doesn't deserve to be promoted.

"What orders?" Bean asked.

"He's got him an army. Hell, he wasn't even a toon leader here. Just *got* here last week."

"Which army?"

"Rabbit." The toon leader looked at Bean's uniform again. "Oh. I guess he's replacing *you*."

Bean laughed and headed for the quarters he had just left.

Nikolai was sitting inside with the door open, looking lost.

"Can I come in?"

Nikolai looked up and grinned. "Tell me you're here to take your army back."

"I've got a hint for you. Try to win. They think that's important."

"I couldn't believe you lost all five."

"You know, for a school that doesn't list standings anymore, everybody sure keeps track."

"I keep track of *you*."

"Nikolai, I wish you were coming with me."

"What's happening, Bean? Is this it? Are the Buggers here?"

"I don't know."

"Come on, you figure these things out."

"If the Buggers were really coming, would they leave all you guys here in the station? Or send you back to Earth? Or evacuate you to some obscure asteroid? I don't know. Some things point to the end being really close. Other things seem like nothing important's going to happen anywhere around here."

"So maybe they're about to launch this huge fleet against the Bugger world and you guys are supposed to grow up on the voyage."

"Maybe," said Bean. "But the time to launch *that* fleet was right after the Second Invasion."

"Well, what if they didn't find out where the Bugger home world *was* until now?"

That stopped Bean cold. "Never crossed my mind," said Bean. "I mean, they must have been sending signals home. All we had to do was track that direction. Follow the light, you know. That's what it says in the manuals."

"What if they don't communicate by light?"

"Light may take a year to go a light-year, but it's still faster than anything else."

"Anything else that we know about," said Nikolai. Bean just looked at him.

"Oh, I know, that's stupid. The laws of physics and all that. I just -- you know, I keep thinking, that's all. I don't like to rule things out just because they're impossible."

Bean laughed. "Merda, Nikolai, I should have let you talk more and me talk less back when we slept across from each other."

"Bean, you know I'm not a genius."

"All geniuses here, Nikolai."

"I was scraping by."

"So maybe you're not a Napoleon, Nikolai. Maybe you're just an Eisenhower. Don't expect me to cry for you."

It was Nikolai's turn to laugh.

"I'll miss you, Bean."

"Thanks for coming with me to face Achilles, Nikolai."

"Guy gave me nightmares."

"Me too."

"And I'm glad you brought the others along too. Itf [Itu], Ambul, Crazy Tom, I felt like we could've used six more, and Achilles was hanging from a wire. Guys like him, you can understand why they invented hanging."

"Someday," said Bean, "you're going to need me the way I needed you. And I'll be there."

"I'm sorry I didn't join your squad, Bean."

"You were right," said Bean. "I asked you because you were my friend, and I thought I needed a friend, but I should have *been* a friend, too, and seen what *you* needed."

"I'll never let you down again."

Bean threw his arms around Nikolai. Nikolai hugged him back.

Bean remembered when he left Earth. Hugging Sister Carlotta. Analyzing. This is what she needs. It costs me nothing. Therefore I'll give her the hug.

I'm not that kid anymore.

Maybe because I was able to come through for Poke after all. Too late to help her, but I still got her killer to admit it. I still got him to pay something, even if it can never be enough.

"Go meet your army, Nikolai," said Bean. "I've got a spaceship to catch."

He watched Nikolai go out the door and knew, with a sharp pang of regret, that he would never see his friend again.

Dimak stood in Major Anderson's quarters.

"Captain Dimak, I watched Colonel Graff indulge your constant complaints, your resistance to his orders, and I kept thinking, Dimak might be right, but I would never tolerate such lack of respect if *I* were in command. I'd throw him out on his ass and write 'insubordinate' in about forty places in his dossier. I thought I should tell you that before you make your complaint."

Dimak blinked.

"Go ahead, I'm waiting."

"It isn't so much a complaint as a question."

"Then ask your question."

"I thought you were supposed to choose a team that was equally compatible with Ender *and* with Bean."

"The word *equally* was never used, as far as I can recall. But even if it was, did it occur to you that it might be impossible? I could have chosen forty brilliant children who would all have been proud and eager to serve under Andrew Wiggin. How many would be *equally* proud and eager to serve under Bean?"

Dimak had no answer for that.

"The way I analyze it, the soldiers I chose to send on this destroyer are the students who are emotionally closest and most responsive to Ender Wiggin, while also being among the dozen or so best commanders in the school. These soldiers also have no particular animosity toward Bean. So if they find him placed over them, they'll probably do their best for him."

"They'll never forgive him for not being Ender."

"I guess that will be Bean's challenge. Who else should I have sent? Nikolai is Bean's friend, but he'd be out of his depth. Someday he'll be ready for Tactical School, and then Command, but not yet. And what other friends does Bean have?"

"He's won a lot of respect."

"And lost it again when he lost all five of his games."

"I've explained to you why he --"

"Humanity doesn't need explanations, Captain Dimak! It needs winners! Ender Wiggin had the fire to win. Bean is capable of losing five in a row as if they didn't even matter."

"They didn't matter. He learned what he needed to learn from them."

"Captain Dimak, I can see that I'm falling into the same trap that Colonel Graff fell into. You have crossed the line from teaching into advocacy. I would dismiss you as Bean's teacher, were it not for the fact that the question is already moot. I'm sending the soldiers I decided on already. If Bean is really so brilliant, he'll figure out a way to work with them."

"Yes sir," said Dimak.

"If it's any consolation, do remember that Crazy Tom was one of the ones Bean brought along to hear Achilles' confession. Crazy Tom *went*. That suggests that the better they know Bean, the more seriously they take him."

"Thank you, sir."

"Bean is no longer your responsibility, Captain Dimak. You did well with him. I salute you for it. Now ... get back to work."

Dimak saluted.

Anderson saluted.

Dimak left.

On the destroyer Condor, the crew had no idea what to do with these children. They all knew about the Battle School, and both the captain and the pilot were Battle School graduates. But after perfunctory conversation -- What army were you in? Oh, in my day Rat was the best, Dragon was a complete loser, how things change, how things stay the same -- there was nothing more to say.

Without the shared concerns of being army commanders, the children drifted into their natural friendship groups. Dink and Petra had been friends almost from their first beginnings in Battle School, and they were so senior to the others that no one tried to penetrate that closed circle. Alai and Shen had been in Ender Wiggin's original launch group, and Vlad and Dumper, who had commanded B and E toons and were probably the most worshipful of Ender, hung around with them. Crazy Tom, Fly Molo, and Hot Soup had already been a trio back in Dragon Army. On a personal level, Bean did not expect to be included in any of these groups, and he wasn't particularly excluded, either; Crazy Tom, at least, showed real respect for Bean, and often included him in conversation. If Bean belonged to any of these groups, it was Crazy Tom's.

The only reason the division into cliques bothered him was that this group was clearly being assembled, not just randomly chosen. Trust needed to grow between them all, strongly if not equally. But they had been chosen for Ender -- any idiot could see that -- and it was not Bean's place to suggest that they play the onboard games together, learn together, do anything together. If Bean tried to assert any kind of leadership, it would only build more walls between him and the others than already existed.

There was only one of the group that Bean didn't think belonged there. And he couldn't do anything about that. Apparently the adults did not hold Petra responsible for her near-betrayal of Ender in the corridor the evening before Ender's life-or-death struggle with Bonzo. But Bean was not so sure. Petra was one of the best of the commanders, smart, able to see the big picture. How could she possibly have been fooled by Bonzo? Of course she couldn't have been hoping for Ender's destruction. But she had been careless, at best, and at worst might have been playing some kind of game that Bean did not yet understand. So he remained suspicious of her. Which wasn't good, to have such mistrust, but there it was.

Bean passed the four months of the voyage in the ship's library, mostly. Now that they were out of Battle School, he was reasonably sure that they weren't being spied on so intensely. The destroyer simply wasn't equipped for it. So he no longer had to choose his reading material with an eye to what the teachers would make of his selections.

He read no military history or theory whatsoever. He had already read all the major writers and many of the minor ones and knew the important campaigns backward and forward, from both sides. Those were in his memory to be called upon whenever he needed them. What was missing from his memory was the big picture. How the world worked. Political, social, economic history. What happened in nations when they weren't at war. How they got into and out of wars. How victory and defeat affected them. How alliances were formed and broken.

And, most important of all, but hardest to find: What was going on in the world today. The destroyer library had only the information that had been current when last it docked at Interstellar Launch -- ISL -- which is where the authorized list of documents was made available for download. Bean could make requests for more information, but that would require the library computer to make requisitions and use communications bandwidth that would have to be justified. It would be noticed, and then they'd wonder why this child was studying matters that could have no possible concern for him.

From what he could find on board, however, it was still possible to piece together the basic situation on Earth, and to reach some conclusions. During the years before the First Invasion, various power blocs had jockeyed for position, using some combination of terrorism, "surgical" strikes, limited military operations, and economic sanctions, boycotts, and embargos [sic -- should be embargoes] to gain the upper hand or give firm warnings or simply express national or ideological rage. When the Buggers showed up, China had just emerged as the dominant world power, economically and militarily, having finally reunited itself as a democracy. The North Americans and Europeans played at being China's "big brothers," but the economic balance had finally shifted.

What Bean saw as the driving force of history, however, was the resurgent Russian Empire. Where the Chinese simply took it for granted that they were and should be the center of the universe, the Russians, led by a series of ambitious demagogues and authoritarian generals, felt that history had cheated them out of their rightful place, century after century, and it was time for that to end. So it was Russia that forced the creation of the New Warsaw Pact, bringing its effective borders back to the peak of Soviet power -- and beyond, for this time Greece was its ally, and an

intimidated Turkey was neutralized. Europe was on the verge of being neutralized, the Russian dream of hegemony from the Pacific to the Atlantic at last within reach.

And then the Formics came and cut a swath of destruction through China that left a hundred million dead. Suddenly land-based armies seemed trivial, and questions of international competition were put on hold.

But that was only superficial. In fact, the Russians used their domination of the office of the Polemarch to build up a network of officers in key places throughout the fleet. Everything was in place for a vast power play the moment the Buggers were defeated -- or before, if they thought it was to their advantage. Oddly, the Russians were rather open about their intentions -- they always had been. They had no talent for subtlety, but they made up for it with amazing stubbornness. Negotiations for anything could take decades. And meanwhile, their penetration of the fleet was nearly total. Infantry forces loyal to the Strategos would be isolated, unable to get to the places where they were needed because there would be no ships to carry them.

When the war with the Buggers ended, the Russians clearly planned that within hours they would rule the fleet and therefore the world. It was their destiny. The North Americans were as complacent as ever, sure that destiny would work everything out in their favor. Only a few demagogues saw the danger. The Chinese and the Muslim world were alert to the danger, and even they were unable to make any kind of stand for fear of breaking up the alliance that made resistance to the Buggers possible.

The more he studied, the more Bean wished that he did not have to go to Tactical School. This war would belong to Ender and his friends. And while Bean loved Ender as much as any of them, and would gladly serve with them against the Buggers, the fact was that they didn't need him. It was the next war, the struggle for world domination, that fascinated him. The Russians *could* be stopped, if the right preparations were made.

But then he had to ask himself: *Should* they be stopped? A quick, bloody, but effective coup which would bring the world under a single government -- it would mean the end of war among humans, wouldn't it? And in such a climate of peace, wouldn't all nations be better off?

So, even as Bean developed his plan for stopping the Russians, he tried to evaluate what a worldwide Russian Empire would be like.

And what he concluded was that it would not last. For along with their national vigor, the Russians had also nurtured their astonishing talent for misgovernment, that sense of personal entitlement that made corruption a way of life. The institutional tradition of competence that would be essential for a successful world government was nonexistent. It was in China that those institutions and values were most vigorous. But even China would be a poor substitute for a genuine world government that transcended any national interest. The wrong world government would eventually collapse under its own weight.

Bean longed to be able to talk these things over with someone -- with Nikolai, or even with one of the teachers. It slowed him down to have his own thoughts move around in circles -- without

outside stimulation it was hard to break free of his own assumptions. One mind can think only of its own questions; it rarely surprises itself. But he made progress, slowly, during that voyage, and then during the months of Tactical School.

Tactical was a blur of short voyages and detailed tours of various ships. Bean was disgusted that they seemed to concentrate entirely on older designs, which seemed pointless to him -- why train your commanders in ships they won't actually be using in battle? But the teachers treated his objection with contempt, pointing out that ships were ships, in the long run, and the newest vessels had to be put into service patrolling the perimeters of the solar system. There were none to spare for training children.

They were taught very little about the art of piloting, for they were not being trained to fly the ships, only to command them in battle. They had to get a sense of how the weapons worked, how the ships moved, what could be expected of them, what their limitations were. Much of it was rote learning ... but that was precisely the kind of learning Bean could do almost in his sleep, being able to recall anything that he had read or heard with any degree of attention.

So throughout Tactical School, while he performed as well as anyone, his real concentration was still on the problems of the current political situation on Earth. For Tactical School was at ISL, and so the library there was constantly being updated, and not just with the material authorized for inclusion in finite ships' libraries. For the first time, Bean began to read the writings of current political thinkers on Earth. He read what was coming out of Russia, and once again was astonished at how nakedly they pursued their ambitions. The Chinese writers saw the danger, but being Chinese, made no effort to rally support in other nations for any kind of resistance.

To the Chinese, once something was known in China, it was known everywhere that mattered. And the Euro-American nations seemed dominated by a studied ignorance that to Bean appeared to be a death wish. Yet there were some who were awake, struggling to create coalitions.

Two popular commentators in particular came to Bean's attention. Demosthenes at first glance seemed to be a rabble-rouser, playing on prejudice and xenophobia. But he was also having considerable success in leading a popular movement. Bean didn't know if life under a government headed by Demosthenes would be any better than living under the Russians, but Demosthenes would at least make a contest out of it. The other commentator that Bean took note of was Locke, a lofty, high-minded fellow who nattered about world peace and forging alliances -- yet amid his apparent complacency, Locke actually seemed to be working from the same set of facts as Demosthenes, taking it for granted that the Russians were vigorous enough to "lead" the world, but unprepared to do so in a "beneficial" way. In a way, it was as if Demosthenes and Locke were doing their research together, reading all the same sources, learning from all the same correspondents, but then appealing to completely different audiences.

For a while, Bean even toyed with the possibility that Locke and Demosthenes were the same person. But no, the writing styles were different, and more importantly, they thought and analyzed differently. Bean didn't think anyone was smart enough to fake that.

Whoever they were, these two commentators were the people that seemed to see the situation most accurately, and so Bean began to conceive of his essay on strategy in the post-Formic world as a letter to both Locke and Demosthenes. A private letter. An anonymous letter. Because his observations should be known, and these two seemed to be in the best position to bring Bean's ideas to fruition.

Resorting to old habits, Bean spent some time in the library watching several officers log on to the net, and soon had six log-ins that he could use. He then wrote his letter in six parts, using a different log-in for each part, and then sent the parts to Locke and Demosthenes within minutes of each other. He did it during an hour when the library was crowded, and made sure that he himself was logged on to the net on his own desk in his barracks, ostensibly playing a game. He doubted they'd be counting his keystrokes and realize that he wasn't actually doing anything with his desk during that time. And if they did trace the letter back to him, well, too bad. In all likelihood, Locke and Demosthenes would not try to trace him -- in his letter he asked them not to. They would either believe him or not; they would agree with him or not; beyond that he could not go. He had spelled out for them exactly what the dangers were, what the Russian strategy obviously was, and what steps must be taken to ensure that the Russians did not succeed in their preemptive strike.

One of the most important points he made was that the children from Battle, Tactical, and Command School had to be brought back to Earth as quickly as possible, once the Buggers were defeated. If they remained in space, they would either be taken by the Russians or kept in ineffectual isolation by the I.F. But these children were the finest military minds that humanity had produced in this generation. If the power of one great nation was to be subdued, it would require brilliant commanders in opposition to them.

Within a day, Demosthenes had an essay on the nets calling for the Battle School to be dissolved at once and all those children brought home. "They have kidnapped our most promising children. Our Alexanders and Napoleons, our Rommels and Pattons, our Caesars and Fredericks and Washingtons and Saladins are being kept in a tower where we can't reach them, where they can't help their own people remain free from the threat of Russian domination. And who can doubt that the Russians intend to seize those children and use them? Or, if they can't, they will certainly try, with a single well-placed missile, to blast them all to bits, depriving us of our natural military leadership." Delicious demagoguery, designed to spark fear and outrage. Bean could imagine the consternation in the military as their precious school became a political issue. It was an emotional issue that Demosthenes would not let go of and other nationalists all over the world would fervently echo. And because it was about children, no politician could dare oppose the principle that all the children in Battle School would come home the *moment* the war ended. Not only that, but on this issue, Locke lent his prestigious, moderate voice to the cause, openly supporting the principle of the return of the children. "By all means, pay the piper, rid us of the invading rats -- and then bring our children home."

I saw, I wrote, and the world changed a little. It was a heady feeling. It made all the work at Tactical School seem almost meaningless by comparison. He wanted to bound into the classroom and tell the others about his triumph. But they would look at him like he was crazy. They knew nothing about the world at large, and took no responsibility for it. They were closed into the military world.

Three days after Bean sent his letters to Locke and Demosthenes, the children came to class and found that they were to depart immediately for Command School, this time joined by Carn Carby, who had been a class ahead of them in Tactical School. They had spent only three months at ISL, and Bean couldn't help wondering if his letters had not had some influence over the timing. If there was some danger that the children might be sent home prematurely, the I.F. had to make sure their prize specimens were out of reach.

CHAPTER 22 -- REUNION

"I suppose I should congratulate you for undoing the damage you did to Ender Wiggin."

"Sir, I respectfully disagree that I did any damage."

"Ah, good then, I *don't* have to congratulate you. You do realize that your status here will be as observer."

"I hope that I will also have opportunities to offer advice based on my years of experience with these children."

"Command School has worked with children for years."

"Respectfully, sir, Command School has worked with adolescents. Ambitious, testosterone-charged, competitive teenagers. And quite aside from that, we have a lot riding on these particular children, and I know things about them that must be taken into account."

"All those things should be in your reports."

"They are. But with all respect, is there anyone there who has memorized my reports so thoroughly that the appropriate details will come to mind the instant they're needed?"

"I'll listen to you, Colonel Graff. And please stop assuring me of how respectful you are whenever you're about to tell me I'm an idiot."

"I thought that my leave of absence was designed to chasten me. I'm trying to show that I've been chastened."

"Are there any of these details about the children that come to mind right now?"

"An important one, sir. Because so much depends on what Ender does or does not know, it is vital that you isolate him from the other children. During actual practices he can be there, but under no circumstances can you allow free conversation or sharing of information."

"And why is that?"

"Because if Bean ever comes to know about the ansible, he'll leap straight to the core situation. He may figure it out on his own as it is -- you have no idea how difficult it is to conceal information from him. Ender is more trusting -- but Ender can't do his job *unless* he knows about the ansible. You see? He and Bean cannot be allowed to have any free time together. Any conversation that is not on point."

"But if this is so, then Bean is not capable of being Ender's backup, because then he would *have* to be told about the ansible."

"It won't matter then."

"But you yourself were the author of the proposition that only a child --"

"Sir, none of that applies to Bean."

"Because?"

"Because he's not human."

"Colonel Graff, you make me tired."

The voyage to Command School was four long months, and this time they were being trained continuously, as thorough an education in the mathematics of targeting, explosives, and other weapons-related subjects as could be managed on board a fast-moving cruiser. Finally, too, they were being forged again into a team, and it quickly became clear to everyone that the leading student was Bean. He mastered everything immediately, and was soon the one whom the others turned to for explanations of concepts they didn't grasp at once. From being the lowest in status on the first voyage, a complete outsider, Bean now became an outcast for the opposite reason -- he was alone in the position of highest status.

He struggled with the situation, because he knew that he needed to be able to function as part of the team, not just as a mentor or expert. Now it became vital that he take part in their downtime, relaxing with them, joking, joining in with reminiscences about Battle School. And about even earlier times.

For now, at last, the Battle School tabu against talking about home was gone. They all spoke freely of mothers and fathers who by now were distant memories, but who still played a vital role in their lives.

The fact that Bean had no parents at first made the others a little shy with him, but he seized the opportunity and began to speak openly about his entire experience. Hiding in the toilet tank in the clean room. Going home with the Spanish custodian. Starving on the streets as he scouted for his opportunity. Telling Poke how to beat the bullies at their own game. Watching Achilles, admiring

him, fearing him as he created their little street family, marginalized Poke, and finally killed her. When he told them of finding Poke's body, several of them wept. Petra in particular broke down and sobbed.

It was an opportunity, and Bean seized it. Naturally, she soon fled the company of others, taking her emotions into the privacy of her quarters. As soon afterward as he could, Bean followed her.

"Bean, I don't want to talk."

"I do," said Bean. "It's something we have to talk about. For the good of the team."

"Is that what we are?" she asked.

"Petra, you know the worst thing I've ever done. Achilles was dangerous, I knew it, and I still went away and left Poke alone with him. She died for it. That burns in me every day of my life. Every time I start to feel happy, I remember Poke, how I owe my life to her, how I could have saved her. Every time I love somebody, I have that fear that I'll betray them the same way I did her."

"Why are you telling me this, Bean?"

"Because you betrayed Ender and I think it's eating at you."

Her eyes flashed with rage. "I did not! And it's eating at **you**, not me!"

"Petra, whether you admit it to yourself or not, when you tried to slow Ender down in the corridor that day, there's no way you didn't know what you were doing. I've seen you in action, you're sharp, you see everything. In some ways you're the best tactical commander in the whole group. It's absolutely impossible that you didn't see how Bonzo's thugs were all there in the corridor, waiting to beat the crap out of Ender, and what did you do? You tried to slow him down, peel him off from the group."

"And you stopped me," said Petra. "So it's moot, isn't it?"

"I have to know why."

"You don't have to know squat."

"Petra, we have to fight shoulder to shoulder someday. We have to be able to trust each other. I don't trust you because I don't know why you did that. And now you won't trust me because you know I don't trust **you**."

"Oh what a tangled web we weave."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"My father said it. Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive."

"Exactly. Untangle this for me."

"You're the one who's weaving a web for me, Bean. You know things you don't tell the rest of us. You think I don't see that? So you want me to restore your trust in me, but you don't tell me anything useful."

"I opened my soul to you," said Bean.

"You told me about your *feelings*." She said it with utter contempt. "So good, it's a relief to know you have them, or at least to know that you think it's worth pretending to have them, nobody's quite sure about that. But what you don't ever tell us is what the hell is actually going on here. We think you know."

"All I have are guesses."

"The teachers told you things back in Battle School that none of the rest of us knew. You knew the name of every kid in the school, you knew things about us, all of us. You knew things you had no business knowing."

Bean was stunned to realize that his special access had been so noticeable to her. Had he been careless? Or was she even more observant than he had thought? "I broke into the student data," said Bean.

"And they didn't catch you?"

"I think they did. Right from the start. Certainly they knew about it later." And he told her about choosing the roster for Dragon Army.

She flopped down on her bunk and addressed the ceiling. "You chose them! All those rejects and those little launchy bastards, *you* chose them!"

"Somebody had to. The teachers weren't competent to do it."

"So Ender had the best. He didn't *make* them the best, they already *were* the best."

"The best that weren't already in armies. I'm the only one who was a launchy when Dragon was formed who's with this team now. You and Shen and Alai and Dink and Carn, you weren't in Dragon, and you're obviously among the best. Dragon won because they were good, yes, but also because Ender knew what to do with them."

"It still turns one little corner of my universe upside down."

"Petra, this was a trade."

"Was it?"

"Explain why you weren't a judas back in Battle School."

"I was a judas," said Petra. "How's that for an explanation?"

Bean was sickened. "You can say it like that? Without shame?"

"Are you stupid?" asked Petra. "I was doing the same thing you were doing, trying to save Ender's life. I knew Ender had trained for combat, and those thugs hadn't. I was also trained. Bonzo had been working these guys up into a frenzy, but the fact is, they didn't like Bonzo very much, he had just pissed them off at Ender. So if they got in a few licks against Ender, right there in the corridor where Dragon Army and other soldiers would get into it right away, where Ender would have me beside him in a limited space so only a few of them could come at us at once -- I figured that Ender would get bruised, get a bloody nose, but he'd come out of it OK. And all those walking scabies would be satisfied. Bonzo's ranting would be old news. Bonzo would be alone again. Ender would be safe from anything worse."

"You were gambling a lot on your fighting ability."

"And Ender's. We were both damn good then, and in excellent shape. And you know what? I think Ender understood what I was doing, and the only reason he didn't go along with it was you."

"Me?"

"He saw you plunging right into the middle of everything. You'd get your head beaten in, that was obvious. So he had to avoid the violence then. Which means that because of you, he got set up the next day when it really **was** dangerous, when Ender was completely alone with no one for backup."

"So why didn't you explain this before?"

"Because you were the only one besides Ender who knew I was setting him up, and I didn't really care what you thought then, and I'm not that concerned about it now."

"It was a stupid plan," said Bean.

"It was better than yours," said Petra.

"Well, I guess when you look at how it all turned out, we'll never know how stupid your plan was. But we sure know that mine was shot to hell."

Petra flashed him a brief, insincere grin. "Now, do you trust me again? Can we go back to the intimate friendship we've shared for so long?"

"You know something, Petra? All that hostility is wasted on me. In fact, it's bad aim on your part to even try it. Because I'm the best friend you've got here."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really. Because I'm the only one of these boys who ever chose to have a girl as his commander."

She paused a moment, staring at him blankly before saying, "I got over the fact that I'm a girl a long time ago."

"But they didn't. And you know they didn't. You know that it bothers them all the time, that you're not really one of the guys. They're your friends, sure, at least Dink is, but they all like you. At the same time, there were what, a dozen girls in the whole school? And except for you, none of them were really topflight soldiers. They didn't take you seriously,"

"Ender did," said Petra.

"And I do," said Bean. "The others all know what happened in the corridor, you know. It's not like it was a secret. But you know why they haven't had this conversation with you?"

"Why?"

"Because *they* all figured you were an idiot and didn't realize how close you came to getting Ender pounded into the deck. I'm the only one who had enough respect for you to realize that you would never make such a stupid mistake by accident."

"I'm supposed to be flattered?"

"You're supposed to stop treating me like the enemy. You're almost as much of an outsider in this group as I am. And when it comes down to actual combat, you need someone who'll take you as seriously as you take yourself."

"Do me no favors."

"I'm leaving now."

"About time."

"And when you think about this more and you realize I'm right, you don't have to apologize. You cried for Poke, and that makes us friends. You can trust me, and I can trust you, and that's all."

She was starting some retort as he left, but he didn't stick around long enough to hear what it was. Petra was just that way -- she had to act tough. Bean didn't mind. He knew they'd said the things they needed to say.

Command School was at FleetCom, and the location of FleetCom was a closely guarded secret. The only way you ever found out where it was was to be assigned there, and very few people who had been there ever came back to Earth.

Just before arrival, the kids were briefed. FleetCom was in the wandering asteroid Eros. And as they approached, they realized that it really was *in* the asteroid. Almost nothing showed on the surface except the docking station. They boarded the shuttlebug, which reminded them of schoolbuses, and took the five-minute ride down to the surface. There the shuttlebug slid inside what looked like a cave, A snakelike tube reached out to the bug and enclosed it completely. They got out of the shuttlebug into near-zero gravity, and a strong air current sucked them like a vacuum cleaner up into the bowels of Eros.

Bean knew at once that this place was not shaped by human hands. The tunnels were all too low -- and even then, the ceilings had obviously been raised after the initial construction, since the lower walls were smooth and only the top half-meter showed tool marks. The Buggers made this, probably when they were mounting the Second Invasion. What was once their forward base was now the center of the International Fleet. Bean tried to imagine the battle required to take this place. The Buggers scuttering along the tunnels, the infantry coming in with low-power explosives to burn them out. Flashes of light. And then cleanup, dragging the Formic bodies out of the tunnels and bit by bit converting it into a human space.

This is how we got our secret technologies, thought Bean. The Buggers had gravity-generating machines. We learned how they worked and built our own, installing them in the Battle School and wherever else they were needed. But the I.F. never announced the fact, because it would have frightened people to realize how advanced their technology was.

What else did we learn from them?

Bean noticed how even the children hunched a little to walk through the tunnels. The headroom was at least two meters, and not one of the kids was nearly that tall, but the proportions were all wrong for human comfort, so the roof of the tunnels seemed oppressively low, ready to collapse. It must have been even worse when we first arrived, before the roofs were raised.

Ender would thrive here. He'd hate it, of course, because he was human. But he'd also use the place to help him get inside the minds of the Buggers who built it. Not that you could ever really understand an alien mind. But this place gave you a decent chance to try.

The boys were bunked up in two rooms; Petra had a smaller room to herself. It was even more bare here than Battle School, and they could never escape the coldness of the stone around them. On Earth, stone had always seemed solid. But in space, it seemed downright porous. There were bubble holes all through the stone, and Bean couldn't help feeling that air was leaking out all the time. Air leaking out, and cold leaking in, and perhaps something else, the larvae of the Buggers chewing like earthworms through the solid stone, crawling out of the bubble holes at night when the room was dark, crawling over their foreheads and reading their minds and ...

He woke up, breathing heavily, his hand clutching his forehead. He hardly dared to move his hand. Had something been crawling on him?

His hand was empty.

He wanted to go back to sleep, but it was too close to reveille for him to hope for that. He lay there thinking. The nightmare was absurd -- there could not possibly be any Buggers alive here. But something made him afraid. Something was bothering him, and he wasn't sure what.

He thought back to a conversation with one of the technicians who serviced the simulators. Bean's had malfunctioned during practice, so that suddenly the little points of light that represented his ships moving through three-dimensional space were no longer under his control. To his surprise, they didn't just drift on in the direction of the last orders he gave. Instead, they began to swarm, to gather, and then changed color as they shifted to be under someone else's control.

When the technician arrived to replace the chip that had blown, Bean asked him why the ships didn't just stop or keep drifting. "It's part of the simulation," the technician said. "What's being simulated here is not that you're the pilot or even the captain of these ships. You're the admiral, and so inside each ship there's a simulated captain and a simulated pilot, and so when your contact got cut off, they acted the way the real guys would act if they lost contact. See?"

"That seems like a lot of trouble to go to."

"Look, we've had a lot of time to work on these simulators," said the technician. "They're **exactly** like combat."

"Except," said Bean, "the time-lag."

The technician looked blank for a moment. "Oh, right. The time-lag. Well, that just wasn't worth programming in." And then he was gone.

It was that moment of blankness that was bothering Bean. These simulators were as perfect as they could make them, **exactly** like combat, and yet they didn't include the time-lag that came from lightspeed communications. The distances being simulated were large enough that most of the time there should be at least a slight delay between a command and its execution, and sometimes it should be several seconds. But no such delay was programmed in. All communications were being treated as instantaneous. And when Bean asked about it, his question was blown off by the teacher who first trained them on the simulators. "It's a simulation. Plenty of time to get used to the lightspeed delay when you train with the real thing."

That sounded like typically stupid military thinking even at the time, but now Bean realized it was simply a lie. If they programmed in the behavior of pilots and captains when communications were cut off, they could very easily have included the time-lag. The reason these ships were simulated with instantaneous response was because that **was** an accurate simulation of conditions they would meet in combat.

Lying awake in the darkness, Bean finally made the connection. It was so obvious, once he thought of it. It wasn't just gravity control they got from the Buggers. It was faster-than-light communication. It's a big secret from people on Earth, but our ships can talk to each other instantaneously.

And if the ships can, why not FleetCom here on Eros? What was the range of communication? Was it truly instantaneous regardless of distance, or was it merely faster than light, so that at truly great distances it began to have its own time-lag?

His mind raced through the possibilities, and the implications of those possibilities. Our patrol ships will be able to warn us of the approaching enemy fleet long before it reaches us. They've probably known for years that it was coming, and how fast. That's why we've been rushed through our training like this -- they've known for years when the Third Invasion would begin.

And then another thought. If this instantaneous communication works regardless of distance, then we could even be talking to the invasion fleet we sent against the Formic home planet right after the Second Invasion. If our starships were going near lightspeed, the relative time differential would complicate communication, but as long as we're imagining miracles, that would be easy enough to solve. We'll know whether our invasion of their world succeeded or not, moments afterward. Why, if the communication is really powerful, with plenty of bandwidth, FleetCom could even watch the battle unfold, or at least watch a simulation of the battle, and ...

A simulation of the battle. Each ship in the expeditionary force sending back its position at all times. The communications device receives that data and feeds it into a computer and what comes out is ... the simulation we've been practicing with.

We are training to command ships in combat, not here in the solar system, but light-years away. They sent the pilots and the captains, but the admirals who will command them are still back here. At FleetCom. They had generations to find the right commanders, and we're the ones.

It left him gasping, this realization. He hardly dared to believe it, and yet it made far better sense than any of the other more plausible scenarios. For one thing, it explained perfectly why the kids had been trained on older ships. The fleet they would be commanding had launched decades ago, when those older designs were the newest and the best.

They didn't rip us through Battle School and Tactical School because the Bugger fleet is about to reach our solar system. They're in a hurry because *our* fleet is about to reach the Buggers' world.

It was like Nikolai said. You can't rule out the impossible, because you never know which of your assumptions about what was possible might turn out, in the real universe, to be false. Bean hadn't been able to think of this simple, rational explanation because he had been locked in the box of thinking that lightspeed limited both travel *and* communication. But the technician let down just the tiniest part of the veil they had covering the truth, and because Bean finally found a way to open his mind to the possibility, he now knew the secret.

Sometime during their training, anytime at all, without the slightest warning, without ever even telling us they're doing it, they can switch over and we'll be commanding real ships in a real battle. We'll think it's a game, but we'll be fighting a war.

And they don't tell us because we're children. They think we can't handle it. Knowing that our decisions will cause death and destruction. That when we lose a ship, real men die. They're keeping it a secret to protect us from our own compassion.

Except me. Because now I know.

The weight of it suddenly came upon him and he could hardly breathe, except shallowly. Now I know. How will it change the way I play? I can't let it, that's all. I was already doing my best -- knowing this won't make me work harder or play better. It might make me do worse. Might make me hesitate, might make me lose concentration. Through their training, they had all learned that winning depended on being able to forget everything but what you were doing at that moment. You could hold all your ships in your mind at once -- but only if any ship that no longer matters could be blocked out completely. Thinking about dead men, about torn bodies having the air sucked out of their lungs by the cold vacuum of space, who could still play the game knowing that this was what it really meant?

The teachers were right to keep this secret from us. That technician should be court-martialed for letting me see behind the curtain.

I can't tell anyone. The other kids shouldn't know this. And if the teachers know that I know it, they'll take me out of the game.

So I have to fake it.

No. I have to disbelieve it. I have to forget that it's true. It **isn't** true.

The truth is what they've been telling us. The simulation is simply ignoring lightspeed. They trained us on old ships because the new ones are all deployed and can't be wasted. The fight we're preparing for is to repel invading Formics, not to invade their solar system. This was just a crazy dream, pure self-delusion. Nothing goes faster than light, and therefore information can't be transmitted faster than light.

Besides, if we really did send an invasion fleet that long ago, they don't need little kids to command them. Mazer Rackham must be with that fleet, no way would it have launched without him. Mazer Rackham is still alive, preserved by the relativistic changes of near-lightspeed travel. Maybe it's only been a few years to him. And he's ready. We aren't needed.

Bean calmed his breathing. His heartrate slowed. I can't let myself get carried away with fantasies like that. I would be so embarrassed if anyone knew the stupid theory I came up with in my sleep. I can't even tell this as a dream. The game is as it always was.

Reveille sounded over the intercom. Bean got out of bed -- a bottom bunk, this time -- and joined in as normally as possible with the banter of Crazy Tom and Hot Soup, while Fly Molo kept his morning surliness to himself and Alai did his prayers. Bean went to mess and ate as he normally ate. Everything was normal. It didn't mean a thing that he couldn't get his bowels to unclench at the normal time. That his belly gnawed at him all day, and at mealtime he was faintly nauseated. That was just lack of sleep.

Near the end of three months on Eros, their work on the simulators changed. There would be ships directly under their control, but they also had others under them to whom they had to give commands out loud, besides using the controls to enter them manually. "Like combat," said their supervisor.

"In combat," said Alai, "we'd know who the officers serving under us were."

"That would matter if you depended on them to give you information. But you do not. All the information you need is conveyed to your simulator and appears in the display. So you give your orders orally as well as manually. Just assume that you will be obeyed. Your teachers will be monitoring the orders you give to help you learn to be explicit and immediate. You will also have to master the technique of switching back and forth between crosstalk among yourselves and giving orders to individual ships. It's quite simple, you see. Turn your heads to the left or right to speak to each other, whichever is more comfortable for you. But when your face is pointing straight at the display, your voice will be carried to whatever ship or squadron you have selected with your controls. And to address all the ships under your control at once, head straight forward and duck your chin, like this."

"What happens if we raise our heads?" asked Shen.

Alai answered before the teacher could. "Then you're talking to God."

After the laughter died down, the teacher said, "Almost right, Alai. When you raise your chin to speak, you'll be talking to *your* commander."

Several spoke at once. "*Our* commander?"

"You did not think we were training all of you to be supreme commander at once, did you? No no. For the moment, we will assign one of you at random to be that commander, just for practice. Let's say ... the little one. You. Bean."

"I'm supposed to be commander?"

"Just for the practices. Or is he not competent? You others will not obey him in battle?"

The others answered the teacher with scorn. Of course Bean was competent. Of course they'd follow him.

"But then, he never did win a battle when he commanded Rabbit Army," said Fly Molo.

"Excellent. That means that you will all have the challenge of making this little one a winner in spite of himself. If you do not think *that* is a realistic military situation, you have not been reading history carefully enough."

So it was that Bean found himself in command of the ten other kids from Battle School. It was exhilarating, of course, for neither he nor the others believed for one moment that the teacher's choice had been random. They knew that Bean was better at the simulator than anybody. Petra was the one who said it after practice one day. "Hell, Bean, I think you have this all in your head so clear you could close your eyes and still play." It was almost true. He did not have to keep checking to see where everyone was. It was all in his head at once.

It took a couple of days for them to handle it smoothly, taking orders from Bean and giving their own orders orally along with the physical controls. There were constant mistakes at first, heads in the wrong position so that comments and questions and orders went to the wrong destination. But soon enough it became instinctive.

Bean then insisted that others take turns being in the command position. "I need practice taking orders just like they do," he said. "And learning how to change my head position to speak up and sideways." The teacher agreed, and after another day, Bean had mastered the technique as well as any of the others.

Having other kids in the master seat had another good effect as well. Even though no one did so badly as to embarrass himself, it was clear that Bean was sharper and faster than anyone else, with a keener grasp of developing situations and a better ability to sort out what he was hearing and remember what everybody had said.

"You're not *human*," said Petra. "*Nobody* can do what you do!"

"Am so human," said Bean mildly. "And I know somebody who can do it better than me."

"Who's that?" she demanded.

"Ender."

They all fell silent for a moment.

"Yeah, well, he ain't here," said Vlad.

"How do *you* know?" said Bean. "For all we know, he's been here all along."

"That's stupid," said Dink. "Why wouldn't they have him practice with us? Why would they keep it a secret?"

"Because they like secrets," said Bean. "And maybe because they're giving him different training. And maybe because it's like Sinterklaas. They're going to bring him to us as a present."

"And maybe you're full of merda," said Dumper.

Bean just laughed. Of course it would be Ender. This group was assembled for Ender. Ender was the one all their hopes were resting on. The reason they put Bean in that master position was because Bean was the substitute. If Ender got appendicitis in the middle of the war, it was Bean they'd switch the controls to. Bean who'd start giving commands, deciding which ships would be sacrificed, which men would die. But until then, it would be Ender's choice, and for Ender, it would only be a game. No deaths, no suffering, no fear, no guilt. Just ... a game.

Definitely it's Ender. And the sooner the better.

The next day, their supervisor told them that Ender Wiggin was going to be their commander starting that afternoon. When they didn't act surprised, he asked why. "Because Bean already told us."

"They want me to find out how you've been getting your inside information, Bean." Graff looked across the table at the painfully small child who sat there looking at him without expression.

"I don't have any inside information," said Bean.

"You knew that Ender was going to be the commander."

"I *guessed*," said Bean. "Not that it was hard. Look at who we are. Ender's closest friends. Ender's toon leaders. He's the common thread. There were plenty of other kids you could have brought here, probably about as good as us. But these are the ones who'd follow Ender straight into space without a suit, if he told us he needed us to do it."

"Nice speech, but you have a history of sneaking."

"Right. *When* would I be doing this sneaking? When are any of us alone? Our desks are just dumb terminals and we never get to see anybody else log on so it's not like I can capture another identity. I just do what I'm told all day every day. You guys keep assuming that we kids are stupid, even though you chose us because we're really, really smart. And now you sit there and accuse me of having to *steal* information that any idiot could guess."

"Not *any* idiot."

"That was just an expression."

"Bean," said Graff, "I think you're feeding me a line of complete bullshit."

"Colonel Graff, even if that were true, which it isn't, so what? So I found out Ender was coming. I'm secretly monitoring your dreams. So *what*? He'll still come, he'll be in command, he'll be

brilliant, and then we'll all graduate and I'll sit in a booster seat in a ship somewhere and give commands to grownups in my little-boy voice until they get sick of hearing me and throw me out into space."

"I don't care about the fact that you knew about Ender. I don't care that it was a guess."

"I know you don't care about those things."

"I need to know what else you've figured out."

"Colonel," said Bean, sounding very tired, "doesn't it occur to you that the very fact that you're asking me this question *tells* me there's something else for me to figure out, and therefore greatly increases the chance that I *will* figure it out?"

Graff's smile grew even broader. "That's just what I told the ... officer who assigned me to talk to you and ask these questions. I told him that we would end up telling you more, just by having the interview, than you would ever tell us, but he said, 'The kid is *six*, Colonel Graff.'"

"I think I'm seven."

"He was working from an old report and hadn't done the math."

"Just tell me what secret you want to make sure I don't know, and I'll tell you if I already knew it."

"Very helpful."

"Colonel Graff, am I doing a good job?"

"Absurd question. Of course you are."

"If I do know anything that you don't want us kids to know, have I talked about it? Have I told any of the other kids? Has it affected my performance in any way?"

"No."

"To me that sounds like a tree falling in the forest where no one can hear. If I *do* know something, because I figured it out, but I'm not telling anybody else, and it's not affecting my work, then why would you waste time finding out whether I know it? Because after this conversation, you may be sure that I'll be looking very hard for any secret that might be lying around where a seven-year-old might find it. Even if I do find such a secret, though, I *still* won't tell the other kids, so it *still* won't make a difference. So why don't we just drop it?"

Graff reached under the table and pressed something.

"All right," said Graff. "They've got the recording of our conversation and if that doesn't reassure them, nothing will."

"Reassure them of what? And who is 'them'?"

"Bean, this part is not being recorded."

"Yes it is," said Bean.

"I turned it off."

"Puh-leeze."

In fact, Graff was not altogether sure that the recording **was** off. Even if the machine he controlled was off, that didn't mean there wasn't another.

"Let's walk," said Graff.

"I hope not outside."

Graff got up from the table -- laboriously, because he'd put on a lot of weight and they kept Eros at full gravity -- and led the way out into the tunnels.

As they walked, Graff talked softly. "Let's at least make them work for it," he said.

"Fine," said Bean.

"I thought you'd want to know that the I.F. is going crazy because of an apparent security leak. It seems that someone with access to the most secret archives wrote letters to a couple of net pundits who then started agitating for the children of Battle School to be sent home to their native countries."

"What's a pundit?" asked Bean.

"My turn to say puh-leeze, I think. Look, I'm not accusing you. I just happen to have seen a text of the letters sent to Locke and Demosthenes -- they're both being closely watched, as I'm sure you would expect -- and when I read those letters -- interesting the differences between them, by the way, very cleverly done -- I realized that there was not really any top secret information in there, beyond what any child in Battle School knows. No, the thing that's really making them crazy is that the political analysis is dead on, even though it's based on insufficient information. From what is publicly known, in other words, the writer of those letters couldn't have figured out what he figured out. The Russians are claiming that somebody's been spying on them -- and lying about what they found, of course. But I accessed the library on the destroyer Condor and found out what you were reading. And then I checked your library use on the ISL while you were in Tactical School. You've been a busy boy."

"I try to keep my mind occupied."

"You'll be happy to know that the first group of children has already been sent home."

"But the war's not over."

"You think that when you start a political snowball rolling, it will always go where you wanted it to go? You're smart but you're naive, Bean. Give the universe a push, and you don't know which dominoes will fall. There are always a few you never thought were connected. Someone will always push back a little harder than you expected. But still, I'm happy that you remembered the other children and set the wheels in motion to free them."

"But not us."

"The I.F. has no obligation to remind the agitators on Earth that Tactical School and Command School are still full of children."

"I'm not going to remind them."

"I know you won't. No, Bean, I got a chance to talk to you because you panicked some of the higher-ups with your educated guess about who would command your team. But I was hoping for a chance to talk to you because there are a couple of things I wanted to tell you. Besides the fact that your letter had pretty much the desired effect."

"I'm listening, though I admit to no letter."

"First, you'll be fascinated to know the identity of Locke and Demosthenes."

"Identity? Just one?"

"One mind, two voices. You see, Bean, Ender Wiggin was born third in his family. A special waiver, not an illegal birth. His older brother and sister are just as gifted as he is, but for various reasons were deemed inappropriate for Battle School. But the brother, Peter Wiggin, is a very ambitious young man. With the military closed off to him, he's gone into politics. Twice."

"He's Locke *and* Demosthenes," said Bean.

"He plans the strategy for both of them, but he only writes Locke. His sister Valentine writes Demosthenes."

Bean laughed. "Now it makes sense."

"So both your letters went to the same people."

"If I wrote them."

"And it's driving poor Peter Wiggin crazy. He's really tapping into all his sources inside the fleet to find out who sent those letters. But nobody in the Fleet knows, either. The six officers whose

log-ins you used have been ruled out. And as you can guess, *nobody* is checking to see if the only seven-year-old ever to go to Tactical School might have dabbled in political epistolary in his spare time."

"Except you."

"Because, by God, I'm the only person who understands exactly how brilliant you children actually are."

"How brilliant are we?" Bean grinned.

"Our walk won't last forever, and I won't waste time on flattery. The other thing I wanted to tell you is that Sister Carlotta, being unemployed after you left, devoted a lot of effort to tracking down your parentage. I can see two officers approaching us right now who will put an end to this unrecorded conversation, and so I'll be brief. You have a name, Bean. You are Julian Delphiki."

"That's Nikolai's last name."

"Julian is the name of Nikolai's father. And of your father. Your mother's name is Elena. You are identical twins. Your fertilized eggs were implanted at different times, and your genes were altered in one very small but significant way. So when you look at Nikolai, you see yourself as you would have been, had you not been genetically altered, and had you grown up with parents who loved you and cared for you."

"Julian Delphiki," said Bean.

"Nikolai is among those already heading for Earth. Sister Carlotta will see to it that, when he is repatriated to Greece, he is informed that you are indeed his brother. His parents already know that you exist -- Sister Carlotta told them. Your home is a lovely place, a house on the hills of Crete overlooking the Aegean. Sister Carlotta tells me that they are good people, your parents. They wept with joy when they learned that you exist. And now our interview is coming to an end. We were discussing your low opinion of the quality of teaching here at Command School."

"How did you guess."

"You're not the only one who can do that."

The two officers -- an admiral and a general, both wearing big false smiles -- greeted them and asked how the interview had gone.

"You have the recording," said Graff. "Including the part where Bean insisted that it was still being recorded."

"And yet the interview continued."

"I was telling him," said Bean, "about the incompetence of the teachers here at Command School."

"Incompetence?"

"Our battles are always against exceptionally stupid computer opponents. And then the teachers insist on going through long, tedious analyses of these mock combats, even though no enemy could possibly behave as stupidly and predictably as these simulations do. I was suggesting that the only way for us to get decent competition here is if you divide us into two groups and have us fight each other."

The two officers looked at each other. "Interesting point," said the general.

"Moot," said the admiral. "Ender Wiggin is about to be introduced into your game. We thought you'd want to be there to greet him."

"Yes," said Bean. "I do."

"I'll take you," said the admiral.

"Let's talk," the general said to Graff.

On the way, the admiral said little, and Bean could answer his chat without thought. It was a good thing. For he was in turmoil over the things that Graff had told him. It was almost not a surprise that Locke and Demosthenes were Ender's siblings. If they were as intelligent as Ender, it was inevitable that they would rise into prominence, and the nets allowed them to conceal their identity enough to accomplish it while they were still young. But part of the reason Bean was drawn to them had to be the sheer familiarity of their voices. They must have sounded like Ender, in that subtle way in which people who have lived long together pick up nuances of speech from each other. Bean didn't realize it consciously, but unconsciously it would have made him more alert to those essays. He should have known, and at some level he did know.

But the other, that Nikolai was really his brother -- how could he believe that? It was as if Graff had read his heart and found the lie that would penetrate most deeply into his soul and told it to him. I'm Greek? My brother happened to be in my launch group, the boy who became my dearest friend? Twins? Parents who love me?

Julian Delphiki?

No, I can't believe this. Graff has never dealt honestly with us. Graff was the one who did not lift a finger to protect Ender from Bonzo. Graff does nothing except to accomplish some manipulative purpose.

My name is Bean. Poke gave me that name, and I won't give it up in exchange for a lie.

They heard his voice, first, talking to a technician in another room. "How can I work with squadron leaders I never see?"

"And why would you need to see them?" asked the technician.

"To know who they are, how they think --"

"You'll learn who they are and how they think from the way they work with the simulator. But even so, I think you won't be concerned. They're listening to you right now. Put on the headset so you can hear them."

They all trembled with excitement, knowing that he would soon hear their voices as they now heard his.

"Somebody say something," said Petra.

"Wait till he gets the headset on," said Dink.

"How will we know?" asked Vlad.

"Me first," said Alai.

A pause. A new faint hiss in their earphones.

"Salaam," Alai whispered.

"Alai," said Ender.

"And me," said Bean. "The dwarf."

"Bean," said Ender.

Yes, thought Bean, as the others talked to him. That's who I am. That's the name that is spoken by the people who know me.

CHAPTER 23 -- ENDER'S GAME

"General, you are the Strategos. You have the authority to do this, and you have the obligation."

"I don't need disgraced former Battle School commandants to tell me my obligations."

"If you do not arrest the Polemarch and his conspirators --"

"Colonel Graff, if I *do* strike first, then I will bear the blame for the war that ensues."

"Yes, you would, sir. Now tell me, which would be the better outcome -- everybody blames you, but we win the war, or nobody blames you, because you've been stood up against a wall and shot after the Polemarch's coup results in worldwide Russian hegemony?"

"I will not fire the first shot."

"A military commander not willing to strike preemptively when he has firm intelligence --"

"The politics of the thing --"

"If you let them win it's the end of politics!"

"The Russians stopped being the bad guys back in the twentieth century!"

"Whoever is doing the bad things, that's the bad guy. You're the sheriff, sir, whether people approve of you or not. Do your job."

With Ender there, Bean immediately stepped back into his place among the toon leaders. No one mentioned it to him. He had been the leading commander, he had trained them well, but Ender had always been the natural commander of this group, and now that he was here, Bean was small again.

And rightly so, Bean knew. He had led them well, but Ender made him look like a novice. It wasn't that Ender's strategies were better than Bean's -- they weren't, really. Different sometimes, but more often Bean watched Ender do exactly what he would have done.

The important difference was in the way he led the others. He had their fierce devotion instead of the ever-so-slightly-resentful obedience Bean got from them, which helped from the start. But he also earned that devotion by noticing, not just what was going on in the battle, but what was going on in his commanders' minds. He was stern, sometimes even snappish, making it clear that he expected better than their best. And yet he had a way of giving an intonation to innocuous words, showing appreciation, admiration, closeness. They felt known by the one whose honor they needed. Bean simply did not know how to do that. His encouragement was always more obvious, a bit heavy-handed. It meant less to them because it felt more calculated. It *was* more calculated. Ender was just ... himself. Authority came from him like breath.

They flipped a genetic switch in me and made me an intellectual athlete. I can get the ball into the goal from anywhere on the field. But knowing *when* to kick. Knowing how to forge a team out of a bunch of players. What switch was it that was flipped in Ender Wiggin's genes? Or is that something deeper than the mechanical genius of the body? Is there a spirit, and is what Ender has a gift from God? We follow him like disciples. We look to him to draw water from the rock.

Can I learn to do what he does? Or am I to be like so many of the military writers I've studied, condemned to be second-raters in the field, remembered only because of their chronicles and explanations of other commanders' genius? Will I write a book after this, telling all about how Ender did it?

Let Ender write that book. Or Graff. I have work to do here, and when it's done, I'll choose my own work and do it as well as I can. If I'm remembered only because I was one of Ender's companions, so be it. Serving with Ender is its own reward.

But ah, how it stung to see how happy the others were, and how they paid no attention to him at all, except to tease him like a little brother, like a mascot. How they must have hated it when he was their leader.

And the worst thing was, that's how Ender treated him, too. Not that any of them were ever allowed to see Ender. But during their long separation, Ender had apparently forgotten how he once relied on Bean. It was Petra that he leaned on most, and Alai, and Dink, and Shen. The ones who had never been in an army with him. Bean and the other toon leaders from Dragon Army were still used, still trusted, but when there was something hard to do, something that required creative flair, Ender never thought of Bean.

Didn't matter. Couldn't think about that. Because Bean knew that along with his primary assignment as one of the squadron chiefs, he had another, deeper work to do. He had to watch the whole flow of each battle, ready to step in at any moment, should Ender falter. Ender seemed not to guess that Bean had that kind of trust from the teachers, but Bean knew it, and if sometimes it made him a little distracted in fulfilling his official assignments, if sometimes Ender grew impatient with him for being a little late, a little inattentive, that was to be expected. For what Ender did not know was that at any moment, if the supervisor signaled him, Bean could take over and continue Ender's plan, watching over all of the squadron leaders, saving the game.

At first, that assignment seemed empty -- Ender was healthy, alert. But then came the change.

It was the day after Ender mentioned to them, casually, that he had a different teacher from theirs. He referred to him as "Mazer" once too often, and Crazy Tom said, "He must have gone through hell, growing up with that name."

"When he was growing up," said Ender, "the name wasn't famous."

"Anybody that old is dead," said Shen.

"Not if he was put on a lightspeed ship for a lot of years and then brought back."

That's when it dawned on them. "Your teacher is *the* Mazer Rackham?"

"You know how they say he's a brilliant hero?" said Ender.

Of course they knew.

"What they don't mention is, he's a complete hard-ass."

And then the new simulation began and they got back to work.

Next day, Ender told them that things were changing. "So far we've been playing against the computer or against each other. But starting now, every few days Mazer himself and a team of experienced pilots will control the opposing fleet. Anything goes."

A series of tests, with Mazer Rackham himself as the opponent. It smelled fishy to Bean.

These aren't tests, these are setups, preparations for the conditions that might come when they face the actual Bugger fleet near their home planet.

The I.F. is getting preliminary information back from the expeditionary fleet, and they're preparing us for what the Buggers are actually going to throw at us when battle is joined.

The trouble was, no matter how bright Mazer Rackham and the other officers might be, they were still human. When the real battle came, the Buggers were bound to show them things that humans simply couldn't think of.

Then came the first of these "tests" -- and it was embarrassing how juvenile the strategy was. A big globe formation, surrounding a single ship.

In this battle it became clear that Ender knew things that he wasn't telling them. For one thing, he told them to ignore the ship in the center of the globe. It was a decoy. But how could Ender know that? Because he knew that the Buggers would *show* a single ship like that, and it was a lie. Which means that the Buggers expect us to go for that one ship.

Except, of course, that this was not really the Buggers, this was Mazer Rackham. So why would Rackham expect the Buggers to expect humans to strike for a single ship?

Bean thought back to those vids that Ender had watched over and over in Battle School -- all the propaganda film of the Second Invasion.

They never showed the battle because there wasn't one. Nor did Mazer Rackham command a strike force with a brilliant strategy. Mazer Rackham hit a single ship and the war was over. That's why there's no video of hand-to-hand combat. Mazer Rackham killed the queen. And now he expects the Buggers to show a central ship as a decoy, because that's how we won last time.

Kill the queen, and all the Buggers are defenseless. Mindless. That's what the vids meant. Ender knows that, but he also knows that the Buggers know that we know it, so he doesn't fall for their sucker bait.

The second thing that Ender knew and they didn't was the use of a weapon that hadn't been in any of their simulations till this first test. Ender called it "Dr. Device" and then said nothing more about

it -- until he ordered Alai to use it where the enemy fleet was most concentrated. To their surprise, the thing set off a chain reaction that leapt from ship to ship, until all but the most outlying Formic ships were destroyed. And it was an easy matter to mop up those stragglers. The playing field was clear when they finished.

"Why was their strategy so stupid?" asked Bean.

"That's what I was wondering," said Ender. "But we didn't lose a ship, so that's OK."

Later, Ender told them what Mazer said -- they were simulating a whole invasion sequence, and so he was taking the simulated enemy through a learning curve. "Next time they'll have learned. It won't be so easy."

Bean heard that and it filled him with alarm. An invasion sequence? Why a scenario like that? Why not warmups before a single battle?

Because the Buggers have more than one world, thought Bean. Of course they do. They found Earth and expected to turn it into yet another colony, just as they've done before.

We have more than one fleet. One for each Formic world.

And the reason they can learn from battle to battle is because they, too, have faster-than-light communication across interstellar space.

All of Bean's guesses were confirmed. He also knew the secret behind these tests. Mazer Rackham wasn't commanding a simulated Bugger fleet. It was a real battle, and Rackham's only function was to watch how it flowed and then coach Ender afterward on what the enemy strategies meant and how to counter them in future.

That was why they were giving most of their commands orally. They were being transmitted to real crews of real ships who followed their orders and fought real battles. Any ship we lose, thought Bean, means that grown men and women have died. Any carelessness on our part takes lives. Yet they don't tell us this precisely because we can't afford to be burdened with that knowledge. In wartime, commanders have always had to learn the concept of "acceptable losses." But those who keep their humanity never really accept the idea of acceptability, Bean understood that. It gnaws at them. So they protect us child-soldiers by keeping us convinced that it's only games and tests.

Therefore I can't let on to anyone that I do know. Therefore I must accept the losses without a word, without a visible qualm. I must try to block out of my mind the people who will die from our boldness, whose sacrifice is not of a mere counter in a game, but of their lives.

The "tests" came every few days, and each battle lasted longer. Alai joked that they ought to be fitted with diapers so they didn't have to be distracted when their bladder got full during a battle. Next day, they were fitted out with catheters. It was Crazy Tom who put a stop to that. "Come on, just get us a jar to pee in. We can't play this game with something hanging off our dicks." Jars it

was, after that. Bean never heard of anyone using one, though. And though he wondered what they provided for Petra, no one ever had the courage to brave her wrath by asking.

Bean began to notice some of Ender's mistakes pretty early on. For one thing, Ender was relying too much on Petra. She always got command of the core force, watching a hundred different things at once, so that Ender could concentrate on the feints, the ploys, the tricks. Couldn't Ender see that Petra, a perfectionist, was getting eaten alive by guilt and shame over every mistake she made? He was so good with people, and yet he seemed to think she was really tough, instead of realizing that toughness was an act she put on to hide her intense anxiety. Every mistake weighed on her. She wasn't sleeping well, and it showed up as she got more and more fatigued during battles.

But then, maybe the reason Ender didn't realize what he was doing to her was that he, too, was tired. So were all of them. Fading a little under the pressure, and sometimes a lot. Getting more fatigued, more error-prone as the tests got harder, as the odds got longer.

Because the battles were harder with each new "test," Ender was forced to leave more and more decisions up to others. Instead of smoothly carrying out Ender's detailed commands, the squadron leaders had more and more of the battle to carry on their own shoulders. For long sequences, Ender was too busy in one part of the battle to give new orders in another. The squadron leaders who were affected began to use crosstalk to determine their tactics until Ender noticed them again. And Bean was grateful to find that, while Ender never gave him the interesting assignments, some of the others talked to him when Ender's attention was elsewhere. Crazy Tom and Hot Soup came up with their own plans, but they routinely ran them past Bean. And since, in each battle, he was spending half his attention observing and analyzing Ender's plan, Bean was able to tell them, with pretty good accuracy, what they should do to help make the overall plan work out. Now and then Ender praised Tom or Soup for decisions that came from Bean's advice. It was the closest thing to praise that Bean heard.

The other toon leaders and the older kids simply didn't turn to Bean at all. He understood why; they must have resented it greatly when the teachers placed Bean above them during the time before Ender was brought in. Now that they had their true commander, they were never again going to do anything that smacked of subservience to Bean. He understood -- but that didn't keep it from stinging.

Whether or not they wanted him to oversee their work, whether or not his feelings were hurt, that was still his assignment and he was determined never to be caught unprepared. As the pressure became more and more intense, as they became wearier and wearier, more irritable with each other, less generous in their assessment of each other's work, Bean became all the more attentive because the chances of error were all the greater.

One day Petra fell asleep during battle. She had let her force drift too far into a vulnerable position, and the enemy took advantage, tearing her squadron to bits. Why didn't she give the order to fall back? Worse yet, Ender didn't notice soon enough, either. It was Bean who told him: Something's wrong with Petra.

Ender called out to her. She didn't answer. Ender flipped control of her two remaining ships to Crazy Tom and then tried to salvage the overall battle. Petra had, as usual, occupied the core position, and the loss of most of her large squadron was a devastating blow. Only because the enemy was overconfident during mop-up was Ender able to lay a couple of traps and regain the initiative. He won, but with heavy losses.

Petra apparently woke up near the end of the battle and found her controls cut off, with no voice until it was all over. Then her microphone came on again and they could hear her crying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Tell Ender I'm sorry, he can't hear me, I'm so sorry ..."

Bean got to her before she could return to her room. She was staggering along the tunnel, leaning against the wall and crying, using her hands to find her way because she couldn't see through her tears. Bean came up and touched her. She shrugged off his hand.

"Petra," said Bean. "Fatigue is fatigue. You can't stay awake when your brain shuts down."

"It was **my** brain that shut down! You don't know how that feels because you're always so smart you could do all our jobs and play chess while you're doing it!"

"Petra, he was relying on you too much, he never gave you a break --"

"He doesn't take breaks either, and I don't see him --"

"Yes you **do**. It was obvious there was something wrong with your squadron for several seconds before somebody called his attention to it. And even then, he tried to rouse you before assigning control to somebody else. If he'd acted faster you would have had six ships left, not just two."

"**You** pointed it out to him. You were watching me. Checking up on me."

"Petra, I watch everybody."

"You said you'd trust me, but you don't. And you shouldn't, nobody should trust me."

She broke into uncontrollable sobbing, leaning against the stone of the wall.

A couple of officers showed up then, led her away. Not to her room.

Graff called him in soon afterward. "You handled it just right," said Graff. "That's what you're there for."

"I wasn't quick either," said Bean.

"You were watching. You saw where the plan was breaking down, you called Ender's attention to it. You did your job. The other kids don't realize it and I know that has to gall you --"

"I don't care what they notice --"

"But you did the job. On that battle you get the save."

"Whatever the hell that means."

"It's baseball. Oh yeah. That wasn't big on the streets of Rotterdam."

"Can I please go sleep now?"

"In a minute. Bean, Ender's getting tired. He's making mistakes. It's all the more important that you watch everything. Be there for him. You saw how Petra was."

"We're all getting fatigued."

"Well, so is Ender. Worse than anyone. He cries in his sleep. He has strange dreams. He's talking about how Mazer seems to know what he's planning, spying on his dreams."

"You telling me he's going crazy?"

"I'm telling you that the only person he pushed harder than Petra is himself. Cover for him, Bean. Back him up."

"I already am."

"You're angry all the time, Bean."

Graff's words startled him. At first he thought, No I'm not! Then he thought, Am I?

"Ender isn't using you for anything important, and after having run the show that has to piss you off, Bean. But it's not Ender's fault. Mazer has been telling Ender that he has doubts about your ability to handle large numbers of ships. That's why you haven't been getting the complicated, interesting assignments. Not that Ender takes Mazer's word for it. But everything you do, Ender sees it through the lens of Mazer's lack of confidence."

"Mazer Rackham thinks I --"

"Mazer Rackham knows exactly what you are and what you can do. But we had to make sure Ender didn't assign you something so complicated you couldn't keep track of the overall flow of the game. And we had to do it without telling Ender you're his backup."

"So why are you telling me this?"

"When this test is over and you go on to real commands, we'll tell Ender the truth about what you were doing, and why Mazer said what he said. I know it means a lot to you to have Ender's confidence, and you don't feel like you have it, and so I wanted you to know why. We did it."

"Why this sudden bout of honesty?"

"Because I think you'll do better knowing it."

"I'll do better **believing** it whether it's true or not. You could be lying. So do I really know anything at all from this conversation?"

"Believe what you want, Bean."

Petra didn't come to practice for a couple of days. When she came back, of course Ender didn't give her the heavy assignments anymore. She did well at the assignments she had, but her ebullience was gone. Her heart was broken.

But dammit, she had **slept** for a couple of days. They were all just the tiniest bit jealous of her for that, even though they'd never willingly trade places with her. Whether they had any particular god in mind, they all prayed: Let it not happen to me. Yet at the same time they also prayed the opposite prayer: Oh, let me sleep, let me have a day in which I don't have to think about this game.

The tests went on. How many worlds did these bastards colonize before they got to Earth? Bean wondered. And are we sure we have them all? And what good does it do to destroy their fleets when we don't have the forces there to occupy the defeated colonies? Or do we just leave our ships there, shooting down anything that tries to boost from the surface of the planet?

Petra wasn't the only one to blow out. Vlad went catatonic and couldn't be roused from his bunk. It took three days for the doctors to get him awake again, and unlike Petra, he was out for the duration. He just couldn't concentrate.

Bean kept waiting for Crazy Tom to follow suit, but despite his nickname, he actually seemed to get saner as he got wearier. Instead it was Fly Molo who started laughing when he lost control of his squadron. Ender cut him off immediately, and for once he put Bean in charge of Fly's ships. Fly was back the next day, no explanation, but everyone understood that he wouldn't be given crucial assignments now.

And Bean became more and more aware of Ender's decreasing alertness. His orders came after longer and longer pauses now, and a couple of times his orders weren't clearly stated. Bean immediately translated them into a more comprehensible form, and Ender never knew there had been confusion. But the others were finally becoming aware that Bean was following the whole battle, not just his part of it. Perhaps they even saw how Bean would ask a question during a battle, make some comment that alerted Ender to something that he needed to be aware of, but never in a way that sounded like Bean was criticizing anybody. After the battles one or two of the older kids

would speak to Bean. Nothing major. Just a hand on his shoulder, on his back, and a couple of words. "Good game." "Good work." "Keep it up." "Thanks, Bean."

He hadn't realized how much he needed the honor of others until he finally got it.

"Bean, this next game, I think you should know something."

"What?"

Colonel Graff hesitated. "We couldn't get Ender awake this morning. He's been having nightmares. He doesn't eat unless we make him. He bites his hand in his sleep -- bites it bloody. And today we couldn't get him to wake up. We were able to hold off on the ... test ... so he's going to be in command, as usual, but ... not as usual."

"I'm ready. I always am."

"Yeah, but ... look, advance word on this test is that it's ... there's no ..."

"It's hopeless."

"Anything you can do to help. Any suggestion."

"This Dr. Device thing, Ender hasn't let us use it in a long time."

"The enemy learned enough about how it works that they never let their ships get close enough together for a chain reaction to spread. It takes a certain amount of mass to be able to maintain the field. Basically, right now it's just ballast. Useless."

"It would have been nice if you'd told *me* how it works before now."

"There are people who don't want us to tell you anything, Bean. You have a way of using every scrap of information to guess ten times more than we want you to know. It makes them a little leery of giving you those scraps in the first place."

"Colonel Graff, you know that I know that these battles are real. Mazer Rackham isn't making them up. When we lose ships, real men die."

Graff looked away.

"And these are men that Mazer Rackham knows, neh?"

Graff nodded slightly.

"You don't think Ender can sense what Mazer is feeling? I don't know the guy, maybe he's like a rock, but *I* think that when he does his critiques with Ender, he's letting his ... what, his anguish... Ender feels it. Because Ender is a lot more tired *after* a critique than before it. He may not know what's really going on, but he knows that something terrible is at stake. He knows that Mazer Rackham is really upset with every mistake Ender makes."

"Have you found some way to sneak into Ender's room?"

"I know how to listen to Ender. I'm not wrong about Mazer, am I?"

Graff shook his head.

"Colonel Graff, what you don't realize, what nobody seems to remember -- that last game in Battle School, where Ender turned his army over to me. That wasn't a strategy. He was quitting. He was through. He was on strike. You didn't find that out because you graduated him. The thing with Bonzo finished him. I think Mazer Rackham's anguish is doing the same thing to him now. I think even when Ender doesn't *consciously* know that he's killed somebody, he knows it deep down, and it burns in his heart."

Graff looked at him sharply.

"I know Bonzo was dead. I saw him. I've seen death before, remember? You don't get your nose jammed into your brain and lose two gallons of blood and get up and walk away. You never told Ender that Bonzo was dead, but you're a fool if you think he doesn't know. And he knows, thanks to Mazer, that every ship we've lost means good men are dead. He can't stand it, Colonel Graff."

"You're more insightful than you get credit for, Bean," said Graff.

"I know, I'm the cold inhuman intellect, right?" Bean laughed bitterly. "Genetically altered, therefore I'm just as alien as the Buggers."

Graff blushed. "No one's ever said that."

"You mean you've never said it in front of me. Knowingly. What you don't seem to understand is, sometimes you have to just tell people the truth and ask them to do the thing you want, instead of trying to trick them into it."

"Are you saying we should tell Ender the game is real?"

"No! Are you insane? If he's this upset when the knowledge is unconscious, what do you think would happen if he *knew* that he knew? He'd freeze up."

"But you don't freeze up. Is that it? You should command this next battle?"

"You still don't get it, Colonel Graff. I don't freeze up because it isn't my battle. I'm helping. I'm watching. But I'm free. Because it's Ender's game."

Bean's simulator came to life.

"It's time," said Graff. "Good luck."

"Colonel Graff, Ender may go on strike again. He may walk out on it. He might give up. He might tell himself, It's only a game and I'm sick of it, I don't care what they do to me, I'm done. That's in him, to do that. When it seems completely unfair and utterly pointless."

"What if I promised him it was the last one?"

Bean put on his headset as he asked, "Would it be true?"

Graff nodded.

"Yeah, well, I don't think it would make much difference. Besides, he's Mazer's student now, isn't he?"

"I guess. Mazer was talking about telling him that it was the final exam."

"Mazer is Ender's teacher now," Bean mused. "And you're left with me. The kid you didn't want."

Graff blushed again. "That's right," he said. "Since you seem to know everything. I didn't want you."

Even though Bean already knew it, the words still hurt.

"But Bean," said Graff, "the thing is, I was wrong." He put a hand on Bean's shoulder and left the room.

Bean logged on. He was the last of the squadron leaders to do so.

"Are you there?" asked Ender over the headsets.

"All of us," said Bean. "Kind of late for practice this morning, aren't you?"

"Sorry," said Ender. "I overslept."

They laughed. Except Bean.

Ender took them through some maneuvers, warming up for the battle. And then it was time. The display cleared.

Bean waited, anxiety gnawing at his gut.

The enemy appeared in the display.

Their fleet was deployed around a planet that loomed in the center of the display. There had been battles near planets before, but every other time, the world was near the edge of the display -- the enemy fleet always tried to lure them away from the planet.

This time there was no luring. Just the most incredible swarm of enemy ships imaginable. Always staying a certain distance away from each other, thousands and thousands of ships followed random, unpredictable, intertwining paths, together forming a cloud of death around the planet.

This is the home planet, thought Bean. He almost said it aloud, but caught himself in time. This is a *simulation* of the Bugger defense of their home planet.

They've had generations to prepare for us to come. All the previous battles were nothing. These Formics can lose any number of individual Buggers and they don't care. All that matters is the queen. Like the one Mazer Rackham killed in the Second Invasion. And they haven't put a queen at risk in any of these battles. Until now.

That's why they're swarming. There's a queen here.

Where?

On the planet surface, thought Bean. The idea is to keep us from getting to the planet surface.

So that's precisely where we need to go. Dr. Device needs mass. Planets have mass. Pretty simple.

Except that there was no way to get this small force of human ships through that swarm and near enough to the planet to deploy Dr. Device. For if there was anything that history taught, it was this: Sometimes the other side is irresistibly strong, and then the only sensible course of action is to retreat in order to save your force to fight another day.

In this war, however, there would be no other day. There was no hope of retreat. The decisions that lost this battle, and therefore this war, were made two generations ago when these ships were launched, an inadequate force from the start. The commanders who set this fleet in motion may not even have known, then, that this was the Buggers' home world. It was no one's fault. They simply didn't have enough of a force even to make a dent in the enemy's defenses. It didn't matter how brilliant Ender was. When you have only one guy with a shovel, you can't build a dike to hold back the sea.

No retreat, no possibility of victory, no room for delay or maneuver, no reason for the enemy to do anything but continue to do what they were doing.

There were only twenty starships in the human fleet, each with four fighters. And they were the oldest design, sluggish compared to some of the fighters they'd had in earlier battles. It made sense -- the Bugger home world was probably the farthest away, so the fleet that got there now had left before any of the other fleets. Before the better ships came on line.

Eighty fighters. Against five thousand, maybe ten thousand enemy ships. It was impossible to determine the number. Bean saw how the display kept losing track of individual enemy ships, how the total count kept fluctuating. There were so many it was overloading the system. They kept winking in and out like fireflies.

A long time passed -- many seconds, perhaps a minute. By now Ender usually had them all deployed, ready to move. But still there was nothing from him but silence.

A light blinked on Bean's console. He knew what it meant. All he had to do was press a button, and control of the battle would be his. They were offering it to him, because they thought that Ender had frozen up.

He hasn't frozen up, thought Bean. He hasn't panicked. He has simply understood the situation, exactly as I understand it. There *is* no strategy. Only he doesn't see that this is simply the fortunes of war, a disaster that can't be helped. What he sees is a test set before him by his teachers, by Mazer Rackham, a test so absurdly unfair that the only reasonable course of action is to refuse to take it.

They were so clever, keeping the truth from him all this time. But now was it going to backfire on them. If Ender understood that it was not a game, that the real war had come down to this moment, then he might make some desperate effort, or with his genius he might even come up with an answer to a problem that, as far as Bean could see, had no solution. But Ender did not understand the reality, and so to him it was like that day in the battleroom, facing two armies, when Ender turned the whole thing over to Bean and, in effect, refused to play.

For a moment Bean was tempted to scream the truth. It's not a game, it's the real thing, this is the last battle, we've lost this war after all! But what would be gained by that, except to panic everyone?

Yet it was absurd to even contemplate pressing that button to take over control himself. Ender hadn't collapsed or failed. The battle was unwinnable; it should not even be fought. The lives of the men on those ships were not to be wasted on such a hopeless Charge of the Light Brigade. I'm not General Burnside at Fredericksburg. I don't send my men off to senseless, hopeless, meaningless death.

If I had a plan, I'd take control. I have no plan. So for good or ill, it's Ender's game, not mine.

And there was another reason for not taking over.

Bean remembered standing over the supine body of a bully who was too dangerous to ever be tamed, telling Poke, Kill him now, kill him.

I was right. And now, once again, the bully must be killed. Even though I don't know how to do it, we *can't* lose this war. I don't know how to win it, but I'm not God, I don't see everything. And maybe Ender doesn't *see* a solution either, but if anyone can find one, if anyone can make it happen, it's Ender.

Maybe it isn't hopeless. Maybe there's some way to get down to the planet's surface and wipe the Buggers out of the universe. Now is the time for miracles. For Ender, the others will do their best work. If I took over, they'd be so upset, so distracted that even if I came up with a plan that had some kind of chance, it would never work because their hearts wouldn't be in it.

Ender has to try. If he doesn't, we all die. Because even if they weren't going to send another fleet against us, after this they'll **have** to send one. Because we beat all their fleets in every battle till now. If we don't win this one, with finality, destroying their capability to make war against us, then they'll be back. And this time they'll have figured out how to make Dr. Device themselves.

We have only the one world. We have only the one hope.

Do it, Ender.

There flashed into Bean's mind the words Ender said in their first day of training as Dragon Army: Remember, the enemy's gate is down. In Dragon Army's last battle, when there was no hope, that was the strategy that Ender had used, sending Bean's squad to press their helmets against the floor around the gate and win. Too bad there was no such cheat available now.

Deploying Dr. Device against the planet's surface to blow the whole thing up, that might do the trick. You just couldn't get there from here.

It was time to give up. Time to get out of the game, to tell them not to send children to do grownups' work. It's hopeless. We're done.

"Remember," Bean said ironically, "the enemy's gate is down."

Fly Molo, Hot Soup, Vlad, Dumper, Crazy Tom -- they grimly laughed. They had been in Dragon Army. They remembered how those words were used before.

But Ender didn't seem to get the joke.

Ender didn't seem to understand that there was no way to get Dr. Device to the planet's surface.

Instead, his voice came into their ears, giving them orders. He pulled them into a tight formation, cylinders within cylinders.

Bean wanted to shout, Don't do it! There are real men on those ships, and if you send them in, they'll die, a sacrifice with no hope of victory.

But he held his tongue, because, in the back of his mind, in the deepest corner of his heart, he still had hope that Ender might do what could not be done. And as long as there was such a hope, the lives of those men were, by their own choice when they set out on this expedition, expendable.

Ender set them in motion, having them dodge here and there through the ever-shifting formations of the enemy swarm.

Surely the enemy sees what we're doing, thought Bean. Surely they see how every third or fourth move takes us closer and closer to the planet.

At any moment the enemy could destroy them quickly by concentrating their forces. So why weren't they doing it?

One possibility occurred to Bean. The Buggers didn't dare concentrate their forces close to Ender's tight formation, because the moment they drew their ships that close together, Ender could use Dr. Device against them.

And then he thought of another explanation. Could it be that there were simply too many Bigger ships? Could it be that the queen or queens had to spend all their concentration, all their mental strength just keeping ten thousand ships swarming through space without getting too close to each other?

Unlike Ender, the Bigger queen couldn't turn control of her ships over to subordinates. She **had** no subordinates. The individual Buggers; were like her hands and her feet. Now she had hundreds of hands and feet, or perhaps thousands of them, all wiggling at once.

That's why she wasn't responding intelligently. Her forces were too numerous. That's why she wasn't making the obvious moves, setting traps, blocking Ender from taking his cylinder ever closer to the planet with every swing and dodge and shift that he made.

In fact, the maneuvers the Buggers were making were ludicrously wrong. For as Ender penetrated deeper and deeper into the planet's gravity well, the Buggers were building up a thick wall of forces **behind** Ender's formation.

They're blocking our retreat!

At once Bean understood a third and most important reason for what was happening. The Buggers had learned the wrong lessons from the previous battles. Up to now, Ender's strategy had always been to ensure the survival of as many human ships as possible. He had always left himself a line of retreat. The Buggers, with their huge numerical advantage, were finally in a position to guarantee that the human forces would not get away.

There was no way, at the beginning of this battle, to predict that the Buggers would make such a mistake. Yet throughout history, great victories had come as much because of the losing army's errors as because of the winner's brilliance in battle. The Buggers have finally, finally learned that we humans value each and every individual human life. We don't throw our forces away because every soldier is the queen of a one-member hive. But they've learned this lesson just in time for it to be hopelessly wrong -- for we humans **do**, when the cause is sufficient, spend our own lives. We throw ourselves onto the grenade to save our buddies in the foxhole. We rise out of the trenches and charge the entrenched enemy and die like maggots under a blowtorch. We strap bombs on our

bodies and blow ourselves up in the midst of our enemies. We are, when the cause is sufficient, insane.

They don't believe we'll use Dr. Device because the only way to use it is to destroy our own ships in the process. From the moment Ender started giving orders, it was obvious to everyone that this was a suicide run. These ships were not made to enter an atmosphere. And yet to get close enough to the planet to set off Dr. Device, they had to do exactly that.

Get down into the gravity well and launch the weapon just before the ship burns up. And if it works, if the planet is torn apart by whatever force it is in that terrible weapon, the chain reaction will reach out into space and take out any ships that might happen to survive.

Win or lose, there'd be no human survivors from this battle.

They've never seen us make a move like that. They don't understand that, yes, humans will always act to preserve their own lives -- except for the times when they don't. In the Buggers' experience, autonomous beings do not sacrifice themselves. Once they understood our autonomy, the seed of their defeat was sown.

In all of Ender's study of the Buggers, in all his obsession with them over the years of his training, did he somehow come to **know** that they would make such deadly mistakes?

I did not know it. I would not have pursued this strategy. I **had** no strategy. Ender was the only commander who could have known, or guessed, or unconsciously hoped that when he flung out his forces the enemy would falter, would trip, would fall, would fail.

Or **did** he know at all? Could it be that he reached the same conclusion as I did, that this battle was unwinnable? That he decided not to play it out, that he went on strike, that he quit? And then my bitter words, "the enemy's gate is down," triggered his futile, useless gesture of despair, sending his ships to certain doom because he did not know that there were real ships out there, with real men aboard, that he was sending to their deaths? Could it be that he was as surprised as I was by the mistakes of the enemy? Could our victory be an accident?

No. For even if my words provoked Ender into action, he was still the one who chose **this** formation, **these** feints and evasions, **this** meandering route. It was Ender whose previous victories taught the enemy to think of us as one kind of creature, when we are really something quite different. He pretended all this time that humans were rational beings, when we are really the most terrible monsters these poor aliens could ever have conceived of in their nightmares. They had no way of knowing the story of blind Samson, who pulled down the temple on his own head to slay his enemies.

On those ships, thought Bean, there are individual men who gave up homes and families, the world of their birth, in order to cross a great swatch of the galaxy and make war on a terrible enemy. Somewhere along the way they're bound to understand that Ender's strategy requires them all to die. Perhaps they already have. And yet they obey and will continue to obey the orders that come to them. As in the famous Charge of the Light Brigade, these soldiers give up their lives,

trusting that their commanders are using them well. While we sit safely here in these simulator rooms, playing an elaborate computer game, they are obeying, dying so that all of humankind can live.

And yet we who command them, we children in these elaborate game machines, have no idea of their courage, their sacrifice. We cannot give them the honor they deserve, because we don't even know they exist.

Except for me.

There sprang into Bean's mind a favorite scripture of Sister Carlotta's. Maybe it meant so much to her because she had no children. She told Bean the story of Absalom's rebellion against his own father, King David. In the course of a battle, Absalom was killed. When they brought the news to David, it meant victory, it meant that no more of his soldiers would die. His throne was safe. His **life** was safe. But all he could think about was his son, his beloved son, his dead boy.

Bean ducked his head, so his voice would be heard only by the men under his command. And then, for just long enough to speak, he pressed the override that put his voice into the ears of all the men of that distant fleet. Bean had no idea how his voice would sound to them; would they hear his childish voice, or were the sounds distorted, so they would hear him as an adult, or perhaps as some metallic, machinelike voice? No matter. In some form the men of that distant fleet would hear his voice, transmitted faster than light, God knows how.

"O my son Absalom," Bean said softly, knowing for the first time the kind of anguish that could tear such words from a man's mouth. "My son, my son Absalom. Would God I could die for thee, O Absalom, my son. My sons!"

He had paraphrased it a little, but God would understand. Or if he didn't, Sister Carlotta would.

Now, thought Bean. Do it now, Ender. You're as close as you can get without giving away the game. They're beginning to understand their danger. They're concentrating their forces. They'll blow us out of the sky before our weapons can be launched --

"All right, everybody except Petra's squadron," said Ender. "Straight down, as fast as you can. Launch Dr. Device against the planet. Wait till the last possible second. Petra, cover as you can."

The squadron leaders, Bean among them, echoed Ender's commands to their own fleets. And then there was nothing to do but watch. Each ship was on its own.

The enemy understood now, and rushed to destroy the plummeting humans. Fighter after fighter was picked off by the inrushing ships of the Formic fleet. Only a few human fighters survived long enough to enter the atmosphere.

Hold on, thought Bean. Hold on as long as you can.

The ships that launched too early watched their Dr. Device burn up in the atmosphere before it could go off. A few other ships burned up themselves without launching.

Two ships were left. One was in Bean's squadron.

"Don't launch it," said Bean into his microphone, head down. "Set it off inside your ship. God be with you."

Bean had no way of knowing whether it was his ship or the other that did it. He only knew that both ships disappeared from the display without launching. And then the surface of the planet started to bubble. Suddenly a vast eruption licked outward toward the last of the human fighters, Petra's ships, on which there might or might not still be men alive to see death coming at them. To see their victory approach.

The simulator put on a spectacular show as the exploding planet chewed up all the enemy ships, engulfing them in the chain reaction. But long before the last ship was swallowed up, all the maneuvering had stopped. They drifted, dead. Like the dead Bugger ships in the vids of the Second Invasion. The queens of the hive had died on the planet's surface. The destruction of the remaining ships was a mere formality. The Buggers were already dead.

Bean emerged into the tunnel to find that the other kids were already there, congratulating each other and commenting on how cool the explosion effect was, and wondering if something like that could really happen.

"Yes," said Bean. "It could."

"As if you know," said Fly Molo, laughing.

"Of course I know it could happen," said Bean. "It *did* happen."

They looked at him uncomprehendingly. When did it happen? I never heard of anything like that. Where could they have tested that weapon against a planet? I know, they took out Neptune!

"It happened just now," said Bean. "It happened at the home world of the Buggers. We just blew it up. They're all dead."

They finally began to realize that he was serious. They fired objections at him. He explained about the faster-than-light communications device. They didn't believe him.

Then another voice entered the conversation. "It's called the ansible."

They looked up to see Colonel Graff standing a ways off, down the tunnel.

Is Bean telling the truth? Was that a real battle?

"They were all real," said Bean. "All the so-called tests. Real battles. Real victories. Right, Colonel Graff? We were fighting the real war all along."

"It's over now," said Graff. "The human race will continue. The Buggers won't."

They finally believed it, and became giddy with the realization. It's over. We won. We weren't practicing, we were actually commanders.

And then, at last, a silence fell.

"They're **all** dead?" asked Petra.

Bean nodded.

Again they looked at Graff. "We have reports. All life activity has ceased on all the other planets. They must have gathered their queens back on their home planet. When the queens die, the Buggers die. There is no enemy now."

Petra began to cry, leaning against the wall. Bean wanted to reach out to her, but Dink was there. Dink was the friend who held her, comforted her.

Some soberly, some exultantly, they went back to their barracks. Petra wasn't the only one who cried. But whether the tears were shed in anguish or in relief, no one could say for sure.

Only Bean did not return to his room, perhaps because Bean was the only one not surprised. He stayed out in the tunnel with Graff.

"How's Ender taking it?"

"Badly," said Graff. "We should have broken it to him more carefully, but there was no holding back. In the moment of victory."

"All your gambles paid off," said Bean.

"I know what happened, Bean," said Graff. "Why did you leave control with him? How did you know he'd come up with a plan?"

"I didn't," said Bean. "I only knew that I had no plan at all."

"But what you said -- 'the enemy's gate is down.' That's the plan Ender used."

"It wasn't a plan," said Bean. "Maybe it made him think of a plan. But it was him. It was Ender. You put your money on the right kid."

Graff looked at Bean in silence, then reached out and put a hand on Bean's head, tousled his hair a little. "I think perhaps you pulled each other across the finish line."

"It doesn't matter, does it?" said Bean. "It's finished, anyway. And so is the temporary unity of the human race."

"Yes," said Graff. He pulled his hand away, ran it through his own hair. "I believed in your analysis. I tried to give warning. *If* the Strategos heeded my advice, the Polemarch's men are getting arrested here on Eros and all over the fleet."

"Will they go peacefully?" asked Bean.

"We'll see," said Graff.

The sound of gunfire echoed from some distant tunnel.

"Guess not," said Bean.

They heard the sound of men running in step. And soon they saw them, a contingent of a dozen armed marines.

Bean and Graff watched them approach. "Friend or foe?"

"They all wear the same uniform," said Graff. "You're the one who called it, Bean. Inside those doors" -- he gestured toward the doors to the kids' quarters -- "those children are the spoils of war. In command of armies back on Earth, they're the hope of victory. *You* are the hope."

The soldiers came to a stop in front of Graff. "We're here to protect the children, sir," said their leader.

"From what?"

"The Polemarch's men seem to be resisting arrest, sir," said the soldier. "The Strategos has ordered that these children be kept safe at all costs."

Graff was visibly relieved to know which side these troops were on. "The girl is in that room over there. I suggest you consolidate them all into those two barrack rooms for the duration."

"Is this the kid who did it?" asked the soldier, indicating Bean.

"He's one of them."

"It was Ender Wiggin who did it," said Bean. "Ender was our commander."

"Is he in one of those rooms?" asked the soldier.

"He's with Mazer Rackham," said Graff. "And this one stays with me."

The soldier saluted. He began positioning his men in more advanced positions down the tunnel, with only a single guard outside each door to prevent the kids from going out and getting lost somewhere in the fighting.

Bean trotted along beside Graff as he headed purposefully down the tunnel, beyond the farthest of the guards.

"If the Strategos did this right, the ansibles have already been secured. I don't know about you, but I want to be where the news is coming in. And going out."

"Is Russian a hard language to learn?" asked Bean.

"Is that what passes for humor with you?" asked Graff.

"It was a simple question."

"Bean, you're a great kid, but shut up, OK?"

Bean laughed. "OK."

"You don't mind if I still call you Bean?"

"It's my name."

"Your name should have been Julian Delphiki. If you'd had a birth certificate, that's the name that would have been on it."

"You mean that was true?"

"Would I lie about something like that?"

Then, realizing the absurdity of what he had just said, they laughed. Laughed long enough to still be smiling when they passed the detachment of marines protecting the entrance to the ansible complex.

"You think anybody will ask me for military advice?" asked Bean. "Because I'm going to get into this war, even if I have to lie about my age and enlist in the marines."

CHAPTER 24 -- HOMECOMING

"I thought you'd want to know. Some bad news."

"There's no shortage of that, even in the midst of victory."

"When it became clear that the IDL had control of Battle School and was sending the kids home under I.F. protection, the New Warsaw Pact apparently did a little research and found that there was one student from Battle School who wasn't under our control. Achilles."

"But he was only there a couple of days."

"He passed our tests. He got in. He was the only one they could get."

"Did they? Get him?"

"All the security there was designed to keep inmates inside. Three guards dead, all the inmates released into the general population. They've all been recovered, except one."

"So he's loose."

"I wouldn't call it loose, exactly. They intend to use him."

"Do they know what he is?"

"No. His records were sealed. A juvenile, you see. They weren't coming for his dossier."

"They'll find out. They don't like serial killers in Moscow, either."

"He's hard to pin down. How many died before any of us suspected him?"

"The war is over for now."

"And the jockeying for advantage in the next war has begun."

"With any luck, Colonel Graff, I'll be dead by then."

"I'm not actually a colonel anymore, Sister Carlotta."

"They're really going to go ahead with that court-martial?"

"An investigation, that's all. An inquiry."

"I just don't understand why they have to find a scapegoat for victory."

"I'll be fine. The sun still shines on planet Earth."

"But never again on *their* tragic world."

"Is your God also their God, Sister Carlotta? Did he take them into heaven?"

"He's not *my* God, Mr. Graff. But I am his child, as are you. I don't know whether he looks at the Formics and sees them, too, as his children."

"Children. Sister Carlotta, the things I did to these children."

"You gave them a world to come home to."

"All but one of them."

It took days for the Polemarch's men to be subdued, but at last Fleetcom was entirely under the Strategos's command, and not one ship had been launched under rebel command. A triumph. The Hegemon resigned as part of the truce, but that only formalized what had already been the reality.

Bean stayed with Graff throughout the fighting, as they read every dispatch and listened to every report about what was happening elsewhere in the fleet and back on Earth. They talked through the unfolding situation, tried to read between the lines, interpreted what was happening as best they could. For Bean, the war with the Buggers was already behind him. All that mattered now was how things went on Earth. When a shaky truce was signed, temporarily ending the fighting, Bean knew that it would not last. He would be needed. Once he got to Earth, he could prepare himself to play his role. Ender's war is over, he thought. This next one will be mine.

While Bean was avidly following the news, the other kids were confined to their quarters under guard, and during the power failures in their part of Eros they did their cowering in darkness. Twice there were assaults on that section of the tunnels, but whether the Russians were trying to get at the kids or merely happened to probe in that area, looking for weaknesses, no one could guess.

Ender was under much heavier guard, but didn't know it. Utterly exhausted, and perhaps unwilling or unable to bear the enormity of what he had done, he remained unconscious for days.

Not till the fighting stopped did he come back to consciousness.

They let the kids get together then, their confinement over for now. Together they made the pilgrimage to the room where Ender had been under protection and medical care. They found him apparently cheerful, able to joke. But Bean could see a deep weariness, a sadness in Ender's eyes that it was impossible to ignore. The victory had cost him deeply, more than anybody.

More than me, thought Bean, even though I knew what I was doing, and he was innocent of any bad intent. He tortures himself, and I move on. Maybe because to me the death of Poke was more important than the death of an entire species that I never saw. I knew her -- she has stayed with me in my heart. The Buggers I never knew. How can I grieve for them?

Ender can.

After they filled Ender in on the news about what happened while he slept, Petra touched his hair. "You OK?" she asked. "You scared us. They said you were crazy, and we said *they* were crazy."

"I'm crazy," said Ender. "But I think I'm OK."

There was more banter, but then Ender's emotions overflowed and for the first time any of them could remember, they saw Ender cry. Bean happened to be standing near him, and when Ender reached out, it was Bean and Petra that he embraced. The touch of his hand, the embrace of his arm, they were more than Bean could bear. He also cried.

"I missed you," said Ender. "I wanted to see you so bad."

"You saw us pretty bad," said Petra. She was not crying. She kissed his cheek.

"I saw you magnificent," said Ender. "The ones I needed most, I used up soonest. Bad planning on my part."

"Everybody's OK now," said Dink. "Nothing was wrong with any of us that five days of cowering in blacked-out rooms in the middle of a war couldn't cure."

"I don't have to be your commander anymore, do I?" asked Ender. "I don't want to command anybody again."

Bean believed him. And believed also that Ender never *would* command in battle again. He might still have the talents that brought him to this place. But the most important ones didn't have to be used for violence. If the universe had any kindness in it, or even simple justice, Ender would never have to take another life. He had surely filled his quota.

"You don't have to command anybody," said Dink, "but you're always our commander."

Bean felt the truth of that. There was not one of them who would not carry Ender with them in their hearts, wherever they went, whatever they did.

What Bean didn't have the heart to tell them was that on Earth, both sides had insisted that they be given custody of the hero of the war, young Ender Wiggin, whose great victory had captured the popular imagination. Whoever had him would not only have the use of his fine military mind -- they thought -- but would also have the benefit of all the publicity and public adulation that surrounded him, that filled every mention of his name.

So as the political leaders worked out the truce, they reached a simple and obvious compromise. All the children from Battle School would be repatriated. Except Ender Wiggin.

Ender Wiggin would not be coming home. Neither party on Earth would be able to use him. That was the compromise.

And it had been proposed by Locke. By Ender's own brother.

When he learned that it made Bean seethe inside, the way he had when he thought Petra had betrayed Ender. It was wrong. It couldn't be borne.

Perhaps Peter Wiggin did it to keep Ender from becoming a pawn. To keep him free. Or perhaps he did it so that Ender could not use his celebrity to make his own play for political power. Was Peter Wiggin saving his brother, or eliminating a rival for power?

Someday I'll meet him and find out, thought Bean. And if he betrayed his brother, I'll destroy him.

When Bean shed his tears there in Ender's room, he was weeping for a cause the others did not yet know about. He was weeping because, as surely as the soldiers who died in those fighting ships, Ender would not be coming home from the war.

"So," said Alai, breaking the silence. "What do we do now? The Bugger War's over, and so's the war down there on Earth, and even the war here. What do we do now?"

"We're kids," said Petra. "They'll probably make us go to school. It's a law. You have to go to school till you're seventeen."

They all laughed until they cried again.

They saw each other off and on again over the next few days. Then they boarded several different cruisers and destroyers for the voyage back to Earth. Bean knew well why they traveled in separate ships. That way no one would ask why Ender wasn't on board. If Ender knew, before they left, that he was not going back to Earth, he said nothing about it.

Elena could hardly contain her joy when Sister Carlotta called, asking if she and her husband would both be at home in an hour. "I'm bringing you your son," she said.

Nikolai, Nikolai, Nikolai. Elena sang the name over and over again in her mind, with her lips. Her husband Julian, too, was almost dancing as he hurried about the house, making things ready. Nikolai had been so little when he left. Now he would be so much older. They would hardly know him. They would not understand what he had been through. But it didn't matter. They loved him. They would learn who he was all over again. They would not let the lost years get in the way of the years to come.

"I see the car!" cried Julian.

Elena hurriedly pulled the covers from the dishes, so that Nikolai could come into a kitchen filled with the freshest, purest food of his childhood memories. Whatever they ate in space, it couldn't be as good as this.

Then she ran to the door and stood beside her husband as they watched Sister Carlotta get out of the front seat.

Why didn't she ride in back with Nikolai?

No matter. The back door opened, and Nikolai emerged, unfolding his lanky young body. So tall he was growing! Yet still a boy. There was a little bit of childhood left for him.

Run to me, my son!

But he didn't run to her. He turned his back on his parents.

Ah. He was reaching into the back seat. A present, perhaps?

No. Another boy.

A smaller boy, but with the same face as Nikolai. Perhaps too careworn for a child so small, but with the same open goodness that Nikolai had always had. Nikolai was smiling so broadly he could not contain it. But the small one was not smiling. He looked uncertain. Hesitant.

"Julian," said her husband.

Why would he say his own name?

"Our second son," he said. "They didn't all die, Elena. One lived."

All hope of those little ones had been buried in her heart. It almost hurt to open that hidden place. She gasped at the intensity of it.

"Nikolai met him in Battle School," he went on. "I told Sister Carlotta that if we had another son, you meant to name him Julian."

"You knew," said Elena.

"Forgive me, my love. But Sister Carlotta wasn't sure then that he was ours. Or that he would ever be able to come home. I couldn't bear it, to tell you of the hope, only to break your heart later."

"I have two sons," she said.

"If you want him," said Julian. "His life has been hard. But he's a stranger here. He doesn't speak Greek. He's been told that he's coming just for a visit. That legally he is not our child, but rather a ward of the state. We don't have to take him in, if you don't want to, Elena."

"Hush, you foolish man," she said. Then, loudly, she called out to the approaching boys. "Here are my two sons, home from the wars! Come to your mother! I have missed you both so much, and for so many years!"

They ran to her then, and she held them in her arms, and her tears fell on them both, and her husband's hands rested upon both boys' heads.

Her husband spoke. Elena recognized his words at once, from the gospel of St. Luke. But because he had only memorized the passage in Greek, the little one did not understand him. No matter. Nikolai began to translate into Common, the language of the fleet, and almost at once the little one recognized the words, and spoke them correctly, from memory, as Sister Carlotta had once read it to him years before.

"Let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." Then the little one burst into tears and clung to his mother, and kissed his father's hand.

"Welcome home, little brother," said Nikolai. "I told you they were nice."

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One book was particularly useful in preparing this novel: Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton University Press, 1986). The essays are not all of identical quality, but they gave me a good idea of the writings that might be in the library in Battle School.

I have nothing but fond memories of Rotterdam, a city of kind and generous people. The callousness toward the poor shown in this novel would be impossible today, but the business of science fiction is sometimes to show impossible nightmares.

I owe individual thanks to:

Erin and Phillip Absher, for, among other things, the lack of vomiting on the shuttle, the size of the toilet tank, and the weight of the lid;

Jane Brady, Laura Morefield, Oliver Withstandley, Matt Tolton, Kathryn H. Kidd, Kristine A. Card, and others who read the advance manuscript and made suggestions and corrections. Some annoying contradictions between *Ender's Game* and this book were thereby averted; any that remain are not errors at all, but merely subtle literary effects designed to show the difference in perception and memory between the two accounts of the same event. As my programmer friends would say, there are no bugs, only features;

Tom Doherty, my publisher; Beth Meacham, my editor; and Barbara Bova, my agent, for responding so positively to the idea of this book when I proposed it as a collaborative project and then realized I wanted to write it entirely myself. And if I still think *Urchin* was the better title for this book, it doesn't mean that I don't agree that my second title, *Ender's Shadow*, is the more marketable one;

My assistants, Scott Allen and Kathleen Bellamy, who at various times defy gravity and perform other useful miracles;

My son Geoff, who, though he is no longer the five-year-old he was when I wrote the novel Ender's Game, is still the model for Ender Wiggin;

My wife, Kristine, and the children who were home during the writing of this book: Emily, Charlie Ben, and Zina. Their patience with me when I was struggling to figure out the right approach to this novel was surpassed only by their patience when I finally found it and became possessed by the story. When I brought Bean home to a loving family I knew what it should look like, because I see it every day.

THE SHADOW OF THE HEGEMON
by Orson Scott Card

To: Chamrajnagar%sacredriver@ifcom.gov

From: Locke%espinoza@polnet.gov

Re: What are you doing to protect the children?

Dear Admiral Chamrajnagar,

I was given your idname by a mutual friend who once worked for you but now is a glorified dispatcher -- I'm sure you know whom I mean. I realize that your primary responsibility now is not so much military as logistical, and your thoughts are turned to space rather than the political situation on Earth. After all, you decisively defeated the nationalist forces led by your predecessor in the League War, and that issue seems settled. The IF remains independent and for that we are all grateful.

What no one seems to understand is that peace on Earth is merely a temporary illusion. Not only is Russia's long-pent expansionism still a driving force, but also many other nations have aggressive designs on their neighbors. The forces of the Strategos are being disbanded, the Hegemony is rapidly losing all authority, and Earth is poised on the edge of cataclysm.

The most powerful resource of any nation in the wars to come will be the children trained in Battle, Tactical, and Command School. While it is perfectly appropriate for these children to serve their native countries in future wars, it is inevitable that at least some nations that lack such IF-certified geniuses or who believe that rivals have more-gifted commanders will inevitably take preemptive action, either to secure that enemy resource for their own use or, in any event, to deny the enemy the use of that resource. In short, these children are in grave danger of being kidnapped or killed.

I recognize that you have a hands-off policy toward events on Earth, but it was the IF that identified these children and trained them, thus making them targets. Whatever happens to these children, the IF has ultimate responsibility. It would go a long way toward protecting them if you were to issue an order placing these children under Fleet protection, warning any nation or group attempting to harm or interfere with them that they would face swift and harsh military retribution. Far from regarding this as interference in Earthside affairs, most nations would welcome this action, and, for whatever it is worth, you would have my complete support in all public forums.

I hope you will act immediately. There is no time to waste.

Respectfully,

Locke

Nothing looked right in Armenia when Petra Arkanian returned home. The mountains were dramatic, of course, but they had not really been part of her childhood experience. It was not until she got to Maralik that she began to see things that should mean something to her. Her father had met her in Terevan while her mother remained at home with her eleven-year-old brother and the new baby -- obviously conceived even before the population restrictions were relaxed when the war ended. They had no doubt watched Petra on television. Now, as the flivver took Petra and her father along the narrow streets, he began apologizing. "It won't seem much to you, Pet, after seeing the world."

"They didn't show us the world much, Papa. There were no windows in Battle School."

"I mean, the spaceport, and the capital, all the important people and wonderful buildings ..."

"I'm not disappointed, Papa." She had to lie in order to reassure him. It was as if he had given her Maralik as a gift, and now was unsure whether she liked it. She didn't know yet whether she would like it or not. She hadn't liked Battle School, but she got used to it. There was no getting used to Eros, but she had endured it. How could she dislike a place like this, with open sky and people wandering wherever they wanted?

Yet she was disappointed. For all her memories of Maralik were the memories of a five-year-old, looking up at tall buildings, across wide streets where large vehicles loomed and fled at alarming speeds. Now she was much older, beginning to come into her womanly height, and the cars were smaller, the streets downright narrow, and the buildings -- designed to survive the next earthquake, as the old buildings had not -- were squat. Not ugly -- there was grace in them, given the eclectic styles that were somehow blended here, Turkish and Russian, Spanish and Riviera, and, most incredibly, Japanese -- it was a marvel to see how they were still unified by the choice of colors, the closeness to the street, the almost uniform height as all strained against the legal maximums.

She knew of all this because she had read about it on Eros as she and the other children sat out the League War. She had seen pictures on the nets. But nothing had prepared her for the fact that she had left here as a five-year-old and now was returning at fourteen.

"What?" she said. For Father had spoken and she hadn't understood him.

"I asked if you wanted to stop for a candy before we went home, the way we used to."

Candy. How could she have forgotten the word for candy?

Easily, that's how. The only other Armenian in Battle School had been three years ahead of her and graduated to Tactical School so they overlapped only for a few months. She had been seven when she got from Ground School to Battle School, and he was ten, leaving without ever having commanded an army. Was it any wonder that he didn't want to jabber in Armenian to a little kid from home? So in effect she had gone without speaking Armenian for nine years. And the

Armenian she had spoken then was a five-year-old's language. It was so hard to speak it now, and harder still to understand it.

How could she tell Father that it would help her greatly if he would speak to her in Fleet Common - English, in effect? He spoke it, of course -- he and Mother had made a point of speaking English at home when she was little, so she would not be handicapped linguistically if she was taken into Battle School. In fact, as she thought about it, that was part of her problem. How often had Father actually called candy by the Armenian word? Whenever he let her walk with him through town and they stopped for candy, he would make her ask for it in English, and call each piece by its English name. It was absurd, really -- why would she need to know, in Battle School, the English names of Armenian candies?

"What are you laughing for?"

"I seem to have lost my taste for candy while I was in space, Father. Though for old time's sake, I hope you'll have time to walk through town with me again. You won't be as tall as you were the last time."

"No, nor will your hand be as small in mine." He laughed, too. "We've been robbed of years that would be precious now, to have in memory."

"Yes," said Petra. "But I was where I needed to be."

Or was I? I'm the one who broke first. I passed all the tests, until the test that mattered, and there I broke first. Ender comforted me by telling me he relied on me most and pushed me hardest, but he pushed us all and relied upon us all and I'm the one who broke. No one ever spoke of it; perhaps here on Earth not one living soul knew of it. But the others who had fought with her knew it. Until that moment when she fell asleep in the midst of combat, she had been one of the best. After that, though she never broke again, Ender also never trusted her again. The others watched over her, so that if she suddenly stopped commanding her ships, they could step in. She was sure that one of them had been designated, but never asked who. Dink? Bean? Bean, yes -- whether Ender assigned him to do it or not, she knew Bean would be watching, ready to take over. She was not reliable. They did not trust her. She did not trust herself.

Yet she would keep that secret from her family, as she kept it in talking to the prime minister and the press, to the Armenian military and the schoolchildren who had been assembled to meet the great Armenian hero of the Formic War. Armenia needed a hero. She was the only candidate out of this war. They had shown her how the online textbooks already listed her among the ten greatest Armenians of all time. Her picture, her biography, and quotations from Colonel Graff, from Major Anderson, from Mazer Rackham.

And from Ender Wiggin. "It was Petra who first stood up for me at risk to herself. It was Petra who trained me when no one else would. I owe everything I accomplished to her. And in the final campaign, in battle after battle she was the commander I relied upon."

Ender could not have known how those words would hurt. No doubt he meant to reassure her that he did rely upon her. But because she knew the truth, his words sounded like pity to her. They sounded like a kindly lie.

And now she was home. Nowhere on Earth was she so much a stranger as here, because she ought to feel at home here, but she could not, for no one knew her here. They knew a bright little girl who was sent off amid tearful good-byes and brave words of love. They knew a hero who returned with the halo of victory around her every word and gesture. But they did not know and would never know the girl who broke under the strain and in the midst of battle simply ... fell asleep. While her ships were lost, while real men died, she slept because her body could stay awake no more. That girl would remain hidden from all eyes.

And from all eyes would be hidden also the girl who watched every move of the boys around her, evaluating their abilities, guessing at their intentions, determined to take any advantage she could get, refusing to bow to any of them. Here she was supposed to become a child again -- an older one, but a child nonetheless. A dependent.

After nine years of fierce watchfulness, it would be restful to turn over her life to others, wouldn't it?

"Your mother wanted to come. But she was afraid to come." He chuckled as if this were amusing. "Do you understand?"

"No," said Petra.

"Not afraid of you," said Father. "Of her firstborn daughter she could never be afraid. But the cameras. The politicians. The crowds. She is a woman of the kitchen. Not a woman of the market. Do you understand?"

She understood the Armenian easily enough, if that's what he was asking, because he had caught on, he was speaking in simple language and separating his words a little so she would not get lost in the stream of conversation. She was grateful for this, but also embarrassed that it was so obvious she needed such help.

What she did not understand was a fear of crowds that could keep a mother from coming to meet her daughter after nine years.

Petra knew that it was not the crowds or the cameras that Mother was afraid of. It was Petra herself. The lost five-year-old who would never be five again, who had had her first period with the help of a Fleet nurse, whose mother had never bent over her homework with her, or taught her how to cook. No, wait. She had baked pies with her mother. She had helped roll out the dough. Thinking back, she could see that her mother had not actually let her do anything that mattered. But to Petra it had seemed that she was the one baking. That her mother trusted her.

That turned her thoughts to the way Ender had coddled her at the end, pretending to trust her as before but actually keeping control.

And because that was an unbearable thought, Petra looked out the window of the flivver. "Are we in the part of town where I used to play?"

"Not yet," said Father. "But nearly. Maralik is still not such a large town."

"It all seems new to me," said Petra.

"But it isn't. It never changes. Only the architecture. There are Armenians all over the world, but only because they were forced to leave to save their lives. By nature, Armenians stay at home. The hills are the womb, and we have no desire to be born." He chuckled at his joke.

Had he always chuckled like that? It sounded to Petra less like amusement than like nervousness. Mother was not the only one afraid of her.

At last the flivver reached home. And here at last she recognized where she was. It was small and shabby compared to what she had remembered, but in truth she had not even thought of the place in many years. It stopped haunting her dreams by the time she was ten. But now, coming home again, it all returned to her, the tears she had shed in those first weeks and months in Ground School, and again when she left Earth and went up to Battle School. This was what she had yearned for, and at last she was here again, she had it back ... and knew that she no longer needed it, no longer really wanted it. The nervous man in the car beside her was not the tall god who had led her through the streets of Maralik so proudly. And the woman waiting inside the house would not be the goddess from whom came warm food and a cool hand on her forehead when she was sick.

But she had nowhere else to go.

Her mother was standing at the window as Petra emerged from the flivver. Father palmed the scanner to accept the charges. Petra raised a hand and gave a small wave to her mother, a shy smile that quickly grew into a grin. Her mother smiled back and gave her own small wave in reply. Petra took her father's hand and walked with him to the house.

The door opened as they approached. It was Stefan, her brother. She would not have known him from her memories of a two-year-old, still creased with baby fat. And he, of course, did not know her at all. He beamed the way the children from the school group had beamed at her, thrilled to meet a celebrity but not really aware of her as a person. He was her brother, though, and so she hugged him and he hugged her back. "You're really Petra!" he said.

"You're really Stefan!" she answered. Then she turned to her mother. She was still standing at the window, looking out.

"Mother?"

The woman turned, tears streaking her cheeks. "I'm so glad to see you, Petra," she said.

But she made no move to come to Petra, or even to reach out to her.

"But you're still looking for the little girl who left nine years ago," said Petra.

Mother burst into tears, and now she reached out her arms and Petra strode to her, to be enfolded in her embrace. "You're a woman now," said Mother. "I don't know you, but I love you."

"I love you too, Mother," said Petra. And was pleased to realize that it was true.

They had about an hour, the four of them -- five, once the baby woke up. Petra shunted aside their questions -- "Oh, everything about me has already been published or broadcast. It's you that I want to hear about" -- and learned that her father was still editing textbooks and supervising translations, and her mother was still the shepherd of the neighborhood, watching out for everyone, bringing food when someone was sick, taking care of children while parents ran errands, and providing lunch for any child who showed up. "I remember once that Mother and I had lunch alone, just the two of us," Stefan joked. "We didn't know what to say, and there was so much food left over."

"It was already that way when I was little," Petra said. "I remember being so proud of how the other kids loved my mother. And so jealous of the way she loved them!"

"Never as much as I loved my own girl and boy," said Mother. "But I do love children, I admit it, every one of them is precious in the sight of God, every one of them is welcome in my house."

"Oh, I've known a few you wouldn't love," said Petra.

"Maybe," said Mother, not wishing to argue, but plainly not believing that there could be such a child.

The baby gurgled and Mother lifted her shirt to tuck the baby to her breast.

"Did I slurp so noisily?" asked Petra.

"Not really," said Mother.

"Oh, tell the truth," said Father. "She woke the neighbors."

"So I was a glutton."

"No, merely a barbarian," said Father. "No table manners."

Petra decided to ask the delicate question boldly and have done with it. "The baby was born only a month after the population restrictions were lifted."

Father and Mother looked at each other, Mother with a beatific expression, Father with a wince. "Yes, well, we missed you. We wanted another little girl."

"You would have lost your job," said Petra.

"Not right away," said Father.

"Armenian officials have always been a little slow about enforcing those laws," said Mother.

"But eventually, you could have lost everything."

"No," said Mother. "When you left, we lost half of everything. Children are everything. The rest is ... nothing."

Stefan laughed. "Except when I'm hungry. Food is something!"

"You're always hungry," said Father.

"Food is always something," said Stefan.

They laughed, but Petra could see that Stefan had had no illusions about what the birth of this child would have meant. "It's a good thing we won the war."

"Better than losing it," said Stefan.

"It's nice to have the baby and obey the law, too," said Mother.

"But you didn't get your little girl."

"No," said Father. "We got our David."

"We didn't need a little girl after all," said Mother. "We got you back."

Not really, thought Petra. And not for long. Four years, maybe fewer, and I'll be off to university. And you won't miss me by then, because you'll know that I'm not the little girl you love, just this bloody-handed veteran of a nasty military school that turned out to have real battles to fight.

After the first hour, neighbors and cousins and friends from Father's work began dropping by, and it was not until after midnight that Father had to announce that tomorrow was not a national holiday and he needed to have some sleep before work. It took yet another hour to shoo everyone out of the house, and by then all Petra wanted was to curl up in bed and hide from the world for at least a week.

But by the end of the next day, she knew she had to get out of the house. She didn't fit into the routines. Mother loved her, yes, but her life centered around the baby and the neighborhood, and while she kept trying to engage Petra in conversation, Petra could see that she was a distraction, that it would be a relief for Mother when Petra went to school during the day as Stefan did, returning only at the scheduled time. Petra understood, and that night announced that she wanted to register for school and begin class the next day.

"Actually," said Father, "the people from the IF said that you could probably go right on to university."

"I'm fourteen," said Petra. "And there are serious gaps in my education."

"She never even heard of Dog," said Stefan.

"What?" said Father. "What dog?"

"Dog," said Stefan. "The zip orchestra. You know."

"Very famous group," said Mother. "If you heard them, you'd take the car in for major repairs."

"Oh, that Dog," said Father. "I hardly think that's the education Petra was talking about."

"Actually, it is," said Petra.

"It's like she's from another planet," said Stefan. "Last night I realized she never heard of anybody."

"I am from another planet. Or, properly speaking, asteroid."

"Of course," said Mother. "You need to join your generation."

Petra smiled, but inwardly she winced. Her generation? She had no generation, except the few thousand kids who had once been in Battle School, and now were scattered over the surface of the Earth, trying to find out where they belonged in a world at peace.

School would not be easy, Petra soon discovered. There were no courses in military history and military strategy. The mathematics was pathetic compared to what she had mastered in Battle School, but with literature and grammar she was downright backward -- her knowledge of Armenian was indeed childish, and while she was fluent in the version of English used in Battle School -- including the slang that the kids used there -- she had little knowledge of the rules of grammar and no understanding at all of the mixed Armenian and English slang that the kids used with each other at school.

Everyone was very nice to her, of course -- the most popular girls immediately took possession of her, and the teachers treated her like a celebrity. Petra allowed herself to be led around and shown everything, and studied the chatter of her new friends very carefully, so she could learn the slang and hear how school English and Armenian were nuanced. She knew that soon enough the popular girls would tire of her -- especially when they realized how bluntly outspoken Petra was, a trait that she had no intention of changing. Petra was quite used to the fact that people who cared about the social hierarchy usually ended up hating her and, if they were wise, fearing her, since pretensions didn't last long in her presence. She would find her real friends over the next few weeks -- if, in fact, there were any here who would value her for what she was. It didn't matter. All the friendships here, all the social concerns seemed so trivial to her. There was nothing at stake here, except each student's own social life and academic future, and what did that matter? Petra's previous schooling

had all been conducted in the shadow of war, with the fate of humanity riding on the outcome of her studies and the quality of her skills. Now, what did it matter? She would read Armenian literature because she wanted to learn Armenian, not because she thought it actually mattered what some expatriate like Saroyan thought about the lives of children in a long-lost era of a far-off country.

The only part of school that she truly loved was physical education. To have sky over her head as she ran, to have the track lie flat before her, to be able to run and run for the sheer joy of it and without a clock ticking out her allotted time for aerobic exercise -- such a luxury. She could not compete, physically, with most of the other girls. It would take time for her body to reconstruct itself for high gravity, for despite the great pains that the IF went to to make sure that soldiers' bodies did not deteriorate too much during long months and years in space, nothing trained you for living on a planet's surface except living there. But Petra didn't care that she was one of the last to complete every race, that she couldn't leap even the lowest hurdle. It felt good simply to run freely, and her weakness gave her goals to meet. She would be competitive soon enough. That was one of the aspects of her innate personality that had taken her to Battle School in the first place -- that she had no particular interest in competition because she always started from the assumption that, if it mattered, she would find a way to win.

And so she settled in to her new life. Within weeks she was fluent in Armenian and had mastered the local slang. As she had expected, the popular girls dropped her in about the same amount of time, and a few weeks later, the brainy girls had cooled toward her as well. It was among the rebels and misfits that she found her friends, and soon she had a circle of confidants and co-conspirators that she called her "jeesh," her private army. Not that she was the commander or anything, but they were all loyal to each other and amused at the antics of the teachers and the other students, and when a school counselor called her in to tell her that the administration was growing concerned about the fact that Petra seemed to be associating with an anti-social element in school, she knew that she was truly at home in Maralik.

Then one day she came home from school to find the front door locked. She carried no house key -- no one did in their neighborhood because no one locked up, or even, in good weather, closed their doors. She could hear the baby crying inside the house, so instead of making her mother come to the front door to let her in, she walked around back and came into the kitchen to find that her mother was tied to a chair, gagged, her eyes wide and frantic with fear.

Before Petra had time to react, a hypostick was slapped against her arm and, without ever seeing who had done it, she slipped into darkness.

Bean

To: Locke%espinoza@polnet.gov

From: Chamrajnagar%%@ifcom.gov

Re: Do not write to me again

Mr. Peter Wiggin,

Did you really think I would not have the resources to know who you are? You may be the author of the "Locke Proposal," giving you a reputation as a peacemaker, but you are also partly responsible for the world's present instability by your jingoist use of your sister's identity as Demosthenes. I have no illusions about your motives.

It is outrageous of you to suggest that I jeopardize the neutrality of the International Fleet in order to take control of children who have completed their military service with the IF. If you attempt to manipulate public opinion to force me to do so, I will expose your identity as both Locke and Demosthenes.

I have changed my idname and have informed our mutual friend that he is not to attempt to relay communication between you and me again. The only comfort you are entitled to take from my letter is this: The IF will not interfere with those trying to assert hegemony over other nations and peoples -- not even you.

Chamrajnagar

The disappearance of Petra Arkanian from her home in Armenia was worldwide news. The headlines were full of accusations hurled by Armenia against Turkey, Azerbaijan, and every other Turkish-speaking nation, and the stiff or fiery denials and counter-accusations that came in reply. There were the tearful interviews with her mother, the only witness, who was sure the kidnapers were Azerbaijani. "I know the language, I know the accent, and that's who took my little girl!"

Bean was with his family on the second day of their vacation at the beach on the island of Ithaca, but this was Petra, and he read the nets and watched the vids avidly, along with his brother, Nikolai. They both reached the same conclusion right away. "It wasn't any of the Turkish nations," Nikolai announced to their parents. "That's obvious." Father, who had been working in government for many years, agreed. "Real Turks would have made sure to speak only Russian."

"Or Armenian," said Nikolai.

"No Turk speaks Armenian," said Mother. She was right, of course, since real Turks would never deign to learn it, and those in Turkish countries who did speak Armenian were, by definition, not really Turks and would never be trusted with a delicate assignment like kidnapping a military genius.

"So who was it?" said Father. "Agents provocateurs, trying to start a war?"

"My bet is on the Armenian government," said Nikolai. "Put her in charge of their military."

"Why kidnap her when they could employ her openly?" asked Father.

"Taking her out of school openly," said Nikolai, "would be an announcement of Armenia's military intentions. It might provoke preemptive actions by surrounding Turkey or Azerbaijan."

There was superficial plausibility in what Nikolai was saying, but Bean knew better. He had already foreseen this possibility back when all the militarily gifted children were still in space. At that time the main danger had come from the Polemarch, and Bean wrote an anonymous letter to a couple of opinion leaders on Earth, Locke and Demosthenes, urging them to get all the Battle School children back to Earth so they couldn't be seized or killed by the Polemarch's forces in the League War. The warning had worked, but now that the League War was over, too many governments had begun to think and act complacently, as if the world now had peace instead of a fragile ceasefire. Bean's original analysis still held. It was Russia that was behind the Polemarch's coup attempt in the League War, and it was likely to be Russia that was behind the kidnapping of Petra Arkanian.

Still, he didn't have any hard evidence of this and knew of no way to get it -- now that he wasn't inside a Fleet installation, he had no access to military computer systems. So he kept his skepticism to himself, and made a joke out of it. "I don't know, Nikolai," he said. "Since staging this kidnapping is having an even more destabilizing effect, I'd have to say that if she was taken by her own government, it proves they really really need her, because it was a deeply dumb thing to do."

"If they're not dumb," said Father, "who did it?"

"Somebody who's ambitious to fight and win wars and smart enough to know they need a brilliant commander," said Bean. "And either big enough or invisible enough or far enough away from Armenia not to care about the consequences of kidnaping her. In fact, I'll bet that whoever took her would be perfectly delighted if war broke out in the Caucasus."

"So you think it's some large and powerful nation close by?" asked Father. Of course, there was only one large and powerful nation close to Armenia.

"Could be, but there's no telling," said Bean. "Anybody who needs a commander like Petra wants a world in turmoil. Enough turmoil, and anybody might emerge on top. Plenty of sides to play off against each other." And now that Bean had said it, he began to believe it. Just because Russia was the most aggressive nation before the League War didn't mean that other nations weren't going to get into the game.

"In a world in chaos," said Nikolai, "the army with the best commander wins."

"If you want to find the kidnapper, look for the country that talks most about peace and conciliation," said Bean, playing with the idea and saying whatever came to mind.

"You're too cynical," said Nikolai. "Some who talk about peace and conciliation merely want peace and conciliation."

"You watch -- the nations that offer to arbitrate are the ones that think they should rule the world, and this is just one more move in the game."

Father laughed. "Don't read too much into that," he said. "Most of the nations that are always offering to arbitrate are trying to recover lost status, not gain new power. France. America. Japan. They're always meddling just because they used to have the power to back it up and they haven't caught on yet that they don't anymore."

Bean smiled. "You never know, do you, Papa. The very fact that you dismiss the possibility that they could be the kidnappers makes me regard them as all the more likely candidates."

Nikolai laughed and agreed.

"That's the problem with having two Battle School graduates in the house," said Father. "You think because you understand military thinking that you understand political thinking, too."

"It's all maneuver and avoiding battle until you have overwhelming superiority," said Bean.

"But it's also about the will to power," said Father. "And even if individuals in America and France and Japan have the will to power, the people don't. Their leaders will never get them moving. You have to look at nations on the make. Aggressive peoples who think they have a grievance, who think they're undervalued. Belligerent, snappish."

"A whole nation of belligerent, snappish people?" asked Nikolai.

"Sounds like Athens," said Bean.

"A nation that takes that attitude toward other nations," said Father. "Several self-consciously Islamic nations have the character to make such a play, but they'd never kidnap a Christian girl to lead their armies."

"They might kidnap her to prevent her own nation from using her," said Nikolai. "Which brings us back to Armenia's neighbors."

"It's an interesting puzzle," said Bean, "which we can figure out later, after we get to wherever we're going."

Father and Nikolai looked at him as if he were crazy. "Going?" asked Father.

It was Mother who understood. "They're kidnaping Battle School graduates. Not just that, but a member of Ender's team from the actual battles."

"And one of the best," said Bean.

Father was skeptical. "One incident doesn't make a pattern."

"Let's not wait to see who's next," said Mother. "I'd rather feel silly later for overreacting than grieve because we dismissed the possibility."

"Give it a few days," said Father. "It will all blow over."

"We've already given it six hours," said Bean. "If the kidnappers are patient, they won't strike again for months. But if they're impatient, they're already in motion against all their other targets. For all we know, the only reason Nikolai and I aren't in the bag already is because we threw off their plans by going on vacation."

"Or else," said Nikolai, "our being here on this island gives them the perfect opportunity."

"Father," said Mother, "why don't you call for some protection?"

Father hesitated.

Bean understood why. The political game was a delicate one, and anything Father did right now could have repercussions throughout his career. "You won't be perceived as asking for special privileges for yourself," said Bean. "Nikolai and I are a precious national resource. I believe the prime minister is on record as saying that several times. Letting Athens know where we are and suggesting they protect us and get us out of here is a good idea."

Father got on the cellphone.

He got only a System Busy response.

"That's it," said Bean. "There's no way the phone system can be too busy here on Ithaca. We need a boat."

"An airplane," said Mother."

"A boat," said Nikolai. "And not a rental. They're probably waiting for us to put ourselves in their hands, so there won't be a struggle."

"Several of the nearby houses have boats," said Father. "But we don't know these people."

"They know us," said Nikolai. "Especially Bean. We are war heroes, you know."

"But any house around here could be the very one from which they're watching us," said Father. "If they're watching us. We can't trust anybody."

"Let's get in our bathing suits," said Bean, "and walk to the beach and then wander as far as we can before we cut inland and find somebody with a boat."

Since no one had a better plan, they put it into action at once. Within two minutes they were out the door, carrying no wallets or purses, though Father and Mother slipped a few identification papers and credit cards into their suits. Bean and Nikolai laughed and teased each other as usual, and

Mother and Father held hands and talked quietly, smiling at their sons ... as usual. No sign of alarm. Nothing to cause anyone watching to spring into action.

They were only about a quarter mile up the beach when they heard an explosion -- loud, as if it were close, and the shockwave made them stumble. Mother fell. Father helped her up as Bean and Nikolai looked back.

"Maybe it's not our house," said Nikolai.

"Let's not go back and check," said Bean.

They began to jog up the beach, matching their speed to Mother, who was limping a little from having skinned one knee and twisted the other when she fell. "Go on ahead," she said.

"Mother," said Nikolai, "taking you is the same as taking us, because we'd do whatever they wanted to get you back."

"They don't want to take us," said Bean. "Petra they wanted to use. Me they want dead."

"No," said Mother.

"He's right," said Father. "You don't blow up a house in order to kidnap the occupants."

"But we don't know it was our house!" Mother insisted.

"Mother," said Bean. "It's basic strategy. Any resource you can't get control of, you destroy so your enemy can't have it."

"What enemy?" Mother said. "Greece has no enemies!"

"When somebody wants to rule the world," said Nikolai, "eventually everyone is his enemy."

"I think we should run faster," said Mother.

They did.

As they ran, Bean thought through what Mother had said. Nikolai's answer was right, of course, but Bean couldn't help but wonder: Greece might have no enemies, but I have. Somewhere in this world, Achilles is alive. Supposedly he's in custody, a prisoner because he is mentally ill, because he has murdered again and again. Graff promised that he would never be set free. But Graff was court-martialed -- exonerated, yes, but retired from the military. He's now Minister of Colonization, no longer in a position to keep his promise about Achilles. And if there's one thing Achilles wants, it's me, dead.

Kidnaping Petra, that's something Achilles would think of. And if he was in a position to cause that to happen -- if some government or group was listening to him -- then it would have been a simple enough matter for him to get the same people to kill Bean.

Or would Achilles insist on being there in person?

Probably not. Achilles was not a sadist. He killed with his own hands when he needed to, but would never put himself at risk. Killing from a distance would actually be preferable. Using other hands to do his work.

Who else would want Bean dead? Any other enemy would seek to capture him. His test scores from Battle School were a matter of public record since Graff's trial. The military in every nation knew that he was the kid who in many ways had topped Ender himself. He would be the one most desired. He would also be the one most feared, if he were on the other side in a war. Any of them might kill him if they knew they couldn't take him. But they would try to take him first. Only Achilles would prefer his death.

But he said nothing of this to his family. His fears about Achilles would sound too paranoid. He wasn't sure whether he believed them himself. And yet, as he ran along the beach with his family, he grew more certain with every step that whoever had kidnaped Petra was in some way under Achilles' influence.

They heard the rotors of helicopters before they saw them, and Nikolai's reaction was instantaneous. "Inland now!" he shouted. They scrambled for the nearest wooden stairway leading up the cliff from the beach.

They were only halfway up before the choppers came into view. There was no point in trying to hide. One of the choppers set down on the beach below them, the other on the bluff above.

"Down is easier than up," said Father. "And the choppers do have Greek military insignia."

What Bean didn't point out, because everyone knew it, was that Greece was part of the New Warsaw Pact, and it was quite possible that Greek military craft might be acting under Russian command.

In silence they walked back down the stairs. Hope and despair and fear tugged at them by turns.

The soldiers who spilled out of the chopper were wearing Greek Army uniforms.

"At least they're not trying to pretend they're Turks," said Nikolai.

"But how would the Greek Army know to come rescue us?" said Mother. "The explosion was only a few minutes ago."

The answer came quickly enough, once they got to the beach. A colonel that Father knew slightly came to meet them, saluting them. No, saluting Bean, with the respect due to a veteran of the Formic War.

"I bring you greetings from General Thrakos," said the colonel. "He would have come himself, but there was no time to waste when the warning came."

"Colonel Dekanos, we think our sons might be in danger," said Father.

"We realized that the moment word came of the kidnapping of Petra Arkanian," said Dekanos. "But you weren't at home and it took a few hours to find out where you were."

"We heard an explosion," said Mother.

"If you had been inside the house," said Dekanos, "you'd be as dead as the people in the surrounding houses. The army is securing the area. Fifteen choppers were sent up to search for you -- we hoped -- or, if you were dead, the perpetrators. I have already reported to Athens that you are alive and well."

"They were jamming the cellphone," said Father.

"Whoever did this has a very effective organization," said Dekanos. "Nine other children, it turns out, were taken within hours of Petra Arkanian."

"Who?" demanded Bean.

"I don't know the names yet," said Dekanos. "Only the count."

"Were any of the others simply killed?" asked Bean.

"No," said Dekanos. "Not that I've heard, anyway."

"Then why did they blow up our house?" Mother demanded.

"If we knew why," said Dekanos, "we'd know who. And vice-versa."

They were belted into their seats. The chopper rose from the beach -- but not very high. By now the other choppers were ranged around them and above them. Flying escort.

"Ground troops are continuing the search for the perpetrators," said Dekanos. "But your survival is our highest priority."

"We appreciate that," said Mother.

But Bean was not all that appreciative. The Greek military would, of course, put them in hiding and protect them carefully. But no matter what they did, the one thing they could not do was conceal

the knowledge of his location from the Greek government itself. And the Greek government had been part of the Russia-dominated Warsaw Pact for generations now, since before the Formic War. Therefore Achilles -- if it was Achilles, if it was Russia he worked for, if, if -- would be able to find out where they were. Bean knew that it was not enough for him to be in protection. He had to be in true concealment, where no government could find him, where no one but himself would know who he was.

The trouble was, he was not only still a child, he was a famous child. Between his youth and his celebrity, it would be almost impossible for him to move unnoticed through the world. He would have to have help. So for the time being, he had to remain in military custody and simply hope that it would take him less time to get away than it would take Achilles to get to him.

If it was Achilles.

Message in a Bottle

To: Carlotta%agape@vatican.net/orders/sisters/ind

From: Graff%pilgrimage@colmin.gov

Re: Danger

I have no idea where you are and that's good, because I believe you are in grave danger, and the harder it is to find you, the better.

Since I'm no longer with the IF, I'm not kept abreast of things there. But the news is full of the kidnaping of most of the children who served with Ender in Command School. That could have been done by anybody, there is no shortage of nations or groups that might conceive and carry out such a project. What you may not know is that there was no attempt to kidnap one of them. From a friend of mine I have learned that the beach house in Ithaca where Bean and his family were vacationing was simply blown up -- with so much force that the neighboring houses were also flattened and everyone in them killed. Bean and his family had already escaped and are under the protection of the Greek military. Supposedly this is a secret, in hopes that the assassins will think they succeeded, but in fact, like most governments, Greece leaks like a colander, and the assassins probably already know more than I do about where Bean is.

There is only one person on Earth who would prefer Bean dead.

That means that the people who got Achilles out of that mental hospital are not just using him -- he is making, or at least influencing, their decisions to fit his private agenda. The danger to you is grave. The danger to Bean, more so. He must go into deep hiding, and he cannot go alone. To save his life and yours, the only thing I can think of is to get both of you off planet. We are within months of launching our first colony ships. If I am the only one to know your real identities, we can keep you safe until launch. But we must get Bean out of Greece as quickly as possible. Are you with me?

Do not tell me where you are. We will work out how to meet.

How stupid did they think she was?

It took Petra only about half an hour to realize that these people weren't Turkish. Not that she was some kind of expert on language, but they'd be babbling along and every now and then out would pop a word of Russian. She didn't understand Russian either, except for a few loan words in Armenian, and Azerbaijani had loan words like that, too, but the thing is, when you say a Russian loan word in Armenian, you give it an Armenian pronunciation. These clowns would switch to an easy, native-sounding Russian accent when they hit those words. She would have to have been a gibbon in the slow-learner class not to realize that the Turkish pose was just that, a pose.

So when she decided she'd learned all she could with her eyes closed, listening, she spoke up in Fleet Common. "Aren't we across the Caucasus yet? When do I get to pee?"

Someone said an expletive.

"No, pee," she answered. She opened her eyes and blinked. She was on the floor of some ground vehicle. She started to sit up.

A man pushed her back down with his foot.

"Oh, that's clever. Keep me out of sight as we coast along the tarmac, but how will you get me into the airplane without anyone seeing? You want me to come out walking and acting normal so nobody gets all excited, right?"

"You'll act that way when we tell you to or we'll kill you," said the man with the heavy foot.

"If you had the authority to kill me, I'd be dead back in Maralik." She started to rise again. Again the foot pushed her back down.

"Listen carefully," she said. "I've been kidnapped because somebody wants me to plan a war for them. That means I'm going to be meeting with the top brass. They're not stupid enough to think they'll get anything decent from me without my willing cooperation. That's why they wouldn't let you kill my mother. So when I tell them that I won't do anything for them until I have your balls in a paper bag, how long do you think it will take them to decide what's more important to them? My brain or your balls?"

"We do have the authority to kill you."

It took her only moments to decide why such authority might have been given to morons like these. "Only if I'm in imminent danger of being rescued. Then they'd rather have me dead than let somebody else get the use of me. Let's see you make a case for that here on the runway at the Gyuniri airport."

A different rude word this time.

Somebody spurted out a sentence of Russian. She caught the gist of it from the intonation and the bitter laughter afterward. "They warned you she was a genius."

Genius, hell. If she was so smart, why hadn't she anticipated the possibility that somebody would make a grab for the kids who won the war? And it had to be kids, not just her, because she was too far down the list for somebody outside Armenia to make her their only choice. When the front door was locked, she should have run for the cops instead of puttering around to the back door. And that was another stupid thing they did, locking the front door. In Russia you had to lock your doors, they probably thought that was normal. They should have done better research. Not that it helped her now, of course. Except that she knew they weren't all that careful and they weren't all that bright. Anybody can kidnap someone who's taking no precautions.

"So Russia makes her play for world domination, is that it?" she asked.

"Shut up," said the man in the seat in front of her.

"I don't speak Russian you know, and I won't learn."

"You don't have to," said a woman.

"Isn't that ironic?" said Petra. "Russia plans to take over the world, but they have to speak English to do it."

The foot on her belly pressed down harder.

"Remember your balls in a bag," she said.

A moment, and then the foot let up.

She sat up, and this time no one pushed her down.

"Untape me so I can get myself up on the seat. Come on! My arms hurt in this position! Haven't you learned anything since the days of the KGB? Unconscious people don't have to have their circulation cut off. Fourteen-year-old Armenian girls can probably be overpowered quite easily by big strong Russian goons."

By now the tape was off and she was sitting beside Heavy-foot and a guy who never looked at her, just kept watching out the left window, then the right, then the left again. "So this is Gyuniri airport?"

"What, you don't recognize it?"

"I've never been here before. When would I? I've only taken two airplane trips in my life, one out of Terevan when I was five, and the other coming back, nine years later."

"She knew it was Gyuniri because it's the closest airport that doesn't fly commercial jets," said the woman. She spoke without any tone in her voice -- not contempt, not deference. Just ... flat.

"Whose bright idea was this? Because captive generals don't strategize all that well."

"First, why in the world do you think anyone would tell us?" said the woman. "Second, why don't you shut up and find things out when they matter?"

"Because I'm a cheerful, talkative extrovert who likes to make friends," said Petra.

"You're a bossy, nosy introvert who likes to piss people off," said the woman.

"Oh, you actually did some research."

"No, just observation." So she did have a sense of humor. Maybe.

"You'd better just pray you can get over the Caucasus before you have to answer to the Armenian Air Force."

Heavy-foot made a derisory noise, proving that he didn't recognize irony when he heard it.

"Of course, you'll probably have only a small plane, and we'll probably fly out over the Black Sea. Which means that IF satellites will know exactly where I am."

"You're not IF personnel anymore," said the woman.

"Meaning they don't care what happens to you," said Heavy-foot.

By now they had pulled to a stop beside a small plane. "A jet, I'm impressed," said Petra. "Does it have any weaponry? Or is it just wired with explosives so that if the Armenian Air Force does start to force you down, you can blow me up and the whole plane with me?"

"Do we have to tie you again?" asked the woman.

"That would look really good to the people in the control tower."

"Get her out," said the woman.

Stupidly, the men on both sides of her opened their doors and got out, leaving her a choice of exits. So she chose Heavy-foot because she knew he was stupid, whereas the other man was anyone's guess. And, yes, he truly was stupid, because he held her by only one arm as he used his other hand to close the door. So she lurched to one side as if she had stumbled, drawing him off balance, and then, still using his grip to support her weight, she did a double kick, one in the groin and one in the knee. She landed solidly both times, and he let go of her very nicely before falling to the ground, writhing, one hand clutching his crotch and the other trying to slide his kneecap back around to the front of his knee,

Did they think she'd forgotten all her hand-to-hand unarmed combat training? Hadn't she warned him that she'd have his balls in a bag?

She made a good run for it, and she was feeling pretty good about how much speed she had picked up during her months of running at school, until she realized that they weren't following her. And that meant they knew they didn't have to.

No sooner had she noticed this than she felt something sharp pierce the skin over her right shoulder blade. She had time to slow down but not to stop before she collapsed into unconsciousness again.

This time they kept her drugged until they reached their destination, and since she never saw any scenery except the walls of what seemed to be an underground bunker, she had no guesses about where they might have taken her. Somewhere in Russia, that's all. And from the soreness of the bruises on her arms and legs and neck and the scrapes on her knees and palms and nose, she guessed that they hadn't been too careful with her. The price she paid for being a bossy, nosy introvert. Or maybe it was the part about pissing people off.

She lay on her bunk until a doctor came in and treated her scrapes with a special no-anesthetic blend of alcohol and acid, or so it seemed. "Was that just in case it didn't hurt enough?" she asked.

The doctor didn't answer. Apparently they had warned the woman what happened to those who spoke to her.

"The guy I kicked in the balls, did they have to amputate them?"

Still no answer. Not even a trace of amusement. Could this possibly be the one educated person in Russia who didn't speak Common?

Meals were brought to her, lights went on and off, but no one came to speak to her and she was not allowed out of her room. She heard nothing through the heavy doors, and it became clear that her punishment for her misbehavior on the trip was going to be solitary confinement for a while.

She resolved not to beg for mercy. Indeed, once it became clear to her that she was in isolation, she accepted it and isolated herself still further, neither speaking nor responding to the people who came and went. They never tried to speak to her, either, so the silence of her world was complete.

They did not understand how self-contained she was. How her mind could show her more than mere reality ever could. She could recall memories by the sheaf, by the bale. Whole conversations. And then new versions of those conversations, in which she was actually able to say the clever things that she only really thought of later.

She could even relive every moment of the battles on Eros. Especially the battle where she fell asleep in the middle. How tired she was. How she struggled frantically to stay awake. How she could feel her mind being so sluggish that she began to forget where she was, and why, and even who she was.

To escape from this endlessly repeating scene, she tried to think of other things. Her parents, her little brother. She could remember everything they had said and done since she returned, but after a while the only memories that mattered to her were the early ones from before Battle School. Memories she had suppressed for nine years, as best she could. All the promises of the family life that was lost to her. The good-bye when her mother wept and let her go. Her father's hand as he led her to the car. That hand had always meant that she was safe, before. But this time that hand led her to a place where she never felt safe again. She knew she had chosen to go -- but she was only a child, and she knew that this was what was expected of her. That she should not succumb to the temptation to run to her weeping mother and cling to her and say no, I won't do it, let someone else become a soldier, I want to stay here and bake with Mama and play mother to my own little dolls. Not go off into space where I can learn how to kill strange and terrible creatures -- and, by the way, humans as well, who trusted me and then I fell ... a ... sleep.

Being alone with her memories was not all that happy for her.

She tried fasting, simply ignoring the food they brought her, the liquids too, nothing by mouth. She expected someone to speak to her then, to cajole. But no. The doctor came in, slapped an injection into her arm, and when she woke up her hand was sore where the I.V. had been and she realized that there was no point in refusing to eat.

She hadn't thought to keep a calendar at first, but after the I.V. she did keep a calendar on her own body, pressing a fingernail into her wrist until it bled. Seven days on the left wrist, then switch to the right, and all she had to remember in her head was the number of weeks.

Except she didn't bother going for three. She realized that they were going to outwait her because, after all, they had the others they had kidnapped, and no doubt some of them were cooperating, so it was perfectly all right with them if she stayed in her cell and got farther and farther behind so that when she finally did emerge, she'd be the worst of them at whatever it was they were doing.

Fine, what did she care? She was never going to help them anyway.

But if she was to have any chance to get free of these people and this place, she had to be out of this room and into a place where she could earn enough trust to be able to get free.

Trust. They'd expect her to lie, they'd expect her to plot. Therefore she had to be as convincing as possible. Her long time in solitary was a help, of course -- everyone knew that isolation caused untold mental pressures. Another thing that helped was that it was undoubtedly known to them by now, from the other children, that she was the first one who broke under pressure during the battles on Eros. So they would be predisposed to believe a breakdown now.

She began to cry. It wasn't hard. There were plenty of real tears pent up in her. But she shaped those emotions, made it into a whimpering cry that went on and on and on. Her nose filled with mucus, but she did not blow it. Her eyes streamed with tears but she did not wipe them. Her pillow got soaked with tears and covered with snot but she did not evade the wet place. Instead she rolled her hair right through it as she turned over, did it again and again until her hair was matted with

mucus and her face stiff with it. She made sure her crying did not get more desperate -- let no one think she was trying to get attention. She toyed with the idea of falling silent when anyone came into the room, but decided against it -- she figured it would be more convincing to be oblivious to other people's coming and going.

It worked. Someone came in after a day of this and slapped her with another injection. And this time when she woke up, she was in a hospital bed with a window that showed a cloudless northern sky. And sitting by her bed was Dink Meeker.

"Ho Dink," she said.

"Ho Petra. You pasted these conchos over real good."

"One does what one can for the cause," she said. "Who else?"

"You're the last to come out of solitary. They got the whole team from Eros, Petra. Except Ender, of course. And Bean."

"He's not in solitary?"

"No, they didn't keep it a secret who was still in the box. We thought you made a pretty fine showing."

"Who was second longest?"

"Nobody cares. We were all out in the first week. You lasted five."

So it had been two and a half weeks before she started her calendar.

"Because I'm the stupid one."

"Stubborn is the right word."

"Know where we are?"

"Russia."

"I meant where in Russia."

"Far from any borders, they assure us."

"What are our resources?"

"Very thick walls. No tools. Constant observation. They weigh our bodily wastes, I'm not kidding."

"What have they got us doing?"

"Like a really dumbed-down Battle School. We put up with it for a long time till Fly Molo finally gave up and when one of the teachers was quoting one of Von Clausewitz's stupider generalizations, Fly continued the quotation, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, and the rest of us joined in as best we could -- I mean, nobody has a memory like Fly, but we do OK -- and they finally got the idea that we could teach the stupid classes to them. So now it's just ... war games."

"Again? You think they're going to spring it on us later that the games are real?"

"No, this is just planning stuff. Strategy for a war between Russia and Turkmenistan. Russia and an alliance between Turkmenistan, Kasakhstan,, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. War with the United States and Canada. War with the old NATO alliance except Germany. War with Germany. On and on. China. India. Really stupid stuff, too, like between Brazil and Peru, which makes no sense but maybe they were testing our compliance or something."

"All this in five weeks?"

"Three weeks of kuso classes, and then two weeks of war games. When we finish our plan, see, they run it on the computer to show us how it went. Someday they're going to catch on that the only way to do this that isn't a waste of time is to have one of us making the plan for the opponent as well."

"My guess is you just told them."

"I've told them before but they're hard to persuade. Typical military types. Makes you understand why the whole concept of Battle School was developed in the first place. If the war had been up to adults, there'd be Buggers at every breakfast table in the world by now."

"But they are listening?"

"I think they record it all and play it back at slow speeds to see if we're passing messages subvocally."

Petra smiled.

"So why did you finally decide to cooperate?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't think I decided."

"Hey, they don't pull you out of the room until you express really sincere interest in being a good, compliant little kid."

She shook her head. "I don't think I did that."

"Yeah, well, whatever you did, you were the last of Ender's jeesh to break, kid."

A short buzzer sounded.

"Time's up," said Dink. He got up, leaned over, kissed her brow, and left the room.

Six weeks later, Petra was actually enjoying the life. By complying with the kids' demands, their captors had finally come up with some decent equipment. Software that allowed them very realistic head-to-head strategic and tactical war-gaming. Access to the nets so they could do decent research into terrains and capabilities so their wargaming had some realism -- though they knew every message they sent was censored, because of the number of messages that were rejected for one obscure reason or another. They enjoyed each other's company, exercised together, and by all appearances seemed to be completely happy and compliant Russian commanders.

Yet Petra knew, as they all knew, that every one of them was faking. Holding back. Making dumb mistakes which, if they were made in combat, would lead to gaps that a clever enemy could exploit. Maybe their captors realized this, and maybe they didn't. At least it made them all feel better, though they never spoke of it. But since they were all doing it, and cooperating by not exposing those weaknesses by exploiting them in the games, they could only assume that everyone felt the same about it.

They chatted comfortably about a lot of things -- their disdain for their captors, memories of Ground School, Battle School, Command School. And, of course, Ender. He was out of the reach of these bastards, so they made sure to mention him a lot, to talk about how the IF was bound to use him to counter all these foolish plans the Russians were making. They knew they were blowing smoke, that the IF wouldn't do anything, they even said so. But still, Ender was there, the ultimate trump card.

Till the day one of the erstwhile teachers told them that a colony ship had gone, with Ender and his sister Valentine aboard.

"I didn't even know he had a sister," said Hot Soup.

No one said anything, but they all knew that this was impossible. They had all known Ender had a sister. But ... whatever Hot Soup was doing, they'd play along and see what the game was.

"No matter what they tell us, one thing we know," said Hot Soup. "Wiggin is still with us."

Again, they weren't sure what he meant by this. After the briefest pause, though, Shen clapped his hand to his chest and cried out, "In our hearts forever."

"Yes," said Hot Soup. "Ender is in our hearts."

Just the tiniest extra emphasis on the name "Ender."

But he had said Wiggin before.

And before that, he had called attention to the fact that they all knew Ender had a sister. They also knew that Ender had a brother. Back on Eros, while Ender was in bed recovering from his breakdown after finding out the battles had been real, Mazer Rackham had told them some things about Ender. And Bean had told them more, as they were trapped together while the League War played itself out. They had listened as Bean expounded on what Ender's brother and sister meant to him, that the reason Ender had been born at all during the days of the two-child law was because his brother and sister were so brilliant, but the brother was too dangerously aggressive and the sister too passively compliant. How Bean knew all this he wouldn't tell, but the information was indelibly planted in their memories, tied as it was with those tense days after their victory over the Formics and before the defeat of the Polemarch in his attempt to take over the IF.

So when Hot Soup said "Wiggin is still with us," he had not been referring to Ender or Valentine, because they most assuredly were not "with us."

Peter, that was the brother's name. Peter Wiggin. Hot Soup was telling them that he was one whose mind was perhaps as brilliant as Ender's, and he was still on Earth. Maybe, if they could somehow contact him on the outside, he would ally himself with his brother's battle companions. Maybe he could find a way to get them free.

The game now was to find some way to communicate with him.

Sending email would be pointless -- the last thing they needed to do was have their captors see a bunch of email addressed to every possible variant of Peter Wiggin's name at every single mailnet that they could think of. And sure enough, by that evening Alai was telling them some tall tale about a genie in a bottle that had washed up on the shore. Everyone listened with feigned interest, but they knew the real story had been stated right at the beginning, when Alai said, "The fisherman thought maybe the bottle had a message from some castaway, but when he popped the cork, a cloud of smoke came out and ..." and they got it. What they had to do was send a message in a bottle, a message that would go indiscriminately to everyone everywhere, but which could only be understood by Ender's brother, Peter.

But as she thought about it, Petra realized that with all these other brilliant brains working to reach Peter Wiggin, she might as well work on an alternative plan. Peter Wiggin was not the only one outside who might help them. There was Bean. And while Bean was almost certainly in hiding, so that he would have far less freedom of action than Peter Wiggin, that didn't mean they couldn't still find him.

She thought about it for a week in every spare moment, rejecting idea after idea.

Then she thought of one that might get past the censors.

She worked out the text of her message very carefully in her head, making sure that it was phrased and worded exactly right. Then, with that memorized, she figured the binary code of each letter in standard two-byte format, and memorized that. Then she started the really hard stuff. All done in her head, so nothing was ever committed to paper or typed into the computer, where a keystroke monitor could report to their captors whatever she wrote.

In the meantime, she found a complex black-and-white drawing of a dragon on a netsite somewhere in Japan and saved it as a small file. When she finally had the message fully encoded in her mind, it took only a few minutes of fiddling with the drawing and she was done. She added it as part of her signature on every letter she sent. She spent so little time on it that she did not think it would look to her captors like anything more than a harmless whim. If they asked, she could say she added the picture in memory of Ender's Dragon Army in Battle School.

Of course, it wasn't just a picture of a dragon anymore. Now there was a little poem under it.

Share this dragon.

If you do,

lucky end for

them and you.

She would tell them, if they asked, that the words were just an ironic joke. If they didn't believe her, they would strip off the picture and she'd have to find another way.

She sent it on every letter from then on. Including to the other kids. She got it back from them on messages after that, so they had picked up on what she was doing and were helping. Whether their captors were actually letting it leave the building or not, she had no way of knowing -- at first. Finally, though, she started getting it back on messages from outside. A single glance told her that she had succeeded -- her coded message was still embedded in the picture. It hadn't been stripped out.

Now it was just a question of whether Bean would see it and look at it closely enough to realize that there was a mystery to solve.

Custody

To: Graff%pilgrimage@colmin.gov

From: Chamrajnagar%Jawaharlal@ifcom.gov

Re: Quandary

You know better than anyone how vital it is to maintain the independence of the Fleet from the machinations of politicians. That was my reason for rejecting "Locke's" suggestion. But in the event I was wrong. Nothing jeopardizes Fleet independence more than the prospect of one nation becoming dominant, especially if, as seems likely, the particular nation is one that has already shown a disposition to take over the IF and use it for nationalist purposes.

I'm afraid I was rather harsh with Locke. I dare not write to him directly, because, while Locke would be reliable, one can never know what Demosthenes would do with an official letter of apology from the Polemarch. Therefore please arrange for him to be notified that my threat is rescinded and I wish him well.

I do learn from my mistakes. Since one of Wiggin's companions remains outside the control of the aggressor, prudence dictates that young Delphiki be protected. Since you are Earthside and I am not, I give you brevet command over an IFM contingent and any other resources you need, orders forthcoming through level 6 backchannels (of course). I give you specific instructions not to tell me or anyone else of the steps you have taken to protect Delphiki or his family. There is to be no record in the IF system or that of any government.

By the way, trust no one in the Hegemony. I always knew they were a nest of careerists, but recent experience shows that the careerist is now being replaced by worse: the ideologue rampant.

Act swiftly. It appears that we are either on the verge of a new war, or the League War never quite ended after all.

How many days can you stay closed in, surrounded by guards, before you start to feel like a prisoner? Bean never felt claustrophobic in Battle School. Not even on Eros, where the low ceilings of the Buggers' tunnels teetered over them like a car slipping off its jack. Not like this, closed up with his family, pacing the four-room apartment. Well, not actually pacing it. He just felt like pacing it, and instead sat still, controlling himself, trying to think of some way to get control of his own life.

Being under someone else's protection was bad enough -- he had never liked that, though it had happened before, when Poke protected him on the streets of Rotterdam, and then when Sister Carlotta saved him from certain death by taking him in and sending him to Battle School. But both those times, there were things he could do to make sure everything went right. This was different. He knew something was going to go wrong, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The soldiers guarding this apartment, surrounding the building, they were all good, loyal men, Bean had no reason to doubt that. They weren't going to betray him. Probably. And the bureaucracy that was keeping his location a secret -- no doubt it would just be an honest oversight, not a conscious betrayal, that would give his address to his enemies.

And in the meantime, Bean could only wait, pinned down by his protectors. They were the web, holding him in place for the spider. And there wasn't a thing he could say to change this situation. If Greece were fighting a war, they'd set Bean and Nikolai to work, making plans, charting strategies. But when it came to a matter of security, they were just children, to be protected and taken care of. It would do no good for Bean to explain that his best protection was to get out of here, get off completely on his own, make a life for himself on the streets of some city where he could be nameless and faceless and lost and safe. Because they looked at him and saw nothing but a little kid. And who listens to little kids?

Little kids have to be taken care of.

By adults who don't have it in their power to keep those little kids safe.

He wanted to throw something through the window and jump down after it.

Instead he sat still. He read books. He signed on to the nets using one of his many names and cruised around, looking for whatever dribbles of information oozed through the military security systems of every nation, hoping for something to tell him where Petra and Fly Molo and Vlad and Dumper were being held. Some country that was showing signs of a little more cockiness because they thought they had the winning hand now. Or a country that was acting more cautious and methodical because finally somebody with a brain was running their strategy.

But it was pointless because he knew he wasn't going to find it this way. The real information never got onto the net until it was too late to do anything about it. Somebody knew. The facts he needed to find his way to his friends were available in a dozen sites -- he knew that, knew it, because that's the way it always was, the historians would find it and wonder for a thousand pages at a time: Why didn't anybody notice? Why didn't anybody put it together? Because the people who had the information were too dim to know what they had, and the people who could have understood it were locked in an apartment in an abandoned resort that even tourists didn't want to come to anymore.

The worst thing was that even Mother and Father were getting on his nerves. After a childhood with no parents, the best thing that had ever happened to him was when Sister Carlotta's research found his biological parents. The war ended, and when all the other kids got to go home to their families, Bean wasn't left over. He got to go home to his family, too. He had no childhood memories of them, of course. But Nikolai had, and Nikolai let Bean borrow them as if they were his own.

They were good people, his mother and his father. They never made him feel as if he were an intruder, a stranger, even a visitor. It was as if he had always belonged with them. They liked him. They loved him. It was a strange, exhilarating feeling to be with people who didn't want anything from you except your happiness, who were glad just to have you around.

But when you're already going crazy from confinement, it doesn't matter how much you like somebody, how much you love them, how grateful you are for their kindness to you. They will make you nuts. Everything they do grates on you like a bad song that won't get out of your head. You just want to scream at them to shut. Up. But you don't, because you love them and you know that you're probably driving them crazy too and as long as there's no hope of release you've got to keep things calm ...

And then finally there comes a knock on the door and you open it up and you realize that something different is finally going to happen.

It was Colonel Graff and Sister Carlotta at the door. Graff in a suit now, and Sister Carlotta in an extravagant auburn wig that made her look really stupid but also kind of pretty. The whole family recognized them at once, except that Nikolai had never met Sister Carlotta. But when Bean and his

family got up to greet them, Graff held up a hand to stop them and Carlotta put her finger to her lips. They came inside and closed the door after them and beckoned the family to gather in the bathroom.

It was a tight fit, the six of them in there. Father and Mother ended up standing in the shower while Graff hung a tiny machine from the overhead light. Once it was in place and the red light began blinking, Graff spoke softly.

"Hi," he said. "We came to get you out of this place."

"Why all the precautions in here?" asked Father.

"Because part of the security system here is to listen in on everything said in this apartment."

"To protect us, they spy on us?" asked Mother.

"Of course they do," said Father.

"Since anything we say here might leak into the system," said Graff, "and would most certainly leak right back out of the system, I brought this little machine, which hears every sound we make and produces countersounds that nullify them so we pretty much can't be heard."

"Pretty much?" asked Bean.

"That's why we won't go into any details," said Graff. "I'll tell you only this much. I'm the minister of Colonization, and we have a ship that leaves in a few months. Just time enough to get you off Earth, up to the ISL, and over to Eros for the launch."

But even as he said it, he was shaking his head, and Sister Carlotta was grinning and shaking her head, too, so that they would know that this was all a lie. A cover story.

"Bean and I have been in space before, Mother," said Nikolai, playing along. "It's not so bad."

"It's what we fought the war for," Bean chimed in. "The Formics wanted Earth because it was just like the worlds they already lived on. So now that they're gone, we get their worlds, which should be good for us. It's only fair, don't you think?"

Of course their parents both understood what was happening, but Bean knew Mother well enough by now that he wasn't surprised that she had to ask a completely useless and dangerous question just to be sure.

"But we're not really ..., " she began. Then Father's hand gently covered her mouth.

"It's the only way to keep us safe," Father said. "Once we're going at lightspeed, it'll seem like a couple of years to us, while decades pass on Earth. By the time we reach the other planet, everybody who wants us dead will be dead themselves."

"Like Joseph and Mary taking Jesus into Egypt," said Mother.

"Exactly," said Father.

"Except they got to go back to Nazareth."

"If Earth destroys itself in some stupid war," said Father, "it won't matter to us anymore, because we'll be part of a new world. Be happy about this, Elena. It means we can stay together." Then he kissed her.

"Time to go, Mr. and Mrs. Delphiki. Bring the boys, please." Graff reached up and yanked the damper from the ceiling light.

The soldiers who waited for them in the hall wore the uniform of the IF. Not a Greek uniform was in sight. And these young men were armed to the teeth. As they walked briskly to the stairs -- no elevators, no doors that might suddenly open to leave them trapped in a box for an enemy to toss in a grenade or a few thousand projectiles -- Bean watched the way the soldier in the lead watched everything, checked every corner, the light under every door in the hall, so that nothing could surprise him. Bean also saw how the man's body moved inside his clothes, with a kind of contained strength that made his clothes seem like kleenex, he could rip through the fabric just by tugging at it a little, because nothing could hold him in except his own self-control. It was like his sweat was pure testosterone. This was what a man was supposed to be. This was a soldier.

I was never a soldier, thought Bean. He tried to imagine himself the way he had been in Battle School, strapping on cut-down flashsuit pieces that never fit him right. He always looked like somebody's pet monkey dressed up as a human for the joke of it. Like a toddler who got clothes out of his big brother's dresser. The man in front of him, that's what Bean wanted to be when he grew up. But try as he might, he could never imagine himself actually being big. No, not even being full size. He would always be looking up at the world. He might be male, he might be human, or at least humanesque, but he would never be a manly. No one would ever look at him and say, Now, that's a man.

Then again, this soldier had never given orders that changed the course of history. Looking great in a uniform wasn't the only way to earn your place in the world.

Down the stairs, three flights, and then a pause for just a moment well back from the emergency exit while two of the soldiers came out and watched for the signal from the men in the IF chopper waiting thirty meters away. The signal came. Graff and Sister Carlotta led the way, still a brisk walk. They looked neither left nor right, just focused on the helicopter. They got in, sat down, buckled up, and the chopper tilted and rose from the grass and flew low out over the water.

Mother was all for demanding to know the real plan but again, Graff cut off all discussion with a cheerful bellow of, "Let's wait to discuss this until we can do it without shouting!"

Mother didn't like it. None of them did. But there was Sister Carlotta smiling her best nun smile, like a sort of Virgin-in-training. How could they help but trust her?

Five minutes in the air and then they set down on the deck of a submarine. It was a big one, with the stars and stripes of the United States, and it occurred to Bean that since they didn't know what country had kidnaped the other kids, how could they be sure they weren't just walking into the hands of their enemies?

But once they got down inside the ship, they could see that while the crew was in U.S. uniforms, the only people carrying weapons were the IF soldiers who had brought them and a half dozen more who had been waiting for them with the sub. Since power came from the barrel of a gun, and the only guns on the ship were under Graff's command, Bean's mind was eased a little.

"If you try to tell us that we can't talk here," Mother began -- but to her consternation Graff again held up a hand, and Sister Carlotta again made a shushing gesture as Graff beckoned them to follow their lead soldier through the narrow corridors of the sub.

Finally the six of them were packed once more into a tiny space -- this time the executive officer's cabin -- and once again they waited while Graff hung his noise damper and turned it on. When the light started blinking, Mother was the first to speak.

"I'm trying to figure out how we can tell we aren't being kidnaped just like the others," she said dryly.

"You got it," said Graff. "They were all taken by a group of terrorist nuns, aided by fat old bureaucrats."

"He's joking," said Father, trying to soothe Mother's immediate wrath.

"I know he's joking. I just don't think it's funny. After all we've been through, and then we're supposed to go along without a word, without a question, just ... trusting."

"Sorry," said Graff. "But you were already trusting the Greek government back where you were. You've got to trust somebody, so why not us?"

"At least the Greek Army explained things to us and pretended we had a right to make some decisions," said Mother.

They didn't explain things to me and Nikolai, Bean wanted to say.

"Come, children, no bickering," said Sister Carlotta. "The plan is very simple. The Greek Army continues to guard that apartment building as if you were still inside it, taking meals in and doing laundry. This fools no one, probably, but it makes the Greek government feel like they're part of the program. In the meantime, four passengers answering your description but flying under assumed names are taken to Eros where they embark on the first colony ship and only then, when the ship is

launched, is an announcement made that for their protection, the Delphiki family have opted for permanent emigration and a new life in a new world."

"And where are we really?" asked Father.

"I don't know," said Graff very simply.

"And neither do I," said Sister Carlotta.

Bean's family looked at them in disbelief.

"I guess that means we won't be staying in the sub," said Nikolai, "because then you'd absolutely know where we are."

"It's a double blind," said Bean. "They're splitting us up. I'll go one way, you'll go another."

"Absolutely not," said Father.

"We've had enough of a divided family," said Mother.

"It's the only way," said Bean. "I knew it already. I ... want it that way."

"You want to leave us?" said Mother.

"It's me they want to kill," said Bean.

"We don't know that!" said Mother.

"But we're pretty sure," said Bean. "If I'm not with you, then even if you're found, they'll probably leave you alone."

"And if we're divided," said Nikolai, "it changes the profile of what they're looking for. Not a mother and father and two boys. Now it's a mother and father and one boy. And a grandma and her grandchild." Nikolai grinned at Sister Carlotta.

"I was rather hoping to be taken for an aunt," she said.

"You talk as if you already know the plan!" said Mother.

"It was obvious," said Nikolai. "From the moment they told us the cover story in the bathroom. Why else would Colonel Graff bring Sister Carlotta?"

"It wasn't obvious to me," said Mother.

"Or to me," said Father. "But that's what happens when your sons are both brilliant military minds."

"How long?" Mother demanded. "When will it end? When do we get to have Bean back with us?"

"I don't know," said Graff.

"He can't know, Mother," said Bean. "Not until we know who did the kidnappings and why. When we know what the threat actually is, then we can judge when we've taken sufficient countermeasures to make it safe for us to come partway out of hiding."

Mother suddenly burst into tears. "And you want this, Julian?"

Bean put his arms around her. Not because he felt any personal need to do it, but because he knew she needed that gesture from him. Living with a family for a year had not given him the full complement of normal human emotional responses, but at least it had made him more aware of what they ought to be. And he did have one normal reaction -- he felt a little guilty that he could only fake what Mother needed, instead of having it come from the heart. But such gestures never came from the heart, for Bean. It was a language he had learned too late for it to come naturally to him. He would always speak the language of the heart with an awkward foreign accent.

The truth was that even though he loved his family, he was eager to get to a place where he could get to work making the contacts he needed to get the information that would let him find his friends. Except for Ender, he was the only one from Ender's Jeesh that was outside and free. They needed him, and he'd wasted enough time already.

So he held his mother, and she clung to him, and she shed many tears. He also embraced his father, but more briefly; and he and Nikolai only punched each other's arms. All foreign gestures to Bean, but they knew he meant to mean them, and took them as if they were real.

The sub was fast. They weren't very long at sea before they reached a crowded port -- Salonika, Bean assumed, though it could have been any other cargo port on the Aegean. The sub never actually entered the harbor. Instead, it surfaced between two ships moving in a parallel track toward the harbor. Mother, Father, Nikolai, and Graff were transferred to a freighter along with two of the soldiers, who were now in civilian clothes, as if that could conceal the soldierly way they acted. Bean and Carlotta stayed behind. Neither group would know where the other was. There would be no effort to contact each other. That had been another hard realization for Mother. "Why can't we write?"

"Nothing is easier to track than email," said Father. "Even if we use disguised online identities, if someone finds us, and we're writing regularly to Julian, then they'll see the pattern and track him down."

Mother understood it then. With her head, if not her heart.

Down inside the sub, Bean and Sister Carlotta sat down at a tiny table in the mess.

"Well?" said Bean.

"Well," said Sister Carlotta.

"Where are we going?" asked Bean.

"I have no idea," said Sister Carlotta. "They'll transfer us to another ship at another port, and we'll get off, and I have these false identities that we're supposed to use, but I really have no idea where we should go from there."

"We have to keep moving. No more than a few weeks in any one place," said Bean. "And I have to get on the nets with new identities every time we move, so no one can track the pattern."

"Do you seriously think someone will catalogue all the email in the entire world and follow up on all the ones that move around?" asked Sister Carlotta.

"Yes," said Bean. "They probably already do, so it's just a matter of running a search."

"But that's billions of emails a day."

"That's why it takes so many clerks to check all the email addresses on the file cards in the central switchboard," said Bean. He grinned at Sister Carlotta.

She did not grin back. "You really are a snotty and disrespectful little boy," she said.

"You're really leaving it up to me to decide where we go?"

"Not at all. I'm merely waiting to make a decision until we both agree."

"Oh, now, that's a cheap excuse to stay down here in this sub with all these great-looking men."

"Your level of banter has become even more crude than it was when you lived on the streets of Rotterdam," she said, coolly analytical.

"It's the war," said Bean. "It ... it changes a man."

She couldn't keep a straight face any longer. Even though her laugh was only a single bark, and her smile lasted only a moment longer, it was enough. She still liked him. And he, to his surprise, still liked her, even though it had been years since he lived with her while she educated him to a level where Battle School would take him. He was surprised because, at the time he lived with her, he had never let himself realize that he liked her. After Poke's death, he hadn't been willing to admit to himself that he liked anybody. But now he knew the truth. He liked Sister Carlotta just fine.

Of course, she would probably get on his nerves after a while, too, just like his parents had. But at least when that happened, they could pick up and move. There wouldn't be soldiers keeping them indoors and away from the windows.

And if it ever became truly annoying, Bean could leave and strike out on his own. He'd never say that to Sister Carlotta, because it would only worry her. Besides, she was bound to know it already. She had all the test data. And those tests had been designed to tell everything about a person. Why, she probably knew him better than he knew himself.

Of course, he knew that back when he took the tests, there was hardly an honest answer on any of the psychological tests. He had already read enough psychology by the time he took them that he knew exactly what answers were needed to show the profile that would probably get him into Battle School. So in fact she didn't know him from those tests at all.

But then, he didn't have any idea what his real answers would have been, then or now. So it isn't as if he knew himself any better.

And because she had observed him, and she was wise in her own way, she probably did know him better than he knew himself.

What a laugh, though. To think that one human being could ever really know another. You could get used to each other, get so habituated that you could speak their words right along with them, but you never knew why other people said what they said or did what they did, because they never even knew themselves. Nobody understands anybody.

And yet somehow we live together, mostly in peace, and get things done with a high enough success rate that people keep trying. Human beings get married and a lot of the marriages work, and they have children and most of them grow up to be decent people, and they have schools and businesses and factories and farms that have results at some level of acceptability -- all without having a clue what was going on inside anybody's head.

Muddling through, that's what human beings do.

That was the part of being human that Bean hated the most.

Ambition

To: Locke%espinoza@polnet.gov

From: Graff%%@colmin.gov

Re: Correction

I have been asked to relay a message that a threat of exposure has been rescinded, with apologies. Nor should you be alarmed that your identity is widely known. Your identity was penetrated at my direction several years ago, and while multiple persons then under my command were made aware of who you are, it is a group that has neither reason nor disposition to violate confidentiality. The only exception has now been chastened by circumstance. On a personal level, let me say that I have no doubt of your capacity to achieve your ambition. I can only hope that, in the event of success,

you will choose to emulate Washington, MacArthur, or Augustus rather than Napoleon, Alexander, or Hitler.

Colmin

Now and then Peter was almost overwhelmed by a desire to tell somebody what was actually happening in his life. He never succumbed to the desire, of course, since to tell it would be to undo it. But especially now that Valentine had gone, it was almost unbearable to sit there reading a personal letter from the Minister of Colonization and not shout for the other students in the library to come and see.

When he and Valentine had first broken through and placed essays or, in Valentine's case, diatribes on some of the major political nets, they had done a little hugging and laughing and jumping around. But it never took long for Valentine to remember how much she loathed half the positions she was forced to espouse in her Demosthenes persona, and her resulting gloom would calm him down as well. Peter missed her, of course, but he did not miss the arguments, the whining about having to be the bad guy. She could never see how the Demosthenes persona was the interesting one, the most fun to work with. Well, when he was done with it he'd give it back to her -- long before she got to whatever planet it was that she and Ender were heading for. She'd know by then that even at his most outrageous, Demosthenes was a catalyst, making things happen.

Valentine. Stupid to choose Ender and exile over Peter and life. Stupid to get so angry over the obvious necessity of keeping Ender off planet. For his own protection, Peter told her, and hadn't events proven it? If he'd come home as Valentine demanded, he'd be a captive somewhere, or dead, depending on whether his captors had been able to get him to cooperate. I was right, Valentine, as I've always been right about everything. But you'd rather be nice than right, you'd rather be liked than powerful, and you'd rather be in exile with the brother who worships you than share power with the brother who made you influential.

Ender was already gone, Valentine. When they took him away to Battle School, he was never coming home -- not the precious little Enderpoo that you adored and petted and watched over like a little mommy playing with a doll. They were going to make a soldier out of him, a killer -- did you even look at the video they showed during Graff's court-martial? -- and if something named Andrew Wiggin came home, it would not be the Ender you sentimentalized to the point of nausea. He'd be a damaged, broken, useless soldier whose war was finished. Pushing to have him sent off to a colony was the kindest thing I could have done for our erstwhile brother. Nothing would have been sadder than having his biography include the ruin that his life would have become here on Earth, even if nobody bothered to kidnap him. Like Alexander, he'll go out with a flash of brilliant light and live forever in glory, instead of withering away and dying in miserable obscurity, getting trotted out for parades now and then. I was the kind one!

Good riddance to both of you. You would have been drags on my boat, thorns in my side, pains in my ass.

But it would have been fun to show Valentine the letter from Graff -- Graff himself! Even though he hid his private access code, even though he was condescending in his urging Peter to emulate the

nice guys of history -- as if anybody ever planned to create an ephemeral empire like Napoleon's or Hitler's -- the fact was that even knowing that Locke, far from being some elder statesman speaking anonymously from retirement, was just an underage college student, Graff still thought Peter was worth talking to. Still worth giving advice to, because Graff knew that Peter Wiggin mattered now and would matter in the future. Damn right, Graff!

Damn right, everybody! Ender Wiggin may have saved your asses against the Buggers, but I'm the one who's going to save humanity's collective rectum from its own colostomy. Because human beings have always been more dangerous to the survival of the human race than anything else except the complete destruction of planet Earth, and now we're taking steps to evade even that by spreading our seed -- including little Enderseed himself -- to other worlds. Does Graff have any idea how hard I worked to make his little Ministry of Colonization come into existence in the first place? Has anybody bothered to track the history of the good ideas that have actually become law to see how many times the trail leads back to Locke?

They actually consulted with me when they were deciding whether to offer you the title of Colmin with which you so affectedly sign your emails. Bet you didn't know that, Mr. Minister. Without me, you might have been signing your letters with stupid good-luck dragon pictures like half the morons on the net these days.

And for a few minutes it just about killed him that nobody could know about this letter except himself and Graff.

And then ...

The moment passed. His breathing returned to normal. His wiser self prevailed. It's better not to be distracted by the interference of personal fame. In due course his name would be revealed, he'd take his place in a position of authority instead of mere influence. For now, anonymity would do.

He saved the message from Graff, and then sat there staring at the display.

His hand was trembling.

He looked at it as if it were someone else's hand. What in the world is that about, he wondered. Am I such a celebrity hound that getting a letter from a top Hegemony official makes me shake like a teenager at a pop concert?

No. The cool realist took over. He was not trembling out of excitement. That, as always, was transitory, already gone.

He was trembling out of fear.

Because somebody was assembling a team of strategists. The top kids from the Battle School program. The ones they chose to fight the final battle to save humanity. Somebody had them and meant to use them. And sooner or later, that somebody would be Peter's rival, head to head with

him, and Peter would have to outthink not only that rival, but also the kids he had managed to bend to his will.

Peter hadn't made it into Battle School. He didn't have what it took. For one reason or another, he was cut from the program without ever leaving home. So every kid who went to Battle School was more likely to make a good strategist and tactician than Peter Wiggin, and Peter's principal rival for hegemony had collected around himself the very best of them all.

Except for Ender, of course. Ender, whom I could have brought home if I had pulled the right strings and manipulated public opinion the other way. Ender, who was the best of all and might have been standing by my side. But no, I sent him away. For his own damn good. For his own safety. And now here I am, facing the struggle that my whole life has been devoted to, and all I've got to face the best of the Battle School is ... me.

His hand trembled. So what? He'd be crazy not to be just a little bit afraid.

But when that moron Chamrajnagar threatened to expose him and bring the whole thing crashing down, just because he was too stupid to see how Demosthenes was necessary in order to bring about results that Locke's persona could never reach for -- he had spent weeks in hell over that. Watching as the Battle School kids were kidnaped. Unable to do anything, to say anything pertinent. Oh, he answered letters that some people sent, he did enough investigating to satisfy himself that only Russia had the resources to bring it off. But he dared not use Demosthenes to demand that the IF be investigated for its failure to protect these children. Demosthenes could only make some routine suppositions about how it was bound to be the Warsaw Pact that had taken the kids -- but of course everyone expected Demosthenes to say that, he was a well-known russophobe, it meant nothing. All because some short-sighted, stupid, self-serving admiral had decided to interfere with the one person on Earth who seemed to care about trying to keep the world from another visit from Attila the Hun. He wanted to scream at Chamrajnagar: I'm the one who writes essays while the other guy kidnaps children, but because you know who I am and you have no clue who he is, you reach out to stop me? That was about as bright as the pinheads who handed the government of Germany to Hitler because they thought he would be "useful" to them.

Now Chamrajnagar had relented. Sent a cowardly apology through someone else so he could avoid letting Peter have a letter with his signature on it. Too late anyway. The damage was done. Chamrajnagar had not only done nothing, he had kept Peter from doing anything, and now Peter faced a chess game where his side of the board had nothing but pawns, and the other player had a double complement of knights, rooks, and bishops.

So Peter's hand trembled. And he sometimes caught himself wishing that he weren't in this thing so utterly, absolutely alone. Did Napoleon, in his tent alone, wonder what the hell he was doing, betting everything, over and over again, on the ability of his army to do the impossible? Didn't Alexander, once in a while, wish there were someone else he could trust to make a decision or two?

Peter's lip curled in self-contempt. Napoleon? Alexander? It was the other guy who had a stableful of steeds like that to ride. While I have had it certified by the Battle School testing program that I am about as militarily talented as, say, John F. Kennedy, that U.S. President who lost his PT boat

through carelessness and got a medal for it because his father had money and political pull, and then became President and made an unbroken string of stupid moves that never hurt him much politically because the press loved him so much.

That's me. I can manipulate the press. I can paint public opinion, nudge and pull and poke and inject things into it, but when it comes to war -- and it will come to war -- I'm going to look about as clever as the French when the blitzkrieg rolled through.

Peter looked around the reading room. Not much of a library. Not much of a school. But because he entered college early, being a certifiably gifted pupil, and not caring a whit about his formal education, he had gone to the hometown branch of the state university. For the first time he found himself envying the other students who were studying there. All they had to worry about was the next test, or keeping their scholarship, or their dating life.

I could have a life like theirs.

Right. He'd have to kill himself if he ever came to care what some teacher thought of an essay he wrote, or what some girl thought about the clothes he wore, or whether one soccer team could beat another.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. All this self-doubt was pointless. He knew he would never stop until he was forced to stop. From childhood on, he knew that the world was his to change, if he found the right levers to pull. Other children bought the stupid idea that they had to wait until they grew up to do anything important. Peter knew better from the start. He could never have been fooled the way Ender was into thinking he was playing a game. For Peter, the only game worth playing was the real world. The only reason Ender was fooled was because he let other people shape reality for him. That had never been Peter's problem.

Except that all Peter's influence on the real world had been possible only because he could hide behind the anonymity of the net. He had created a persona -- two personas -- that could change the world because nobody knew they were children and therefore ignorable. But when it came to armies and navies clashing in the real world, the influence of political thinkers receded. Unless, like Winston Churchill, they were recognized as being so wise and so right that when the crisis came, the reins of real power were put in their hands. That was fine for Winston -- old, fat, and full of booze as he was, people still took him seriously. But as far as anyone who saw Peter Wiggin could know, he was still a kid.

Still, Winston Churchill had been the inspiration for Peter's plan. Make Locke seem so prescient, so right about everything, that when war began, public fear of the enemy and public trust in Locke would overwhelm their disdain for youth and allow Peter to reveal the face behind the mask and, like Winston, take his place as leader of the good guys.

Well, he had miscalculated. He had not guessed that Chamrajnagar already knew who he was. Peter wrote to him as the first step in a public campaign to get the Battle School children under the protection of the fleet. Not so that they would actually be removed from their home countries -- he never expected any government to allow that -- but so that, when someone moved against them, it

would be widely known that Locke had sounded the warning. But Chamrajnagar had forced Peter to keep Locke silent, so no one knew that Locke had foreseen the kidnappings but Chamrajnagar and Graff. The opportunity had been missed.

Peter wouldn't give up. There was some way to get back on track. And sitting there in the library in Greensboro, North Carolina, leaning back in a chair with his eyes closed like any other weary student, he'd think of it.

*

They roused Ender's jeesh out of bed at 0400 and assembled them in the dining room. No one explained anything, and they were forbidden to talk. So they waited for five minutes, ten, twenty. Petra knew that the others were bound to be thinking the same things she was thinking: The Russians had caught on that they were sabotaging their own battle plans. Or maybe somebody had noticed the coded message in the dragon picture. Whatever it was, it wasn't going to be nice.

Thirty minutes after they were roused, the door opened. Two soldiers came in and stood at attention. And then, to Petra's utter surprise, in walked ... a kid. No older than they were. Twelve? Thirteen? Yet the soldiers were treating him with respect. And the kid himself moved with the easy confidence of authority. He was in charge here. And he loved it.

Had Petra seen him before? She didn't think so. Yet he looked at them as if he knew them. Well, of course he did -- if he had authority here, he had no doubt been observing them for the weeks they'd been in captivity.

A child in charge. Had to be a Battle School kid -- why else would a government give such power to somebody so young? From his age they had to be contemporaries. But she couldn't place him. And her memory was very, very good.

"Don't worry," said the boy. "The reason you don't know me is that I came to Battle School late, and I was only there a little while before you all left for Tactical. But I know you." He grinned. "Or is there someone here who did know me when I came in? Don't worry, I'll be studying the vid later. Looking for that little shock of recognition. Because if any of you did know me, well, then I'll know something more about you. I'll know that I saw you once before, silhouetted in the dark, walking away from me, leaving me for dead."

With that, Petra knew who he was. Knew because Crazy Tom had told them about it -- how Bean had set a trap for this boy that he knew in Rotterdam, and with the help of four other kids had hung him up in an air shaft until he confessed to a dozen murders or so. They left him there, gave the recording to the teachers, and told them where he was. Achilles.

The only member of Ender's Jeesh that had been with Bean that day was Crazy Tom. Bean had never talked about it, and no one asked. It made Bean a figure of mystery, that he had come from a life so dark and frightening that it was peopled with monsters like Achilles. What none of them had ever expected was to find Achilles, not in a mental institution or a prison, but here in Russia with soldiers under his command and themselves as his prisoners.

When Achilles studied the vids, it was possible that Crazy Tom would show recognition. And when he told his story, he would no doubt see recognition on all their faces. She had no idea what this meant, but she knew it couldn't be good. One thing was certain -- she wasn't going to let Crazy Tom face the consequences alone.

"We all know who you are," said Petra. "You're Achilles. And nobody left you for dead, the way Bean told it. They left you for the teachers. To arrest and send you back to Earth. To a mental institution, no doubt. Bean even showed us your picture. If anybody recognized you, it was from that."

Achilles turned to her and smiled. "Bean would never tell that story. He would never show my picture."

"Then you don't know Bean," said Petra. She hoped the others would realize that admitting they heard it from Crazy Tom would be dangerous to him. Probably fatal, with this oomay in charge of the triggers. Bean wasn't here, so naming him as the source made sense.

"Oh, yes, you're quite the team," said Achilles. "Passing signals to each other, sabotaging the plans you submit, thinking we'll be too stupid to notice. Did you really think we'd set you to work on real plans before we turned you?"

As usual, Petra couldn't shut up. But she didn't really want to, either. "Trying to see which of us felt like outsiders, so you could turn them?" she said. "What a joke -- there were no outsiders in Ender's jeesh. The only outsider here is you."

In fact, though, she knew perfectly well that Carn Carby, Shen, Vlad, and Fly Molo felt like outsiders, for various reasons. She felt like one herself. Her words were designed only to urge them all to maintain solidarity.

"So now you divide us up and start working on us," said Petra. "Achilles, we know your moves before you make them."

"You really can't hurt my pride," said Achilles. "Because I don't have any. All I care about is uniting humanity under one government. Russia is the only nation, the only people who have the will to greatness and the power to back it up. You're here because some of you might be useful in that effort. If we think you have what it takes, we'll invite you to join us. The rest of you, we'll just keep on ice till the war is over. The real losers, well, we'll send you home and hope your home government uses you against us." He grinned. "Come on, don't look so grim. You know you were going crazy back home. You didn't even know those people. You left them when you were so little you still got shit on your fingers when you wiped your ass. What did they know about you? What did you know about them? That they let you go. Me, I didn't have any families, Battle School just meant three meals a day. But you, they took away everything from you. You don't owe them anything. What you've got is your mind. Your talent. You've been tagged for greatness. You won their war with the Buggers for them. And they sent you home so your parents could go back to raising you?"

Nobody said anything. Petra was sure they all had as much contempt for his spiel as she did. He knew nothing about them. He'd never be able to divide them. He'd never win their loyalty. They knew too much about him. And they didn't like being held against their will.

He knew it, too. Petra saw it in his eyes, the rage dancing there as he realized that they had nothing but contempt for him.

At least he could see her contempt, because he zeroed in on her, took a few steps closer, smiling ever more kindly.

"Petra, it's so nice to meet you," he said. "The girl who tested so aggressive they had to check your DNA to make sure you weren't really a boy."

Petra felt the blood drain from her face. Nobody was supposed to know about that. It was a test the psychiatrists in Ground School had ordered when they decided her contempt for them was a symptom of dysfunction instead of what they deserved for asking her such stupid questions. It wasn't even supposed to be in her file. But apparently a record existed somewhere. Which was, of course, the message Achilles intended to get across to them: He knew everything. And, as a side benefit, it would start the others wondering just how puffed up she was.

"Eight of you. Only two missing from the glorious victory. Ender, the great one, the genius, the keeper of the holy grail -- he's off founding a colony somewhere. We'll all be in our fifties by the time he gets there, and he'll still be a little kid. We're going to make history. He is history." Achilles smirked at his pun.

But Petra knew that mocking Ender wasn't going to play with this group. Achilles no doubt assumed that the eight of them were also-rans, runners-up, the ones who wanted to have Ender's job and had to sit there and watch him do it. He assumed that they were all burning with envy -- because he would have been eaten alive with it. But he was wrong. He didn't understand them at all. They missed Ender. They were Ender's jeesh. And this yelda actually thought that he could forge them into a team the way Ender had.

"And then there's Bean," Achilles went on. "The youngest of you, the one whose test scores made you all look like halfwits, he could teach the rest of you classes in how to lead armies -- except you probably wouldn't understand him, he's such a genius. Where could he be? Anybody miss him?"

Nobody answered. This time, though, Petra knew that the silence hid a different set of feelings. There had been some resentment of Bean. Not because of his brilliance, or at least no one admitted resenting him for that. What annoyed them was the way he just assumed he knew better than anyone. And that awkward time before Ender arrived on Eros, when Bean was the acting commander of the jeesh, that was hard on some of them, taking orders from the youngest of them. So maybe Achilles had guessed right about that.

Except that nobody was proud of those feelings, and bringing them out in the open didn't exactly make them love Achilles. Of course, it might be shame he was trying to provoke. Achilles might be smarter than they thought.

Probably not. He was so out of his league in trying to scope this group of military prodigies that he might as well be wearing a clown suit and throwing water balloons for all the respect he was going to get.

"Ah, yes, Bean," said Achilles. "I'm sorry to inform you that he's dead."

This was apparently too much for Crazy Tom, who yawned and said, "No he's not."

Achilles looked amused. "You think you know more about it than I do?"

"We've been on the nets," said Shen. "We'd know."

"You've been away from your desks since 2200. How do you know what's been happening while you slept?" Achilles glanced at his watch. "Oops, you're right. Bean is still alive right now. And for another fifteen minutes or so. Then ... whoosh! A nice little rocket straight to his little bedroom to blow him up right on his little bed. We didn't even have to buy his location from the Greek military. Our friends there gave us the information for free."

Petra's heart sank. If Achilles could arrange for them to be kidnaped, he could certainly arrange for Bean to be killed. Killing was always easier than taking someone alive.

Did Bean already notice the message in the dragon, decode it, and pass along the information? Because if he's dead, there's no one else who'll be able to do it.

Immediately she was ashamed that the news of Bean's death made her think first of herself. But it didn't mean she didn't care about the kid. It meant that she trusted him so much that she had pinned all her hopes on him. If he died, those hopes died with him. It was not indecent of her to think of that.

To say it out loud, that would be indecent. But you can't help the thoughts that come to mind.

Maybe Achilles was lying. Or maybe Bean would survive, or get away. And if he died, maybe he'd already decoded the message. Maybe he hadn't. There was nothing Petra could do to change the outcome.

"What, no tears?" said Achilles. "And here I thought you were such close friends. I guess that was all hero-hype." He chuckled. "Well, I'm done with you for now." He turned to a soldier by the door. "Travel time."

The soldier left. They heard a few words of Russian and at once sixteen soldiers came in and divided up, one pair to each of the kids.

"You're being separated now," said Achilles. "Wouldn't want anyone to start thinking of a rescue operation. You can still email each other. We want your creative synergy to continue. After all,

you're the finest little military minds that humanity was able to squeeze out in its hour of need. We're all really proud of you, and we look forward to seeing your finest work in the near future."

One of the kids farted loudly.

Achilles only grinned, winked at Petra, and left.

Ten minutes later they were all in separate vehicles, being driven away to points unknown, somewhere in the vast reaches of the largest country on the face of the Earth.

CODE

To: Graff%pilgrimage@colmin.gov
From: Konstan%Briseis@helstrat.gov
Re: Leak

Your Excellency, I write to you myself because I was most vociferously opposing to your plan to take young Julian Delphiki from our protection. I was wrong as we learnt from the missile assault on former apartment today leaving two soldiers dead. We are follow your previous advice by public release that Julian was killed in attack. His room was target in late night and he would die instead of soldiers sleeping there. Penetration of our system very deep, obviously. We trust no one now. You were just in time and I regret my making of delay. My pride in Hellene military made me blind. You see I speak Common a little after all, no more bluffing between me and true friend to Greece. Because of you and not me a great national resource is not destroy.

If Bean had to be in hiding, there were worse places he could be than Araraquara. The town, named for a species of parrot, had been kept as something of a museum piece, with cobbled streets and old buildings. They weren't particularly beautiful old buildings or picturesque houses--even the cathedral was rather dull, and not particularly ancient, having been finished in the twentieth century. Still, there was the sense of a quieter way of life that had once been common in Brasil. The growth that had turned nearby Ribeirido Preto into a sprawling metropolis had pretty much passed Araraquara by. And even though the people were modern enough--you heard as much Common on the streets as Portuguese these days--Bean felt at home here in a way that he had never felt in Greece, where the desire to be fully European and fully Greek at the same time distorted public life and public spaces.

"It won't do to feel too much at home," said Sister Carlotta. "We can't stay anywhere for long."

"Achilles is the devil," said Bean. "Not God. He can't reach everywhere. He can't find us without some kind of evidence."

"He doesn't have to reach everywhere," said Sister Carlotta. "Only where we are."

"His hate for us makes him blind," said Bean.

"His fear makes him unnaturally alert."

Bean grinned-it was an old game between them. "It might not be Achilles who took the other kids."

"It might not be gravity that holds us to Earth," said Sister Carlotta, "but rather an unknown force with identical properties."

Then she grinned, too.

Sister Carlotta was a good traveling companion. She had a sense of humor. She understood his jokes and he enjoyed hers. But most of all, she liked to spend hours and hours without saying a thing, doing her work while he did his own. When they did talk, they were evolving a kind of oblique language where they both already knew everything that mattered so they only had to refer to it and the other would understand. Not that this implied they were kindred spirits or deeply attuned. It's just that their lives only touched at a few key points-they were in hiding, they were cut off from friends and family, and the same enemy wanted them dead. There was no one to gossip about because they knew no one. There was no chat because they had no interests beyond the projects at hand: trying to figure out where the other kids were being held, trying to determine what nation Achilles was serving (which would no doubt soon be serving him), and trying to understand the shape the world was taking so they could interfere with it, perhaps bending the course of history to a better end.

That was Sister Carlotta's goal, at least, and Bean was willing to take part in it, given that the same research required for the first two projects was identical to the research required for the last. He wasn't sure that he cared about the shape of history in the future.

He said that to Sister Carlotta once, and she only smiled. "Is it the world outside yourself you don't care about," she said, "or the future as a whole, including your own?"

"Why should I care about narrowing down which things in particular I don't care about?"

"Because if you didn't care about your own future, you wouldn't care whether you were alive to see it, and you wouldn't be going through all this nonsense to stay alive."

"I'm a mammal," said Bean. "I try to live forever whether I actually want to or not."

"You're a child of God, so you care what happens to his children whether you admit it to yourself or not."

It was not her glib response that bothered him, because he expected it-he had provoked it, really, no doubt (he told himself) because he liked the reassurance that if there was a God, then Bean mattered to him. No, what bothered him was the momentary darkness that passed across her face. A fleeting expression, barely revealed, which he would not have noticed had he not known her face so well, and had darkness so rarely been expressed on it.

Something that I said made her feel sad. And yet it was a sadness that she wants to conceal from me. What did I say? That I'm a mammal? She's used to my gibes about her religion. That I might

not want to live forever? Perhaps she worries that I'm depressed. That I try to live forever, despite my desires? Perhaps she fears that I'll die young. Well, that was why they were in Araraquara-to prevent his early death. And hers, too, for that matter. He had no doubt, though, that if a gun were pointed at him, she would leap in front of him to take the bullet. He did not understand why. He would not do the same for her, or for anyone. He would try to warn her, or pull her out of the way, or interfere with the shooter, whatever he could do that left them both a reasonable chance of survival. But he would not deliberately die to save her.

Maybe it was a thing that women did. Or maybe that grown-ups did for children. To give your life to save someone else. To weigh your own survival and decide that it mattered less to you than the survival of another. Bean could not fathom how anyone could feel that way. Shouldn't the irrational mammal take over, and force them to act for their own survival? Bean had never tried to suppress his own survival instinct, but he doubted that he could even if he tried. But then, maybe older people were more willing to part with their lives, having already spent the bulk of their starting capital. Of course, it made sense for parents to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children, particularly parents too old to make more babies. But Sister Carlotta had never had children. And Bean was not the only one that she would die for. She would leap out to take a bullet for a stranger. She valued her own life less than anyone's. And that made her utterly alien to him.

Survival, not of the fittest, but of myself-that is the purpose at the core of my being. That is the reason, ultimately, that I do all the things that I've done. There have been moments when I felt compassion when, alone of Ender's jeesh, I knowingly sent men to their certain deaths, I felt a deep sorrow for them. But I sent them, and they went. Would I, in their place, have gone as they did, obeying an order? Dying to save unknown future generations who would never know their names?

Bean doubted it.

He would gladly serve humanity if it happened also to serve himself. Fighting the Formics alongside Ender and the other kids, that made sense because saving humanity included saving Bean. And if by managing to stay alive somewhere in the world, he was also a thorn in the side of Achilles, making him less cautious, less wise, and therefore easier to defeat-well, it was a pleasant bonus that Bean's pursuit of his own survival happened also to give the human race a chance to defeat the monster. And since the best way to survive would be to find Achilles and kill him first, he might turn out to be one of the great benefactors of human history. Though now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember a single assassin who was remembered as a hero. Brutus, perhaps. His reputation had had its ups and downs. Most assassins, though, were despised by history. Probably because successful assassins tended to be those whose target was not particularly dangerous to anyone. By the time everyone agreed that a particular monster was well worth assassinating, the monster had far too much power and paranoia to leave any possibility of an assassination actually being carried out.

He got nowhere when he tried to discuss it with Sister Carlotta.

"I can't argue with you so I don't know why you bother. I only know that I won't help you plot his assassination."

"You don't consider it self-defense?" said Bean. "What is this, one of those stupid vids where the hero can never actually kill a bad guy who isn't actually pointing a gun at him right that very moment?"

"It's my faith in Christ," said Carlotta. "Love your enemy, do good to those who hate you."

"Well, where does that leave us? The nicest thing we could do for Achilles would be to post our address on the nets and wait for him to send someone to kill us."

"Don't be absurd," said Carlotta. "Christ said be good to your enemies. It wouldn't be good for Achilles to find us, because then he'd kill us and have even more murders to answer for before the judgment bar of God. The best thing we can do for Achilles is to keep him from killing us. And if we love him, we'll stop him from ruling the world while we're at it, since power like that would only compound his opportunities to sin."

"Why don't we love the hundreds and thousands and millions of people who'll die in the wars he's planning to launch?"

"We do love them," said Carlotta. "But you're confused the way so many people are, who don't understand the perspective of God. You keep thinking that death is the most terrible thing that can happen to a person, but to God, death just means you're coming home a few moments ahead of schedule. To God, the dreadful outcome of a human life is when that person embraces sin and rejects the joy that God offers. So of all the millions who might die in a war, each individual life is tragic only if it ends in sin."

"So why are you going to such trouble to keep me alive?" asked Bean, thinking he knew the answer.

"You want me to say something that will weaken my case," said Carlotta. "Like telling you that I'm human and so I want to prevent your death right now because I love you. And that's true, I have no children but you're as close as I come to having any, and I would be stricken to the soul if you died at the hands of that twisted boy. But in truth, Julian Delphiki, the reason I work so hard to prevent your death is because, if you died today, you would probably go to hell."

To his surprise, Bean was stung by this. He understood enough of what Carlotta believed that he could have predicted this attitude, but the fact that she put it into words still hurt. "I'm not going to repent and get baptized, so I'm bound to go to hell, therefore no matter when I die I'm doomed," he said.

"Nonsense. Our understanding of doctrine is not perfect, and no matter what the popes have said, I don't believe for a moment that God is going to damn for eternity the billions of children he allowed to be born and die without baptism. No, I think you're likely to go to hell because, despite all your brilliance, you are still quite amoral. Sometime before you die, I pray most earnestly that you will learn that there are higher laws that transcend mere survival, and higher causes to serve. When you give yourself to such a great cause, my dear boy, then I will not fear your death, because

I know that a just God will forgive you for the oversight of not having recognized the truth of Christianity during your lifetime."

"You really are a heretic," said Bean. "None of those doctrines would pass muster with any priest."

"They don't even pass muster with me," said Carlotta. "But I don't know a soul who doesn't maintain two separate lists of doctrines-the ones that they believe that they believe; and the ones that they actually try to live by. I'm simply one of the rare ones who knows the difference. You, my boy, are not."

"Because I don't believe in any doctrines."

"That," said Carlotta with exaggerated smugness, "is proof positive of my assertion. You are so convinced that you believe only what you believe that you believe, that you remain utterly blind to what you really believe without believing you believe it."

"You were born in the wrong century," said Bean. "You could make Thomas Aquinas tear out his hair. Nietzsche and Derrida would accuse you of obfuscation. Only the Inquisition would know what to do with you-toast you nice and brown."

"Don't tell me you've actually read Nietzsche and Derrida. Or Aquinas, for that matter."

"You don't have to eat the entire turd to know that it's not a crab cake."

"You arrogant impossible boy."

"But Geppetta, I'm not a real boy."

"You're certainly not a puppet, or not my puppet, anyway. Go outside and play now, I'm busy."

Sending him outside was not a punishment, however. Sister Carlotta knew that. From the moment they got their desks linked to the nets, they had both spent most of every day indoors, gathering information. Carlotta, whose identity was shielded by the firewalls in the Vatican computer system, was able to continue all her old relationships and thus had access to all her best sources, taking care only to avoid saying where she was or even what time zone she was in. Bean, however, had to create a new identity from scratch, hiding behind a double blind of mail servers specializing in anonymity, and even then he kept no identity for longer than a week. He formed no relationships and therefore could develop no sources. When he needed specific information, he had to ask Carlotta to help him find it, and then she had to determine whether it was something she might legitimately ask, or whether it was something that might be a clue that she had Bean with her. Most of the time she decided she dared not ask. So Bean was crippled in his research. Still, they shared what information they could, and despite his disadvantages, there was one advantage that remained to him: The mind looking at his data was his own. The mind that had scored higher than anyone else on the Battle School tests. Unfortunately, Truth did not care much about such credentials. It refused to give up and reveal itself just because it realized you were bound to find it eventually.

Bean could only take so many hours of frustration before he had to get up and go outside. It wasn't just to get away from his work, however. "The climate agrees with me," he told Sister Carlotta on their second day, when, dripping with sweat, he headed for his third shower since waking. "I was born to live with heat and humidity."

At first she had insisted on going everywhere with him. But after a few days he was able to persuade her of several things. First, he looked old enough not to be accompanied by his grandmother everywhere he went-"Avo Carlotta" was what he called her here, their cover story. Second, she would be no protection for him anyway, since she had no weapons and no defensive skills. Third, he was the one who knew how to live on the streets, and even though Araraquara was hardly the kind of dangerous place that Rotterdam had been when he was younger, he had already mapped in his mind a hundred different escape routes and hiding places, just by reflex. When Carlotta realized that she would need his protection a lot more than he would need hers, she relented and allowed him to go out alone, as long as he did his best to remain inconspicuous.

"I can't stop people from noticing the foreign boy."

"You don't look that foreign," she said. "Mediterranean body types are common here. Just try not to speak a lot. Always look like you have an errand but never like you're in a hurry. But then, it was you who taught me that that was how to avoid attracting attention."

And so here he was today, weeks after they arrived in Brasil, wandering the streets of Araraquara and wondering what great cause might make his life worthwhile in Carlotta's eyes. For despite all her faith, it was her approval, not God's, that seemed like it might be worth striving for, as long as it didn't interfere with his project of staying alive. Was it enough to be a thorn in Achilles' side? Enough to look for ways to oppose him? Or was there something else he should be doing?

At the crest of one of Araraquara's many hills there was a sorvete shop run by a Japanese-Brazilian family. The family had been in business there for centuries, as their sign proclaimed, and Bean was both amused and moved by this, in light of what Carlotta had said. For this family, making flavored frozen desserts to eat from a cone or cup was the great cause that gave them continuity through the ages. What could be more trivial than that? And yet Bean came here, again and again, because their recipes were, in fact, delicious, and when he thought about how many other people for these past two or three hundred years must have paused and taken a moment's pleasure in the sweet and delicate flavors, in the feel of the smooth sorvete in their mouths, he could not disdain that cause. They offered something that was genuinely good, and people's lives were better because they offered it. It was not a noble cause that would get written up in the histories. But it was not nothing, either. A person could do worse than spend some large percentage of his life in a cause like that.

Bean wasn't even sure what it meant to give himself to a cause. Did that mean turning over his decision-making to someone else? What an absurd idea. In all likelihood there was no one smarter than him on Earth, and though that did not mean he was incapable of error, it certainly meant he'd have to be a fool to turn over his decisions to someone even more likely to be wrong.

Why he was wasting time on Carlotta's sentiment-ridden philosophy of life he didn't know. Doubtless that was one of his mistakes—the emotional human aspect of his mentality overriding the inhumanly aloof brilliance that, to his chagrin, only sometimes controlled his thinking.

The sorvete cup was empty. Apparently he had eaten it all without noticing. He hoped his mouth had enjoyed every taste of it, because the eating was done by reflex while he thought his thoughts.

Bean discarded the cup and went his way. A bicyclist passed him. Bean saw how the cyclist's whole body bounced and rattled and vibrated from the cobblestones. That is human life, thought Bean. So bounced around that we can never see anything straight.

Supper was beans and rice and stringy beef in the pensao's public dining room. He and Carlotta ate together in near silence, listening to other people's conversations and the clanking and clinking of dishes and silverware. Any real conversation between them would doubtless leak some memorable bit of information that might raise questions and attract attention. Like, why did a woman who talked like a nun have a grandson? Why did this child who looked to be six talk like a philosophy professor half the time? So they ate in silence except for conversations about the weather.

After supper, as always, they each signed

on to the nets to check their mail. Carlotta's mail was interesting and real. All of Bean's correspondents, this week anyway, thought he was a woman named Lettie who was working on her dissertation and needed information, but who had no time for a personal life and so rebuffed with alacrity any attempt at friendly and personal conversation. But so far, there was no way to find Achilles' signature in any nation's behavior. While most countries simply did not have the resources to kidnap Ender's jeesh in such a short time, of those that did have the resources, there was not one that Bean could rule out because they lacked the arrogance or aggressiveness or contempt for law to do it. Why, it could even have been done by Brasil itself—for all he knew, his former companions from the Formic War might be imprisoned somewhere in Araraquara. They might hear in the early morning the rumble of the very garbage truck that picked up the sorvete cup that he threw away today.

"I don't know why people spread these things," said Carlotta.

"What?" asked Bean, grateful for the break from the eye-blearing work he was doing.

"Oh, these stupid superstitious good-luck dragons. There must be a dozen different dragon pictures now."

"Oh, e," said Bean. "They're everywhere, I just don't notice them anymore. Why dragons, anyway?"

"I think this is the oldest of them. At least it's the one I saw first, with the little poem," said Carlotta. "If Dante were writing today, I'm sure there'd be a special place in his hell for people who start these things."

"What poem?"

" 'Share this dragon,' " Carlotta recited. " 'If you do, lucky end for them and you.' "

"Oh, yeah, dragons always bring a lucky end. I mean, what does that poem actually say? That you'll die lucky? That it'll be lucky for you to end?" Carlotta chuckled.

Bored with his correspondence, Bean kept the nonsense going. "Dragons aren't always lucky. They had to discontinue Dragon Army in Battle School, it was so unlucky. Till they revived it for Ender, and no doubt they gave it to him because people thought it was bad luck and they were trying to stack everything against him."

Then a thought passed through his mind, ever so briefly, but it woke him from his lethargy.

"Forward me that picture."

"I bet you already have it on a dozen letters."

"I don't want to search. Send me that one."

"You're still that Lettie person? Haven't you been that one for two weeks now?"

"Five days."

It took a few minutes for the message to be routed to him, but when it finally showed up in his mail, he looked closely at the image.

"Why in the world are you paying attention to this?" asked Carlotta.

He looked up to see her watching him.

"I don't know. Why are you paying attention to the way I'm paying attention to it?" He grinned at her.

"Because you think it matters. I may not be as smart as you are about most things, but I'm very much smarter than you are about you. I know when you're intrigued."

"Just the juxtaposition of the image of a dragon with the word 'end.' Endings really aren't considered all that lucky. Why wouldn't the person write 'luck will come' or 'lucky fate' or something else? Why 'lucky end'?"

"Why not?"

"End. Ender. Ender's army was Dragon."

"Now, that's a little far-fetched."

"Look at the drawing," said Bean. "Right in the middle, where the bitmap is so complicated-there's one line that's damaged. The dots don't line up at all. It's virtually random."

"It just looks like noise to me."

"If you were being held captive but you had computer access, only every bit of mail you sent out was scrutinized, how would you send a message?" asked Bean.

"You don't think this could be a message from--do you?"

"I have no idea. But now that I've thought of it, it's worth looking don't you think?"

By now Bean had pasted the dragon image into a graphics program and was studying that line of pixels. "Yes, this is random, the whole line. Doesn't belong here, and it's not just noise because the rest of the image is still completely intact except for this other line that's partly broken. Noise would be randomly distributed."

"See what it is, then," said Carlotta. "You're the genius, I'm the nun."

Soon Bean had the two lines isolated in a separate file and was studying the information as raw code. Viewed as one-byte or twobyte text code, there was nothing that remotely resembled language, but of course it couldn't, could it, or it would never have got out. So if it was a message, then it had to be in some kind of code.

For the next few hours Bean wrote programs to help him manipulate the data contained in those lines. He tried mathematical schemes and graphic reinterpretations, but in truth he knew all along that it wouldn't be anything that complex. Because whoever created it would have had to do it without the aid of a computer. It had to be something relatively simple, designed only to keep a cursory examination from revealing what it was.

And so he kept coming back to ways of reinterpreting the binary code as text. Soon enough he came upon a scheme that seemed promising. Two-byte text code, but shifted right by one position for each character, except when the right shift would make it correspond with two actual bytes in memory, in which case double shift. That way a real character would never show up if someone looked at the file with an ordinary view program.

When he used that method on the one line, it came up as text characters only, which was not likely to happen by chance. But the other line came up random-seeming garbage.

So he left-shifted the other line, and it, too, became nothing but text characters.

"I'm in," he said. "And it is a message."

"What does it say?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

Carlotta got up and came to look over his shoulder. "It's not even language. It doesn't divide into words."

"That's deliberate," said Bean. "If it divided into words it would look like a message and invite decoding. The easy way that any amateur can decode language is by checking word lengths and the frequency of appearance of certain letter patterns. In Common, you look for letter groupings that could be 'a' and 'the' and 'and,' that sort of thing.

"And you don't even know what language it's in."

"No, but it's bound to be Common, because they know they're sending it to somebody who doesn't have a key. So it has to be decodable, and that means Common."

"So they're making it easy and hard at the same time?"

"Yes. Easy for me, hard for everyone else."

"Oh, come now. You think this was written to you?"

"Ender. Dragon. I was in DragonArmy, unlike most of them. And whom else would they be writing to? I'm outside, they're in. They know that everyone is there but me. And I'm the only person that they'd know they could reach without tipping their hand to everybody else."

"What, did you have some private code?"

"Not really, but what we have is common experience, the slang of Battle School, things like that. You'll see. When I crack it, it'll be because I recognize a word that nobody else would recognize."

"If it's from them."

"It is," said Bean. "It's what I'd do. Get word out. This picture is like a virus. It goes everywhere and gets its code into a million places, but nobody knows it's a code because it looks like something that most people think they already understand. It's a fad, not a message. Except to me."

"Almost thou persuadest me," said Carlotta.

"I'll crack it before I go to bed."

"You're too little to drink that much coffee. It'll give you an aneurysm."

She went back to her own mail.

Since the words weren't separated, Bean had to look for other patterns that might give things away. There were no obvious repeated two-letter or three-letter patterns that didn't lead to obvious dead ends. That didn't surprise him. If he had been composing such a message, he would have dropped

out all the articles and conjunctions and prepositions and pronouns that he possibly could. Not only that, but most of the words were probably deliberately misspelled to avoid repetitive patterns. But some words would be spelled correctly, and they would be designed to be unrecognizable to most people who weren't from the Battle School culture.

There were only two places where the same character was apparently doubled, one in each line. That might just be the result of one word ending with the same letter that began another, but Bean doubted it. Nothing would be left to chance in this message. So he wrote a little program that would take the doubled letters in one word and, beginning with "aa," show him what the surrounding letters might be to see if anything looked plausible to him. And he started with the doubled letters in the shorter line, because that pair was surrounded by another pair, in a 1221 pattern.

The obvious failures, like "xddx" and "pffp," took no time, but he had to investigate all the variants on "abba" and "adda" and "deed" and "effe" to see what they did to the message. Some were promising and he saved them for later exploration.

"Why is it in Greek now?" asked Carlotta.

She was looking over his shoulder again. He hadn't heard her get up and come over behind him.

"I converted the original message to Greek characters so that I wouldn't get distracted by trying to read meanings into letters I hadn't decoded yet. The ones I'm actually working on are in Roman letters."

At that moment, his program showed the letters "iggi."

"Piggies," said Sister Carlotta.

"Maybe, but it doesn't flag anything for me." He started cycling through the dictionary matches with "iggi," but none of them did any better than "piggies" had.

"Does it have to be a word?" said Carlotta.

"Well, if it's a number, then this is a dead end," said Bean.

"No, I mean, why not a name?"

Bean saw it at once. "How blind can I be." He plugged the letters w and n to the positions before and after "iggi" and then spread the results through the whole message, making the program show hyphens for the undeciphered letters. The two lines now read

```
---n-----g---n---n---n---i----n --- g  
-n-n-wiggin---
```

"That doesn't look right for Common," said Carlotta. "There should be a lot more i's than that."

"I'm assuming that the message deliberately leaves out letters as much as possible, especially vowels, so it won't look like Common."

"So how will you know when you've decoded it?"

"When it makes sense."

"It's bedtime. I know, you're not sleeping till you've solved it." He barely noticed that she moved away from behind him. He was busy trying the other doubled letter. This time he had a more complicated job, because the letters before and after the double pair were different. It meant far more combinations to try, and being able to eliminate g, i, n, and w didn't speed up the process all that much.

Again, there were quite a few readings that he saved-more than before-but nothing rang a bell until he got to 'Jees." The word that Ender's companions in the final battle used for themselves. "Jeesh." Could it be? It was definitely a word that might be used as a flag.

h--n--jeesh-g-_en--s--ns--n ---- si --- n --- s--g
-n-n-wiggin ---

If those twenty-seven letters were right, then he had only thirty left to solve. He rubbed his eyes, sighed, and set to work.

It was noon when the smell of oranges woke him. Sister Carlotta was peeling a mexerica orange. "People are eating these things on the street and spitting the pulp on the sidewalk. You can't chew it up enough to swallow it. But the juice is the best orange you'll ever taste in your life."

Bean got out of bed and took the segment she offered him. She was right. She handed him a bowl to spit the pulp into. "Good breakfast," said Bean.

"Lunch," she said. She held up a paper. "I take it you consider this to be a solution?"

It was what he had printed out before going to bed.

hlpndrjeeshtgdrenrusbnstun6rmysiz4Ontrysbtg
bnfndwigginptr

"Oh," said Bean. "I didn't print out the one with the word breaks." Putting another mexerica segment in his mouth, Bean padded on bare feet to the computer, called up the right file, and printed it. He brought it back, handed it to Carlotta, spat out pulp, and took his own mexerica from her shopping bag and began peeling.

"Bean," she said. "I'm a normal mortal. I get 'help' and is this 'Ender'?"

Bean took the paper from her.

hlp ndr jeesh tgdr en rus bns tun 6 rmy siz 40
n try sbtg
bn fnd wiggin ptr

"The vowels are left out as much as possible, and there are other misspellings. But what the first line says is, 'Help. Ender's jeesh is together in Russia-' "

"T-g-d-r is 'together'? And 'in' is spelled like French?"

"Exactly," said Bean. "I understood it and it doesn't look like Common." He went on interpreting. "The next part was confusing for a long time, until I realized that the 6 and the 40 were numbers. I got almost all the other letters before I realized that. The thing is, the numbers matter, but there's no way to guess them from context. So the next few words are designed to give a context to the numbers. It says 'Bean's toon was 6'-that's because Ender divided Dragon Army into five toons instead of the normal four, but then he gave me a sort of ad hoc toon, and if you added it to the count, it was number six.

Only who would know that except for somebody from Battle School? So only somebody like me would get the number. Same thing with the next one. 'Army size 40.' Everyone in Battle School knew that there were forty soldiers in every army. Unless you counted the commander, in which case it was forty-one, but see, it doesn't matter, because that digit is trivial."

"How do you know that?"

"Because the next letter is n. For 'north.' The message is telling their location. They know they're in Russia. And because they can apparently see the sun or at least shadows on the wall, and they know the date, they can calculate their latitude, more or less. Six-four-zero north. Sixty-four north."

"Unless it means something else."

"No, the message is meant to be obvious."

"To you."

"Yes, to me. The rest of that line is 'try sabotage.' I think that means that they're trying to screw up whatever the Russians are trying to make them do. So they're pretending to go along but really gumming up the works. Very smart to get that on record. The fact that Graff was court-martialed after winning the Formic War suggests that they'd better get it on record that they were not collaborating with the enemy-in case the other side wins."

"But Russia isn't at war with anybody."

"The Polemarch was Russian, and Warsaw Pact troops were at the heart of his side in the League War. You've got to remember, Russia was the country that was most on the make before the Formics came and started tearing up real estate and forced humanity to unite under the Hegemon and create the International Fleet. They have always felt cheated out of their destiny, and now that

the Formics are gone, it makes sense that they'd be eager to get back on the fast track. They don't think of themselves as bad guys, they think of themselves as the only people with the will and the resources to unite the world for real, permanently. They think they're doing a good thing."

"People always do."

"Not always. But yes, to wage war you have to be able to sell your own people on the idea that either you're fighting in self-defense, or you're fighting because you deserve to win, or you're fighting in order to save other people. The Russian people respond to an altruistic sales pitch as easily as anybody else."

"So what about the second line?"

" 'Bean find Wiggin Peter.' They're suggesting that I look for Ender's older brother. He didn't go off on the colony ship with Ender and Valentine. And he's been a player, under the net identity of Locke. And I suppose he's running Demosthenes, too, now that Valentine is gone."

"You knew about that?"

"I knew a lot of things," said Bean. "But the main thing is that they're right. Achilles is hunting for me and he's hunting for you, and he's got all the rest of Ender's jeesh, but he doesn't even know Ender's brother exists and he wouldn't care if he did. But you know and I know that Peter Wiggin would have been in Battle School except for a little character flaw. And for all we know, that character flaw may be exactly what he needs to be a good match against Achilles."

"Or it may be exactly the flaw that makes it so a victory for Peter is no better than a victory for Achilles, in terms of the amount of suffering in the world."

"Well, we won't know until we find him, will we?" said Bean.

"To find him, Bean, you'd have to reveal who you are."

"Yes," said Bean. "Isn't this exciting?" He did an exaggerated wriggle like a little kid being taken to the zoo.

"This is your life you're playing with."

"You're the one who wanted me to find a cause."

"Peter Wiggin isn't a cause, he's dangerous. You haven't heard what Graff had to say about him."

"On the contrary," said Bean. "How do you think I learned about him?"

"But he might be no better than Achilles!"

"I know of several ways already that he's better than Achilles. First, he's not trying to kill us. Second, he's already got a huge network of contacts with people all over the world, some of whom know he's as young as he is but most of whom have no idea. Third, he's ambitious just like Achilles is, only Achilles has already assembled almost all of the children who were tagged as the most brilliant military commanders in the world, while Peter Wiggin will have only one. Me. Do you think he's dumb enough not to use me?"

"Use you. That's the operative word here, Bean."

"Well, aren't you being used in your cause?"

"By God, not by Peter Wiggin."

"I'll bet Peter Wiggin sends a lot clearer messages than God does," said Bean. "And if I don't like what he's doing, I can always quit."

"With someone like Peter, you can't always quit."

"He can't make me think of what I don't want to think about. Unless he's a remarkably stupid genius, he'll know that."

"I wonder if Achilles knows that, as he's trying to squeeze brilliance out of the other children."

"Exactly. Between Peter Wiggin and Achilles, what are the odds that Wiggin could be worse?"

"Oh, it's hard to imagine how that could be."

"So let's start thinking of a way to contact Locke without giving away our identity and our location."

"I'm going to need more mexerica oranges before we leave Brasil," said Carlotta.

Only then did he notice that the two of them had already blown through the whole bagful. "Me too," he said.

As she left, the empty bag in hand, she paused at the door. "You did very well with that message, Julian Delphiki."

"Thanks, Grandma Carlotta."

She left smiling.

Bean held up the message and scanned it again. The only part of the message that he hadn't fully interpreted for her was the last word. He didn't think "ptr" meant Peter. That would have been redundant. "Wiggin" was enough to identify him. No, the "ptr" at the end was a signature. This

message was from Petra. She could have tried to write directly to Peter Wiggin. But she had written to Bean, coding it in a way that Peter would never have understood.

She's relying on me.

Bean knew how the others in Ender's jeesh had resented him. Not a lot, but a little. When they were all in Command School on Eros, before Ender arrived, the military had made Bean the acting commander in all their test battles, even though he was the youngest of them all, even younger than Ender. He knew he'd done a good job, and won their respect. But they never liked taking orders from him and were undisguisedly happy when Ender arrived and Bean was dropped back to be one of them. Nobody ever said, "Good job, Bean," or "Hey, you did OK." Except Petra.

She had done for him on Eros the same thing that Nikolai had done for him in Battle School—provided him with a kind word now and then. He was sure that neither Nikolai nor Petra ever realized how important their casual generosity had been to him. But he remembered that when he needed a friend, the two of them had been there for him. Nikolai had turned out, by the workings of not-entirely-coincidental fate, to be his brother. Did that make Petra his sister?

It was Petra who reached out to him now. She trusted him to recognize the message, decode it, and act on it.

There were files in the Battle School record system that said that Bean was not human, and he knew that Graff at least sometimes felt that way because he had overheard those words from his own lips. He knew that Carlotta loved him but she loved Jesus more and anyway, she was old and thought of him as a child. He could rely on her, but she did not rely on him.

In his Earthside life before Battle School, the only friend Bean had ever had was a girl named Poke, and Achilles had murdered her long before. Murdered her only moments after Bean left her, and moments before he realized his mistake and rushed back to warn her and instead found her body floating in the Rhine. She died trying to save Bean, and she died because Bean couldn't be relied upon to take as much care to save her.

Petra's message meant that maybe he had another friend who needed him after all. And this time, he would not turn his back. This time it was his turn to save his friend, or die trying. How's that for a cause, Sister Carlotta?

GOING PUBLIC

To: Demosthenes%Tecumseh@freeamerica.org, Locke%erasmus@polnet.gov

From: dontbother@firewall.set Re: Achilles heel

Dear Peter Wiggin,

A message smuggled to me from the kidnapped children confirms they are (or were, at the time of sending) together, in Russia near the sixty-fourth parallel, doing their best to sabotage those trying to exploit their military talents. Since they will doubtless be separated and moved frequently, the exact location is unimportant, and I am quite sure you already knew Russia was the only country with both the ambition and the means to acquire all the members of Ender's jeesh.

I'm sure you recognize the impossibility of releasing these children through military intervention-at the slightest sign of a plausible effort to extract them, they will be killed in order to deprive an enemy of such assets. But it might be possible to persuade either the Russian government or some if not all of those holding the individual children that releasing them is in Russia's best interest. This might be accomplished by exposing the individual who is almost certainly behind this audacious action, and your two identities are uniquely situated to accuse him in a way that will be taken seriously.

Therefore I suggest that you do a bit of research into a break-in at a highsecurity institution for the criminally insane in Belgium during the League War. Three guards were killed and the inmates were released. All but one were recaptured quickly. The one who got away was once a student at Battle School. He is behind the kidnapping. When it is revealed that this psychopath has control of these children, it will cause grave misgivings inside the Russian command system. It will also give them a scapegoat if they decide to return the children.

Don't bother trying to trace this email identity. It already never existed. If you can't figure out who I am and how to contact me from the research you're about to do, then we don't have much to talk about anyway.

Peter's heart sank when he opened the letter to Demosthenes and saw that it had also been sent to Locke. The salutation "Dear Peter Wiggin" only confirmed it-someone besides the office of the Polemarch had broken his identities. He expected the worst-some kind of blackmail or a demand that he support this or that cause.

To his surprise, the message was nothing of the kind. It came from someone who claimed to have received a message from the kidnapped kids-and gave him a tantalizing path to follow. Of course he immediately searched the news archives and found the break-in at a high-security mental hospital near Genk. Finding the name of the inmate who got away was much harder, requiring that, as Demosthenes, he ask for help from a law enforcement contact in Germany, and then, as Locke, for additional help from a friend in the Anti-Sabotage Committee in the Office of the Hegemon.

It yielded a name that made Peter laugh, since it was in the subject line of the email that prompted this search. Achilles, pronounced "ahSHEEL" in the French manner. An orphan rescued from the streets of Rotterdam by, of all things, a Catholic nun working for the procurement section of the Battle School. He was given surgery to correct a crippled leg, then taken up to Battle School, where he lasted only a few days before being exposed as a serial killer by some of the other students, though in fact he had not killed anyone in the Battle School.

The list of his victims was interesting. He had a pattern of killing anyone who had ever made him feel or seem helpless or vulnerable. Including the doctor who had repaired his leg. Apparently he wasn't much for gratitude.

Putting together the information, Peter could see that his unknown correspondent was right. If in fact this sicko was running the operation that was using these kids for military planning, it was almost certain that the Russian officers working with him did not know his criminal record. Whatever agency liberated Achilles from the mental hospital would not have shared that information with the military who were expected to work with him. There would be outrage that would be heard at the highest levels of the Russian government.

And even if the government did not act to get rid of Achilles and release the kids, the Russian Army jealously guarded its independence from the rest of the government, especially the intelligence-and-dirty-jobs agencies. There was a good chance that some of these children might "escape" before the government acted-indeed, such unauthorized actions might force the government to make it official and pretend that the "early releases" had been authorized.

It was always possible, of course, that Achilles would kill one or more of the kids as soon as he was exposed. At least Peter would not have to face those particular children in battle. And now that he knew something about Achilles, Peter was in a much better position to face him in a head-to-head struggle. Achilles killed with his own hands. Since that was a very stupid thing to do, and Achilles did not test stupid, it had to be an irresistible compulsion. People with irresistible compulsions could be terrifying enemies-but they could also be beaten.

For the first time in weeks, Peter felt a glimmer of hope. This was how his work as Locke and Demosthenes paid off-people with certain kinds of secret information that they wanted to make public found ways to hand it to Peter without his even having to ask for it. Much of his power came from this disorganized network of informants. It never bothered his pride that he was being "used" by this anonymous correspondent. As far as Peter was concerned, they were using each other. And besides, Peter had earned the right to get such helpful gifts.

Still, Peter always looked gift horses in the mouth. As either Locke or Demosthenes, he emailed friends and contacts in various government agencies, trying to get confirmation of various aspects of the story he was preparing to write. Could the break-in at the mental institution have been carried out by Russian agents? Did satellite surveillance show any kind of activity near the sixty-fourth parallel that might correspond with the arrival or departure of the ten kidnapped kids? Was anything known about the whereabouts of Achilles that would contradict the idea of his being in control of the whole kidnap operation?

It took a couple of days to get the story right. He tried it first as a column by Demosthenes, but he soon realized that since Demosthenes was constantly putting out warnings about Russian plots, he might not be taken very seriously. It had to be Locke who published this. And that would be dangerous, because up to now Locke had been scrupulous about not seeming to take sides against Russia. That would now make it more likely that his exposure of Achilles would be taken seriously-but it ran a grave risk of costing Locke some of his best contacts in Russia. No matter how much a Russian might despise what his government was doing, the devotion to Mother Russia

ran deep. There was a line you couldn't cross. For more than a few of his contacts there, publishing this piece would cross that line.

Until he hit upon the obvious solution. Before submitting the piece to International Aspects, he would send copies to his Russian contacts to give a heads-up on what was coming. Of course the expose would fly through the Russian military. It was possible that the repercussions would begin even before his column officially appeared. And his contacts would know he wasn't trying to hurt Russia-he was giving them a chance to clean house, or at least put a spin on the story before it ran.

It wasn't a long story, but it named names and opened doors that other reporters could follow up on. And they would follow up. From the first paragraph, it was dynamite.

The mastermind behind the kidnapping of Ender's "jeesh" is a serial killer named Achilles. He was taken from a mental institution during the League War in order to bring his dark genius to bear on Russian military strategy. He has repeatedly murdered with his own hands, and now ten brilliant children who once saved the world are completely at his mercy. What were the Russians thinking when they gave power to this psychopath? Or was Achilles' bloody record concealed even from them?

There it was-in the first paragraph, right along with the accusation, Locke was generously providing the spin that would allow the Russian government and military to extricate themselves from this mess.

It took twenty minutes to send the individual messages to all his Russian contacts. In each message, he warned them that they had only about six hours before he had to turn in his column to the editor at International Aspects. IA's fact-checkers would add another hour or two to the delay, but they would find complete confirmation of

Peter pushed SEND, SEND, SEND.

Then he settled down to pore over the data to figure out how it revealed to him the identity of his correspondent. Another mental patient? Hardly likely-they were all brought back into confinement. An employee of the mental hospital? Impossible for someone like that to find out who was behind Locke and Demosthenes. Someone in law enforcement? More likely-but few names of investigators were offered in the news stories. Besides, how could he know which of the investigators had tipped him off? No, his correspondent had promised, in effect, a unique solution. Something in the data would tell him exactly who his informant was, and exactly how to reach him. Emailing investigators indiscriminately would serve only to risk exposing Peter with no guarantee that any of the people he contacted would be the right one.

The one thing that did not happen as he searched for his correspondent's identity was any kind of response from any of his Russian friends. If the story had been wrong, or if the Russian military had already known about Achilles' history and wanted to cover it up, he would have been getting constant emails urging him not to run the story, then demanding, and finally threatening him. So the fact that no one wrote him at all served as all the confirmation he needed from the Russian end.

As Demosthenes, he was anti-Russian. As Locke, he was reasonable and fair to all nations. As Peter, though, he was envious of the Russian sense of national identity, the cohesiveness of Russians when they felt their country was in danger. If Americans had ever had such powerful bonds, they had expired long before Peter was born. To be Russian was the most powerful part of a person's identity. To be American was about as important as being a Rotarian-very important if you were elected to high office, but barely noticeable in most citizens' sense of who they were. That was why Peter never planned his future with America in mind. Americans expected to get their way, but they had no passion for anything. Demosthenes could stir up anger and resentment, but it amounted to spitefulness, not purpose. Peter would have to root himself elsewhere. Too bad Russia wasn't available to him. It was a nation that had a vast will to greatness, coupled with the most extraordinary run of stupid leadership in history, with the possible exception of the kings of Spain. And Achilles had got there first.

Six hours after sending the article to his Russian contacts, he pushed SEND once more, submitting it to his editor. As he expected, three minutes later he got a response.

You're sure?

To which Peter replied, "Check it. My sources confirm."

Then he went to bed.

And woke up almost before he had gone to sleep. He couldn't have closed his book, and then his eyes, for more than a couple of minutes before he realized that he had been looking in the wrong direction for his informant. It wasn't one of the investigators who tipped him off. It was someone connected to the I.F. at the highest level, someone who knew that Peter Wiggin was Locke and Demosthenes. But not Graff or Chamrajnagar-they would not have left hints about who they really were. Someone else, someone in whom they confided, perhaps.

But no one from the I.F. had turned up in the information about Achilles' escape. Except for the nun who found Achilles in the first place.

He reread the message. Could this have come from a nun? Possibly, but why would she be sending the information so anonymously? And why would the kidnapped children smuggle a message to her?

Had she recruited one of them?

Peter got out of bed and padded to his desk, where he called up the information on all the kidnapped children. Every one of them came to Battle School through the normal testing process; none had been found by the nun, and so none of them would have any reason to smuggle a message to her.

What other connection could there be? Achilles was an orphan on the streets of Rotterdam when Sister Carlotta identified him as having military talent-he couldn't have had any family connections.

Unless he was like that Greek kid from Ender's jeesh who was killed in a missile attack a few weeks ago, the supposed orphan whose real family was identified while he was in Battle School.

Orphan. Killed in a missile attack. What was his name? Julian Delphiki. Called Bean. A name he picked up when he was an orphan ... where? Rotterdam. Just like Achilles.

It was not a stretch to imagine that Sister Carlotta found both Bean and Achilles. Bean was one of Ender's companions on Eros during the last battle. He was the only one who, instead of being kidnapped, had been killed. Everyone assumed it was because he was so heavily protected by the Greek military that the would-be kidnappers gave up and settled for keeping rival powers from using him. But what if there was never any intention to kidnap him, because Achilles already knew him and, more to the point, Bean knew too much about Achilles?

And what if Bean was not dead at all? What if he was living in hiding, protected by the widespread belief that he was dead? It was absolutely believable that the captive kids would choose him to receive their smuggled message, since he was the only one of their group, besides Ender himself, who wasn't in captivity with them. And who else would have such a powerful motive to work to get them out, along with the proven mental ability to think of a strategy like the one the informant had laid out in his letter?

A house of cards, that's what he was building, one leap after another-but each intuitive jump felt absolutely right. That letter was written by Bean. Julian Delphiki. And how would Peter contact him? Bean could be anywhere, and there was no hope of contacting him since anybody who knew he was alive would be all the more certain to pretend that he was dead and refuse to accept a message for him.

Again, the solution should be obvious from the data, and it was. Sister Carlotta.

Peter had a contact in the Vatican-a sparring partner in the wars of ideas that flared up now and then among those who frequented the discussions of international relations on the nets. It was already morning in Rome, though barely. But if anyone was at his desk early in Italy, it would be a hardworking monk attached to the Vatican foreignaffairs office.

Sure enough, an answer came back within fifteen minutes.

Sister Carlotta's location is protected. Messages can be forwarded. I will not read what you send via me. (You can't work here if you don't know how to keep your eyes closed.)

Peter composed his message to Bean and sent it-to Sister Carlotta. If anyone knew how to reach Julian Delphiki in hiding, it would be the nun who had first found him. It was the only possible solution to the challenge his informant had given him.

Finally he went back to bed, knowing that he wouldn't sleep long-he'd undoubtedly keep waking through the night and checking the nets to see the reaction to his column.

What if no one cared? What if nothing happened? What if he had fatally compromised the Locke persona, and for no gain?

As he lay in bed, pretending to himself that he might sleep, he could hear his parents snoring in their room across the hall. It was both strange and comforting to hear them. Strange that he could be worrying about whether something he had written might not cause an international incident, and yet he was still living in his parents' house, their only child left at home. Comforting because it was a sound he had known since infancy, that comforting assurance that they were alive, they were close by, and the fact that he could hear them meant that when monsters leapt from the dark corners of the room, they would hear him screaming.

The monsters had taken on different faces over the years, and hid in corners of rooms far from his own, but that noise from his parents' bedroom was proof that the world had not ended yet.

Peter wasn't sure why, but he knew that the letter he had just sent to Julian Delphiki, via Sister Carlotta, via his friend in the Vatican, would put an end to his long idyll, playing at world affairs while having his mother do his laundry. He was finally putting himself into play, not as the cool and distant commentator Locke or the hotblooded demagogue Demosthenes, both of them electronic constructs, but as Peter Wiggin, a young man of flesh and blood, who could be caught, who could be harmed, who could be killed.

If anything should have kept him awake, it was that thought. But instead he felt relieved. Relaxed. The long waiting was almost over. He fell asleep and did not wake until his mother called him to breakfast. His father was reading a newsprint at breakfast. "What's the headline, Dad?" asked Peter.

"They're saying that the Russians kidnapped those kids. And put them under the control of a known murderer. Hard to believe, but they seem to know all about this Achilles guy. Got busted out of a mental hospital in Belgium. Crazy world we live in. Could have been Ender." He shook his head.

Peter could see how his mother froze for just a moment at the mention of Ender's name. Yes, yes, Mother, I know he's the child of your heart and you grieve every time you hear his name. And you ache for your beloved daughter Valentine who has left Earth and will never return, not in your lifetime. But you still have your firstborn with you, your brilliant and good-looking son Peter, who is bound to produce brilliant and beautiful grandchildren for you someday, along with a few other things like, oh, who knows, maybe bringing peace to Earth by unifying it under one government? Will that console you just a little bit?

Not likely.

"The killer's name is ... Achilles?"

"No last name. Like some kind of pop singer or something."

Peter cringed inside. Not because of what his father had said, but because Peter had come this close to correcting his father's pronunciation of "Achilles." Since Peter couldn't be sure that any of the

rag mentioned the French pronunciation of Achilles' name, how would he explain knowing the correct pronunciation to Father?

"Has Russia denied it, of course?" asked Peter.

Father scanned the newsprint again. "Nothing about it in this story," he said.

"Cool," said Peter. "Maybe that means it's true."

"If it was true," said Father, "they would deny it. That's the way Russians are."

As if Father knew anything at all about the "way Russians are."

Got to move out, thought Peter, and live on my own. I'm in college. I'm trying to spring ten prisoners from custody a third of the way around the world. Maybe I should use some of the money I've been earning as a columnist to pay rent. Maybe I should do it right away, so that if Achilles finds out who I am and comes to kill me, I won't bring danger down on my family.

Only Peter knew even as he formed this thought that there was another, darker thought hidden deep inside himself: Maybe if I get out of here, they'll blow up the house when I'm not there, the way they must have done with Julian Delphiki. Then they'll think I'm dead and I'll be safe for a while.

No, I don't wish for my parents to die! What kind of monster would wish for that? I don't want that.

But one thing Peter never did was lie to himself, or at least not for long. He didn't wish for his parents to die, certainly not violently in an attack aimed at him. But he knew that if it did happen, he'd prefer not to be with them at the time. Better, of course, if no one was home. But ... me first.

Ah yes. That was what Valentine hated about him. Peter had almost forgotten. That's why Ender was the son that everyone loved. Sure, Ender wiped out a whole species of aliens, not to mention offing a kid in a bathroom in Battle School. But he wasn't selfish like Peter.

"You aren't eating, Peter," said Mother.

"Sorry," said Peter. "I'm getting some test results back today, and I was brooding I guess."

"What subject?" asked Mother.

"World history," said Peter.

"Isn't it strange to realize that when they write history books in the future, your brother's name will always be mentioned?" said Mother.

"Not strange," said Peter. "That's just one of the perks you get when you save the world."

Behind his jocularity, though, he made a much grimmer promise to his mother. Before you die, Mother, you'll see that while Ender's name shows up in a chapter or two, it will be impossible to discuss this century or the next without mentioning my name on almost every page.

"Got to run," said Father. "Good luck with the test."

"Already took the test, Dad. I'm just getting the grade today."

"That's what I meant. Good luck on the grade."

"Thanks," said Peter.

He went back to eating while Mother walked Father to the door so they could kiss good-bye.

I'll have that someday, thought Peter. Someone who'll kiss me good-bye at the door. Or maybe just someone to put a blindfold over my head before they shoot me. Depending on how things turn out.

BREAD VAN

TO: Demosthenes%Tecumseh@freemercia.org

From: unready%cincinnatus@anon.set

Re: satrep

Satellite reports from date Delphiki family killed: Nine vehicles simultaneous departure from northern Russia location, 64 latitude. Encrypted destination list attached. Genuine dispersal? Decoy? What's our best strategy, my friend? Eliminate or rescue? Are they children or weapons of mass destruction? Hard to know. Why did that bastard Locke get Ender Wiggin sent away? We could use that boy now I think. As for why only nine, not ten vehicles: maybe one is dead or sick. Maybe one has turned. Maybe two have turned and were sent together. All guesswork. I only see raw satdat, not intelnetcom. reports. If you have other sources on that, feed some back to me?

Custer

Petra knew that loneliness was the tool they were using against her. Don't let the girl talk to any human at all, then when one shows up she'll be so grateful she'll blurt confessions, she'll believe lies, she'll make friends with her worst enemy.

Weird how you can know exactly what the enemy is doing to you and it still works. Like a play her parents took her to her second week back home after the war. It had a four-year-old girl on the stage asking her mother why her father wasn't home yet. The mother is trying to find a way to tell her that the father was killed by an Azerbaijani terrorist bomb—a secondary bomb that went off to kill people trying to rescue survivors of the first, smaller blast. Her father died as a hero, trying to save a child trapped in the wreckage even after the police shouted at him to stay away, there was probably going to be a second blast. The mother finally tells the child.

The little girl stamps her foot angrily and says, "He's my papa! Not that little boy's papa!" And the mother says, "That little boy's mama and papa weren't there to help him. Your father did what he hoped somebody else would do for you, if he couldn't be there for you." And the little girl starts to cry and says, "Now he isn't ever going to be there for me. And I don't want somebody else. I want my papa.

Petra sat there watching this play, knowing exactly how cynical it was. Use a child, play on the yearning for family, tie it to nobility and heroism, make the villains the ancestral enemy, and make the child say childishly innocent things while crying. A computer could have written it. But it still worked. Petra cried like a baby, just like the rest of the audience.

That's what isolation was doing to her and she knew it. Whatever they were hoping for, it would probably work. Because human beings are just machines, Petra knew that, machines that do what you want them to do, if you only know the levers to pull. And no matter how complex people might seem, if you just cut them off from the network of people who give shape to their personality, the communities that form their identity, they'll be reduced to that set of levers. Doesn't matter how hard they resist, or how well they know they're being manipulated. Eventually, if you take the time, you can play them like a piano, every note right where you expect it. Even me, thought Petra.

All alone, day after day. Working on the computer, getting assignments by mail from people who gave no hint of personality. Sending messages to the others in Ender's jeesh, but knowing that their letters, too, were being censored of all personal references. Just data getting transferred back and forth. No netsearches now. She had to file her request and wait for an answer filtered through the people who controlled her. All alone.

She tried sleeping too much, but apparently they drugged her water-they got her so hopped up she couldn't sleep at all. So she stopped trying to play passive resistance games. Just went along, becoming the machine they wanted her to be, pretending to herself that by only pretending to be a machine, she wouldn't actually become one, but knowing at the same time that whatever people pretend to be, they become.

And then comes the day when the door opens and somebody walks in.

Vlad.

He was from Dragon Army. Younger than Petra, and a good guy, but she didn't know him all that well. The bond between them, though, was a big one: Vlad was the only other kid in Ender's jeesh who broke the way Petra did, had to be pulled out of the battles for a day. Everybody was kind to them but they both knew-it made them the weak ones. Objects of pity. They all got the same medals and commendations, but Petra knew that their medals meant less than the others, their commendations were empty, because they were the ones who hadn't cut it while the others did. Not that Petra had ever talked about it with Vlad. She just knew that he knew the same things she knew, because he had been down the same long dark tunnel.

And here he was.

"Ho, Petra," he said.

"Ho, Vlad," she answered. She liked hearing her own voice. It still worked. Liked hearing his, too.

"I guess I'm the new instrument of torture they're using on you," said Vlad.

He said it with a smile. That told Petra that he wanted it to seem like a joke. Which told her that it wasn't really a joke at all.

"Really?" she said. "Traditionally, you're simply supposed to kiss me and let someone else do the torture."

"It's not really torture. It's the way out."

"Out of what?"

"Out of prison. It's not what you think, Petra. The hegemony is breaking up, there's going to be war. The question is whether it drives the world down into chaos or leads to one nation ruling all the others. And if it's one nation, which nation should it be?"

"Let me guess. Paraguay."

"Close," said Vlad. He grinned. "I know, it's easier for me. I'm from Belarus, we make a big deal about being a separate country, but in our hearts, we don't mind the thought of Russia being the country that comes out on top. Nobody outside of Belarus gives a lobster tit about how we're not really Russians. So sure, I wasn't hard to talk into it. And you're Armenian, and they spent a lot of years being oppressed by Russia in the old Communist days. But Petra, just how Armenian are you? What's really good for Armenia anyway? That's what I'm supposed to say to you, anyway. To get you to see that Armenia benefits if Russia comes out on top. No more sabotage. Really help us get ready for the real war. You cooperate, and Armenia gets a special place in the new order. You get to bring in your whole country. That's not nothing, Petra. And if you don't help, that doesn't do a thing for anybody. Doesn't help you. Doesn't help Armenia. Nobody ever knows what a hero you were."

"Sounds like a death threat."

"Sounds like a threat of loneliness and obscurity. You weren't born to be nobody, Petra. You were born to shine. This is a chance to be a hero again. I know you think you don't care, but come on, admit it-it was great being Ender's jeesh."

"And now we're what's-his-name's jeesh. He'll really share the glory with us," said Petra.

"Why not? He's still the boss, he doesn't mind having heroes serve under him."

"Vlad, he'll make sure nobody knows any of us existed, and he'll kill us when he's done with us." She hadn't meant to speak so honestly. She knew it would get back to Achilles. She knew it would guarantee that her prophecy would come true. But there it was—the lever worked. She was so grateful to have a friend there, even one who had obviously been coopted, that she couldn't help but blurt.

"Well, Petra, what can I say? I told them, you're the tough one. I told you what's on offer. Think about it. There's no hurry. You've got plenty of time to decide."

"You're going?"

"That's the rule," said Vlad. "You say no, I go. Sorry."

He got up.

She watched him go out the door. She wanted to say something clever and brave. She wanted some name to call him to make him feel bad for throwing in his lot with Achilles. But she knew that anything she said would be used against her one way or another. Anything she said would reveal another lever to the lever-pullers. What she'd already said was bad enough.

So she kept her silence and watched the door close and lay there on her bed until her computer beeped and she went to it and there was another assignment and she went to work and solved it and sabotaged it just like usual and thought, This is going rather well after all, I didn't break or anything.

And then she went to bed and cried herself to sleep. For a few minutes, though, just before she slept, she felt that Vlad was her truest, dearest friend and she would have done anything for him, just to have him back in the room with her.

Then that feeling passed and she had one last fleeting thought: If they were really all that smart, they would have known that I'd feel like that, right that moment; and Vlad would have come in and I would have leapt from my bed and thrown my arms around him and told him yes, I'll do it, I'll work with you, thank you for coming to me like that, Vlad, thank you.

Only they missed their chance.

As Ender had once said, most victories came from instantly exploiting your enemy's stupid mistakes, and not from any particular brilliance in your own plan. Achilles was very clever. But not perfect. Not allknowing. He may not win. I may even get out of here without dying.

Peaceful at last, she fell asleep.

They woke her in darkness.

"Get up."

No greeting. She couldn't see who it was. She could hear footsteps outside her door. Boots. Soldiers?

She remembered talking to Vlad. Rejecting his offer. He said there was no hurry; she had plenty of time to decide. But here they were, rousting her in the middle of the night. To do what?

Nobody was laying a hand on her. She dressed in darkness-they didn't hurry her. If this was supposed to be some sort of torture session or interrogation they wouldn't wait for her to dress, they'd make sure she was as uncomfortable, as off-balance as possible.

She didn't want to ask questions, because that would seem weak. But then, not asking questions was passive.

"Where are we going now?"

No answer. That was a bad sign. Or was it? All she knew about these things was from the few fictional war vids she'd seen in Battle School and a few spy movies in Armenia. None of it ever seemed believable to her, yet here she was in a real spy-movie situation and her only source of information about what to expect was those stupid fictional vids and movies. What happened to her superior reasoning ability? The talents that got her into Battle School in the first place? Apparently those only worked when you thought you were playing games in school. In the real world, fear sets in and you fall back on lame made-up stories written by people who had no idea how things like this really worked.

Except that the people doing these things to her had also seen the same dumb vids and movies, so how did she know they weren't modeling their actions and attitudes and even their words on what they'd seen in the movies? It's not like anybody had a training course on how to look tough and mean when you were rousting a pubescent girl in the middle of the night. She tried to imagine the instruction manual. If she is going to be transported to another location, tell her to hurry, she's keeping everyone waiting. If she's going to be tortured, make snide comments about how you hope she got plenty of rest. If she is going to be drugged, tell her that it won't hurt a bit, but laugh snidely so she'll think you're lying. If she is going to be executed, say nothing.

Oh, this is good, she told herself Talk yourself into fearing the absolute worst. Make sure you're as close to a state of panic as possible.

"I've got to pee," she said.

No answer.

"I can do it here. I can do it in my clothes. I can do it naked. I can do it in my clothes or naked wherever we're going. I can dribble it along the way. I can write my name in the snow. It's harder for girls, it requires a lot more athletic activity, but we can do it."

Still no answer.

"Or you can let me go to the bathroom."

"All right," he said.

"Which?"

"Bathroom." He walked out the door.

She followed him. Sure enough, there were soldiers out there. Ten of them. She stopped in front of one burly soldier and looked up at his face. "It's a good thing they brought you. If it had just been those other guys, I would have made my stand and fought to the death. But with you here, I had no choice but to give myself up. Good work, soldier."

She turned and walked on toward the bathroom. Wondering if she had seen just the faintest hint of a smile on that soldier's face. That wasn't in the movie script, was it? Oh, wait. The hero was supposed to have a smart mouth. She was right in character. Only now she understood that all those clever remarks that heroes made were designed to conceal their raw fear. Insouciant heroes aren't brave or relaxed. They're just trying not to embarrass themselves in the moments before they die.

She got to the bathroom and of course he came right in with her. But she'd been in Battle School and if she'd had a shy bladder she would have died of urea poisoning long ago. She dropped trou, sat on the john, and let go. The guy was out the door long before she was ready to flush.

There was a window. There were ceiling air ducts. But she was in the middle of nowhere and it's not like she had anywhere she could run. How did they do this in the vids? Oh, yeah. A friend would have already placed a weapon in some concealed location and the hero would find it, assemble it, and come out firing. That's what was wrong with this whole situation. No friends.

She flushed, rearranged her clothing, washed her hands, and walked back out to her friendly escorts.

They walked her outside to a convoy, of sorts. There were two black limousines and four escort vehicles. She saw two girls about her size and hair color get into the back of each of the limos. Petra, by contrast, was kept close to the building, under the eaves, until she was at the back of a bakery van. She climbed in. None of her guards came with her. There were two men in the back of the van, but they were in civilian clothes. "What am I, bread?" she asked.

"We understand your need to feel that you're in control of the situation through humor," said one of the men.

"What, a psychiatrist? This is worse than torture. What happened to the Geneva convention?"

The psychiatrist smiled. "You're going home, Petra."

"To God? Or Armenia?"

"At this moment, neither. The situation is still ... flexible."

"I'd say it's flexible, if I'm going home to a place where I've never been before."

"Loyalties have not yet been sorted out. The branch of government that kidnapped you and the other children was acting without the knowledge of the army or the elected government-"

"Or so they say," said Petra.

"You understand my situation perfectly."

"So who are you loyal to?"

"Russia."

"Isn't that what they'll all say?"

"Not the ones who turned our foreign policy and military strategy over to a homicidal maniac child."

"Are those three equal accusations?" asked Petra. "Because I'm guilty of being a child. And homicide, too, in some people's opinion."

"Killing buggers was not homicide."

"I suppose it was insecticide." The psychiatrist looked baffled. Apparently he didn't know Common well enough to understand a wordplay that nine-year-olds thought was endlessly funny in Battle School.

The van began to move.

"Where are we going, since it's not home?"

"We're going into hiding to keep you out of the hands of this monster child until the breadth of this conspiracy can be discovered and the conspirators arrested."

"Or vice versa," said Petra.

The psychiatrist looked baffled again. But then he understood. "I suppose that's possible. But then, I'm not an important man. How would they know to look for me?"

"You're important enough that you have soldiers who obey you."

"They're not obeying me. We're all obeying someone else."

"And who is that?"

"If, through some misfortune, you were retaken by Achilles and his sponsors, you won't be able to answer that question."

"Besides, you'd all be dead before they could get to me, so your names wouldn't matter anyway, right?"

He looked at her searchingly. "You seem cynical about this. We are risking our lives to save you."

"You're risking my life, too."

He nodded slowly. "Do you want to return to your prison?"

"I just want you to be aware that being kidnapped a second time isn't exactly the same thing as being set free. You're so sure that you're smart enough and your people are loyal enough to bring this off. But if you're wrong, I could get killed. So yes, you're taking risks-but so am I, and nobody asked me."

"I ask you now."

"Let me out of the van right here," said Petra. "I'll take my chances alone."

"No," said the psychiatrist.

"I see. So I am still a prisoner."

"You are in protective custody."

"But I am a certified strategic and tactical genius," said Petra, "and you're not. So why are you in charge of me?"

He had no answer.

"I'll tell you why," said Petra. "Because this is not about saving the little children who were stolen away by the evil wicked child. This is about saving Mother Russia a lot of embarrassment. So it isn't enough for me to be safe. You have to return me to Armenia under just the right circumstances, with just the right spin, that the faction of the Russian government that you serve will be exonerated of all guilt."

"We are not guilty."

"My point is not that you're lying about that, but that you regard that as a much higher priority than saving me. Because I assure you, riding along in this van, I fully expect to be retaken by Achilles and his ... what did you call them? Sponsors."

"And why do you suppose that this will happen?"

"Does it matter why?"

"You're the genius," said the psychiatrist. "Apparently you have already seen some flaw in our plan."

"The flaw is obvious. Far too many people know about it. The decoy limousines, and soldiers, the escorts. You're sure that not one of those people is a plant? Because if any of them is reporting to Achilles' sponsors, then they already know which vehicle really has me in it, and where it's going."

"They don't know where it's going."

"They do if the driver is the one who was planted by the other side."

"The driver doesn't know where we're going."

"He's just going around in circles?"

"He knows the first rendezvous point, that's all."

Petra shook her head. "I knew you were stupid, because you became a talk-therapy shrink, which is like being a minister of a religion in which you get to be God."

The psychiatrist turned red. Petra liked that. He was stupid, and he didn't like hearing it, but he definitely needed to hear it because he clearly had built his whole life around the idea that he was smart, and now that he was playing with live ammunition, thinking he was smart was going to get him killed.

"I suppose you're right, that the driver does know where we're going first, even if he doesn't know where we plan to go from the first rendezvous." The psychiatrist shrugged elaborately. "But that can't be helped. You have to trust someone."

"And you decided to trust this driver because ... ?"

The psychiatrist looked away.

Petra looked at the other man. "You're talkative."

"I am think," said the man in halting Common, "you make Battle School teachers crazy with talk."

"Ah," said Petra. "You're the brains of the outfit."

The man looked puzzled, but also offended—he wasn't sure how he had been insulted, since he probably didn't know the word outfit, but he knew an insult had been intended.

"Petra Arkanian," said the psychiatrist, "since you're right that I don't know the driver all that well, tell me what I should have done. You have a better plan than trusting him?"

"Of course," said Petra. "You tell him the rendezvous point, plan with him very carefully how he'll drive there."

"I did that," said the psychiatrist.

"I know," said Petra. "Then, at the last minute, just as you're loading me into the van, you take the wheel and make him ride in one of the limousines. And then you drive to a different place entirely. Or better yet, you take me to the nearest town and turn me loose and let me take care of myself."

Again, the psychiatrist looked away. Petra was amused at how transparent his body language was. You'd think a shrink would know how to conceal his own tells.

"These people who kidnapped you," said the psychiatrist, "they are a tiny minority, even within the intelligence organizations they work for. They can't be everywhere."

Petra shook her head. "You're a Russian, you were taught Russian history, and you actually believe that the intelligence service can't be everywhere and hear everything? What, did you spend your entire childhood watching American vids?"

The psychiatrist had had enough. Putting on his finest medical airs, he delivered his ultimate put-down. "And you're a child who never learned decent respect. You may be brilliant in your native abilities, but that doesn't mean you understand a political situation you know nothing about."

"Ah," said Petra. "The you're-just-a-child, you-don't-have-as-much-experience argument."

"Naming it doesn't mean it's untrue."

"I'm sure you understand the nuances of political speeches and maneuvers. But this is a military operation."

"It is a political operation," the psychiatrist corrected her. "No shooting."

Again, Petra was stunned at the man's ignorance. "Shooting is what happens when military operations fail to achieve their purposes through maneuver. Any operation that's intended to physically deprive the enemy of a valued asset is military."

"This operation is about freeing an ungrateful little girl and sending her home to her mama and papa," said the psychiatrist.

"You want me to be grateful? Open the door and let me out."

"The discussion is over," said the psychiatrist. "You can shut up"

"Is that how you end your sessions with your patients?"

"I never said I was a psychiatrist," said the psychiatrist.

"Psychiatry was your education," said Petra. "And I know you had a practice for a while, because real people don't talk like shrinks when they're trying to reassure a frightened child. Just because you got involved in politics and changed careers doesn't mean you aren't still the kind of bonehead who goes to witch-doctor school and thinks he's a scientist."

The man's fury was barely contained. Petra enjoyed the momentary thrill of fear that ran through her. Would he slap her? Not likely. As a psychiatrist, he would probably fall back on his one limitless resource-professional arrogance.

"Laymen usually sneer at sciences they don't understand," said the psychiatrist.

"That," said Petra, "is precisely my point. When it comes to military operations, you're a complete novice. A layman. A bonehead. And I'm the expert. And you're too stupid to listen to me even now."

"Everything is going smoothly," said the psychiatrist. "And you'll feel very foolish and apologize as you thank me when you get on the plane to return to Armenia."

Petra only smiled tightly. "You didn't even look in the cab of this delivery van to make sure it was the same driver before we drove off."

"Someone else would have noticed if the driver changed," said the psychiatrist. But Petra could tell she had finally made him uneasy.

"Oh, yes, I forgot, we trust your fellow conspirators to see all and miss nothing, because, after all, they aren't psychiatrists."

"I'm a psychologist," he said.

"Ouch," said Petra. "That must have hurt, to admit you're only half-educated."

The psychologist turned away from her. What was the term the shrinks in Ground School used for that behavior-avoidance? Denial? She almost asked him, but decided to leave well enough alone.

And people thought she couldn't control her tongue.

They rode for a while in bristling silence.

But the things she said must have been working on him, nagging at him. Because after a while he got up and walked to the front and opened the door between the cargo area and the cab.

A deafening gunshot rang through the closed interior, and the psychiatrist fell back. Petra felt hot brains and stinging bits of bone spatter her face and arms. The man across from her started reaching for a weapon under his coat, but he was shot twice and slumped over dead without touching it.

The door from the cab opened the rest of the way. It was Achilles standing there, holding the gun in his hand. He said something.

"I can't hear you," said Petra. "I can't even hear my own voice."

Achilles shrugged. Speaking louder and mouthing the words carefully, he tried again. She refused to look at him.

"I'm not going to try to listen to you," she said, "while I still have his blood all over me."

Achilles set down the gun—far out of her reach—and pulled off his shirt. Bare-chested, he handed it to her, and when she refused to take it, he started wiping her face with it until she snatched it out of his hands and did the job herself.

The ringing in her ears was fading, too. "I'm surprised you didn't wait to kill them until you'd had a chance to tell them how smart you are," said Petra.

"I didn't need to," said Achilles. "You already told them how dumb they were."

"Oh, you were listening?"

"Of course the compartment back here was wired for sound," said Achilles. "And video."

"You didn't have to kill them," said Petra.

"That guy was going for his gun," said Achilles.

"Only after his friend was dead."

"Come now," said Achilles. "I thought Ender's whole method was the preemptive use of ultimate force. I only do what I learned from your hero."

"I'm surprised you did this one yourself," said Petra.

"What do you mean, 'this one'?" said Achilles.

"I assumed you were stopping the other rescues, too."

"You forget," said Achilles, "I've already had months to evaluate you. Why keep the others, when I can have the best?"

11 "Are you flirting with me?" She said it with as much disdain as she could muster. Those words usually worked to shut down a boy who was being smug. But he only laughed.

"I don't flirt," he said.

"I forgot," said Petra. "You shoot first, and then flirting isn't necessary."

That got to him a little-made him pause a moment, brought the slightest hint of a quickening of breath. It occurred to Petra that her mouth was indeed going to get her killed. She had never actually seen someone get shot before, except in movies and vids. Just because she thought of herself as the protagonist of this biographical vid she was trapped in didn't mean she was safe. For all she knew, Achilles meant to kill her, too.

Or did he? Could he have really meant that she was the only one of the team he was keeping? Vlad would be so disappointed.

"How did you happen to choose me?" she asked, changing the

"Like I said, you're the best."

"That is such kuso," said Petra. "The exercises I did for you weren't any better than anyone else's."

"Oh, those battle plans, those were just to keep you busy while the real tests were going on. Or rather, to make you think you were keeping us busy."

"What was this real test, then, since I supposedly succeeded at it better than anyone else?"

"Your little dragon drawing," said Achilles.

She could feel the blood drain from her face. He saw it and laughed.

"Don't worry," said Achilles. "You won't be punished. That was the test, to see which of you would succeed in getting a message outside."

"And my prize is staying with you?" She said it with all the disgust she could put in her voice.

"Your prize," said Achilles, "is staying alive."

She felt sick at heart. "Even you wouldn't kill all the others, for no reason."

"If they're killed, there's a reason. If there's a reason, they'll be killed. No, we suspected that your dragon drawing would have some meaning to someone. But we couldn't find a code in it."

"There wasn't a code in it," said Petra.

"Oh yes there was," said Achilles. "You somehow encoded it in such a way that someone was able to recognize it and decode it. I know this because the news stories that suddenly appeared, triggering this whole crisis, had some specific information that was more or less correct. One of the messages you guys tried to send must have gotten through. So we went back over every email sent by every one of you, and the only thing that couldn't be accounted for was your dragon clip art."

"If you can read a message in that," said Petra, "then you're smarter than I am."

"On the contrary," said Achilles. "You're smarter than I am, at least about strategy and tactics-like evading the enemy while keeping in close communication with allies. Well, not all that close, since it took them so long to publish the information you sent."

"You bet on the wrong horse," said Petra. "It wasn't a message, and therefore however they got the news it must have come from one of the other guys."

Achilles only laughed. "You're a stubborn liar, aren't you?"

"I'm not lying when I tell you that if I have to keep riding with these corpses in this compartment, I'm going to get sick."

He smiled. "Vomit away."

"So your pathology includes a weird need to hang around with the dead," said Petra. "You'd better be careful-you know where that leads. First you'll start dating them, and then one day you'll bring a dead person home to meet your mother and father. Oops. I forgot, you're an orphan."

"So I brought them to show you."

"Why did you wait so long to shoot them?" asked Petra.

"I wanted it set up just right. So I could shoot the one while he was standing in the doorway. So his body would block any returning fire from the other guy. And besides, I was also enjoying the way you took them apart. You know, arguing with them like you did. Sounded like you hate shrinks almost as much as I do. And you were never even committed to a mental institution. I would have applauded several of your best bon mots, only I might have been overheard."

"Who's driving this van?" asked Petra, ignoring his flattery. -

"Not me," said Achilles. "Are you?"

"How long are you planning to keep me imprisoned?" asked Petra.

"As long as it takes."

"As long as it takes to do what?" ."

"Conquer the world together, you and I. Isn't that romantic? Or, well, it will be romantic, when it happens."

"It will never be romantic," said Petra. "Nor will I help you conquer your dandruff problem, let alone the world."

"Oh, you'll cooperate," said Achilles. "I'll kill the other members of Ender's jeesh, one by one, until you give in."

"You don't have them," said Petra. "And you don't know where they are. They're safe from you."

Achilles grinned mock-sheepishly. "There's just no fooling Genius Girl, is there? But, you see, they're bound to surface somewhere, and when they do, they'll die. I don't forget."

"That's one way to conquer the world," said Petra. "Kill every body one by one until you're the only one left."

"Your first job," said Achilles, "is to decode that message you sent out."

"What message?"

Achilles picked up his gun and pointed it at her

"Kill me and you'll always wonder if I really sent out a message at all," said Petra.

"But at least I won't have to listen to your smug voice lying to me," said Achilles. "That would almost be a consolation."

"You seem to be forgetting that I wasn't a volunteer on this expedition. If you don't like listening to me, let me go."

"You're so sure of yourself," said Achilles. "But I know you better than you know yourself."

"And what is it you think you know about me?" asked Petra.

"I know that you'll eventually give in and help me,"

"Well, I know you better than you know yourself, too," said Petra.

"Oh, really?"

"I know that eventually you'll kill me. Because you always do. So let's just skip all the boring stuff in between. Kill me now. End the suspense."

"No," said Achilles. "Things like that are much better as a surprise. Don't you think? At least, that's the way God always did it."

"Why am I even talking to you?" asked Petra.

"Because you're so lonely after being in solitary for all these months that you'd do anything for human company. Even talk to me!"

She hated that he was probably right. "Human company apparently you're under the delusion that you qualify."

"Oh, you're mean," said Achilles, laughing. "Look, I'm bleeding."

"You've got blood on your hands, all right."

"And you've got it all over your face," said Achilles. "Come on, it'll be fun."

"And here I thought nothing would ever be more tedious than solitary confinement."

"You're the best, Petra," said Achilles. "Except for one."

"Bean," said Petra.

"Ender," said Achilles. "Bean is nothing. Bean is dead."

Petra said nothing.

Achilles looked at her searchingly. "No smart remarks?"

"Bean is dead and you're alive," said Petra. "There's no justice."

The van slowed down and stopped.

"There," said Achilles. "Our lively conversation made the time fly by."

Fly. She heard an airplane overhead. Landing or taking off?

"Where are we flying?" she asked.

"Who says we're flying anywhere?"

"I think we're flying out of the country," said Petra, speaking the ideas as they came to her. "I think you realized that you were going to lose your cushy job here in Russia, and you're sneaking out of the country."

"You're really very good. You keep setting a new standard for cleverness," said Achilles.

"And you keep setting a new standard for failure."

He hesitated a moment, then went on as if she hadn't spoken. "They're going to pit the other kids against me," he said. "You already know them. You know their weaknesses. Whoever I'm up against, you're going to advise me."

"Never."

"We're in this together," said Achilles. "I'm a nice guy. You'll like me, eventually."

"Oh, I know," said Petra. "What's not to like?"

"Your message," said Achilles. "You wrote it to Bean, didn't you?"

"What message?" said Petra.

"That's why you don't believe he's dead."

"I believe he's dead," said Petra. But she knew her earlier hesitation had given her away.

"Or else you wonder-if he got your message before I had him killed, why did it take so long after he died to have it hit the news? And here's the obvious answer, Pet. Somebody else figured it out. Somebody else decoded it. And that really pisses me off. So don't tell me what the message said. I'm going to decode it myself. It can't be that hard."

"Downright easy," said Petra. "After all, I'm dumb enough to end up as your prisoner. So dumb, in fact, that I never sent anybody a message."

"When I do decode it, though, I hope it won't say anything disparaging about me. Because then I'd have to beat the shit out of you."

"You're right," said Petra. "You are a charmer."

Fifteen minutes later, they were on a small private jet, flying south by southeast. It was a luxurious vehicle, for its size, and Petra wondered if it belonged to one of the intelligence services or to some faction in the military or maybe to some crime lord. Or maybe all three at once.

She wanted to study Achilles, watch his face, his body language. But she didn't want him to see her showing interest in him. So she looked out the window, wondering as she did so whether she wasn't just doing the same thing the dead psychologist had done-looking away to avoid facing bitter truth.

When the chime announced that they could unbelt themselves, Petra got up and headed for the bathroom. It was small, but compared to commercial airplane toilets it was downright commodious. And it had cloth towels and real soap.

She did her best with a damp towel to wipe blood and body matter from her clothes. She had to keep wearing the dirty clothing but she could at least get rid of the visible chunks. The towel was so

foul by the time she finished the job that she tossed it and got a fresh one to start in on her face and hands. She scrubbed until her face was red and raw, but she got it all off. She even soaped her hair and washed it as best she could in the tiny sink. It was hard to rinse, pouring one cup of water at a time over her head.

The whole time, she kept thinking of the fact that the psychiatrist's last minutes were spent listening to her tell him how stupid he was and point out the worthlessness of his life's work. And yes, she was right, as his death proved, but that didn't change the fact that however impure his motives might have been, he was trying to save her from Achilles. He had given his life in that effort, however badly planned it might have been. All the other rescues went off smoothly, and they were probably just as badly planned as hers. So much depended on chance. Everybody was stupid about some things. Petra was stupid about the things she said to people who had power over her. Goading them. Daring them to punish her. She did it even though she knew it was stupid. And wasn't it even stupider to do something stupid that you know is stupid? What did he call her? An ungrateful little girl.

He tagged me, all right.

As bad as she felt about his death, as horrified over what she had seen, as frightened as she was to be in Achilles' control, as lonely as she had been for these past weeks, she still couldn't figure out a way to cry about it. Because deeper than all these feelings was something even stronger. Her mind kept thinking of ways to get word to some-one about where she was. She had done it once, she could do it again, right? She might feel bad, she might be a miserable specimen of human life, she might be in the midst of a traumatic childhood experience, but she was not going to submit to Achilles for one moment longer than she had to.

The plane lurched suddenly, throwing her against the toilet. She half-fell onto it-there wasn't room to fall down all the way-but she couldn't get up because the plane had gone into a steep dive, and for a few moments she found herself gasping as the oxygen-rich air was replaced by cold upper-level air that left her dizzy.

The hull was breached. They've shot us down.

And for all that she had an indomitable will to live, she couldn't help but think: Good for them. Kill Achilles now, and no matter who else is on the plane, it'll be a great day for humanity.

But the plane soon leveled out, and the air was breathable before she blacked out. They must not have been very high when it happened.

She opened the bathroom door and stepped back into the main cabin.

The side door was partway open. And standing a couple of meters back from it was Achilles, the wind whipping at his hair and clothes. He was posing, as if he knew just how fine a figure he cut, standing there on the brink of death.

She approached him, glancing at the door to make sure she stayed well back from it, and to see how high they were. Not very, compared to cruising altitude, but higher than any building or bridge or dam. Anyone who fell from this plane would die.

Could she get behind him and push?

He smiled broadly when she got near.

"What happened?" she shouted over the noise of the wind.

"It occurred to me," he yelled back, "that I made a mistake bring-ing you with me."

He opened the door on purpose. He opened it for her.

Just as she began to step back, his hand lashed out and seized her by the wrist.

The intensity of his eyes was startling. He didn't look crazy. He looked ... fascinated. Almost as if he found her amazingly beautiful. But of course it wasn't her. It was his power over her that fascinated him. It was himself that he loved so intensely.

She didn't try to pull away. Instead, she twisted her wrist so that she also gripped him.

"Come on, let's jump together," she shouted. "That would be the most romantic thing we could do."

He leaned close. "And miss out on all the history we're going to make together?" he said. Then he laughed. "Oh, I see, you thought I was going to throw you out of the plane. No, Pet, I took hold of you so that I could anchor you while you close the door. Wouldn't want the wind to suck you out, would we?"

"I have a better idea," said Petra. "I'll be the anchor, you close the door."

"But the anchor has to be the stronger, heavier one," said Achilles. "And that's me."

"Let's just leave it open, then," said Petra.

"Can't fly all the way to Kabul with the door open."

What did it mean, his telling her their destination? Did it mean that he trusted her a little? Or that it didn't matter what she knew, since he had decided she was going to die?

Then it occurred to her that if he wanted her dead, she would die. It was that simple. So why worry about it? If he wanted to kill her by pushing her out the door, how was that different from a bullet in the brain? Dead was dead. And if he didn't plan to kill her, the door needed to be closed, and having him serve as anchor was the second-best plan.

"Isn't there somebody in the crew who can do this?" she asked.

"There's just the pilot," said Achilles. "Can you land a plane?"

She shook her head.

"So he stays in the cockpit, and we close the door."

"I don't mean to be a nag," said Petra, "but opening the door was a really stupid thing to do."

He grinned at her.

Holding tight to his wrist, she slid along the wall toward the door. It was only partially open, the kind of door that worked by sliding up. So she didn't have to reach very far out of the plane. Still, the cold wind snatched at her arm and made it very hard to get a grip on the door handle to pull it down into place. And even when she got it down into position, she simply didn't have the strength to overcome the wind resistance and pull it snug.

Achilles saw this, and now that the door wasn't open enough for anyone to fall out and the wind could no longer suck anybody out, he let go of her and of the bulkhead and joined her in pulling at the handle.

If I push instead of pulling, thought Petra, the wind will help me, and maybe we'll both get sucked right out.

Do it, she told herself. Do it. Kill him. Even if you die doing it, it's worth it. This is Hitler, Stalin, Genghis, Attila all rolled into one.

But it might not work. He might not get sucked out. She might die alone, pointlessly. No, she would have to find a way to destroy him later, when she could be sure it would work.

At another level, she knew that she simply wasn't ready to die. No matter how convenient it might be for the rest of humanity, no matter how richly Achilles deserved to die, she would not be his executioner, not now, not if she had to give her own life to kill him. If that made her a selfish coward, so be it.

They pulled and pulled and finally, with a whoosh, the door passed the threshold of wind resistance and locked nicely into place. Achilles pulled the lever that locked it.

"Traveling with you is always such an adventure," said Petra.

"No need to shout," said Achilles. "I can hear you just fine."

"Why can't you just run with the bulls at Pamplona, like any normal self-destructive person?" asked Petra.

He ignored her gibe. "I must value you more than I thought." He said it as if it took him rather by surprise.

"You mean you still have a spark of humility? You might actually need someone else?"

Again he ignored her words. "You look better without blood all over your face."

"But I'll never be as pretty as you."

"Here's my rule about guns," said Achilles. "When people are getting shot, always stand behind the shooter. It's a lot less messy there."

"Unless people are shooting back."

Achilles laughed. "Pet, I never use a gun when someone might shoot back."

"And you're so well-mannered, you always open a door for a lady."

His smile faded. "Sometimes I get these impulses," he said. "But they're not irresistible."

"Too bad. And here you had such a good insanity defense going."

His eyes blazed for a moment. Then he went back to his seat.

She cursed herself. Goading him like this, how is it different from jumping out of the airplane?

Then again, maybe it was the fact that she spoke to him without cringing that made him value her.

Fool, she said to herself. You are not equipped to understand this boy-you're not insane enough. Don't try to guess why he does what he does, or how he feels about you or anybody or anything. Study him so you can learn how he makes his plans, what he's likely to do, so that someday you can defeat him. But don't ever try to understand. If you can't even understand yourself, what hope do you have of comprehending somebody as deformed as Achilles?

They did not land in Kabul. They landed in Tashkent, refueled, and then went over the Himalayas to New Delhi.

So he lied to her about their destination. He hadn't trusted her after all. But as long as he refrained from killing her, she could endure a little mistrust.

COMMUNING WITH THE DEAD

To: Carlotta%agape@vatican.net/orders/sisters/ind

From: Locke%erasmus@polnet.gov

Re: An answer for your dead friend

If you know who I really am, and you have contact with a certain person purported to be dead, please inform that person that I have done my best to fulfill expectations. I believe further collaboration is possible, but not through intermediaries. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, then please inform me of that, as well, so I can begin my search again.

Bean came home to find that Sister Carlotta had packed their bags.

"Moving day?" he asked.

They had agreed that either one of them could decide that it was time to move on, without having to defend the decision. It was the only way to be sure of acting on any unconscious cues that someone was closing in on them. They didn't want to spend their last moments of life listening to each other say, "I knew we should have left three days ago!" "Well why didn't you say so?" "Because I didn't have a reason."

"We have two hours till the flight."

"Wait a minute," said Bean. "You decide we're going, I decide the destination." That was how they'd decided to keep their movements random.

She handed him the printout of an email. It was from Locke. "Greensboro, North Carolina, in the U.S.," she said.

"Perhaps I'm not decoding this right," said Bean, "but I don't see an invitation to visit him."

"He doesn't want intermediaries," said Carlotta. "We can't trust his email to be untraced."

Bean took a match and burned the email in the sink. Then he crumbled the ashes and washed them down the drain. "What about Petra?"

"Still no word. Seven of Ender's jeesh released. The Russians are simply saying that Petra's place of captivity has not yet been discovered."

"Kuso," said Bean.

"I know," said Carlotta, "but what can we do if they won't tell us? I'm afraid she's dead, Bean. You've got to realize that's the likeliest reason for them to stonewall."

Bean knew it, but didn't believe it. "You don't know Petra," he said.

"You don't know Russia," said Carlotta.

"Most people are decent in every country," said Bean.

"Achilles is enough to tip the balance wherever he goes."

Bean nodded. "Rationally, I have to agree with you. Irrationally expect to see her again someday."

"If I didn't know you so well, I might interpret that as a sign of your faith in the resurrection." Bean picked up his suitcase. "Am I bigger, or is this smaller?" "The case is the same size," said Carlotta. "I think I'm growing." "Of course you're growing. Look at your pants." "I'm still wearing them," said Bean. "More to the point, look at your ankles."

"Oh." There was more ankle showing than when he bought them.

Bean had never seen a child grow up, but it bothered him that in the weeks they had been in Araraquara, he had grown at least five centimeters. If this was puberty, where were the other changes that were supposed to go along with it?

"We'll buy you new clothes in Greensboro," said Sister Carlotta.

Greensboro. "The place where Ender grew up."

"And where he killed for the first time," said Sister Carlotta.

"You just won't let go of that, will you?" said Bean.

"When you had Achilles in your power, you didn't kill him."

Bean didn't like hearing himself compared to Ender that way. Not when it showed Ender at a disadvantage. "Sister Carlotta, we'd have a whole lot less difficulty right now if I had killed him."

"You showed mercy. You turned the other cheek. You gave him a chance to make something worthwhile out of his life."

"I made sure he'd get committed to a mental institution."

"Are you so determined to believe in your own lack of virtue?"

"Yes," said Bean. "I prefer truth to lies."

"There," said Carlotta. "Yet another virtue to add to my list."

Bean laughed in spite of himself. "I'm glad you like me," he said.

"Are you afraid to meet him?"

"Who?"

"Ender's brother."

"Not afraid," said Bean.

"How do you feel, then?"

"Skeptical," said Bean.

"He showed humility in that email," said Sister Carlotta. "He wasn't sure that he'd figured things out exactly right."

"Oh, there's a thought. The humble Hegemon."

"He's not Hegemon yet," said Carlotta.

"He got seven of Ender's jeesh released, just by publishing a column. He has influence. He has ambition. And now to learn he has humility-well, it's just too much for me."

"Laugh all you want. Let's go out and find a cab."

There was no last-minute business to take care of. They had paid cash for everything, owed nothing. They could walk away.

They lived on money drawn from accounts Graff had set up for them. There was nothing about the account Bean was using now to tag it as belonging to Julian Delphiki- It held his military salary, including his combat and retirement bonuses. The I.F. had given all of Ender's jeesh very large trust funds that they couldn't touch till they came of age. The saved-up pay and bonuses were just to tide them over during their childhood. Graff had assured him that he would not run out of money while he was in hiding.

Sister Carlotta's money came from the Vatican. One person there knew what she was doing. She, too, would have money enough for her needs. Neither of them had the temperament to exploit the situation. They spent little, Sister Carlotta because she wanted nothing more, Bean because he knew that any kind of flamboyance or excess would mark him in people's memories. He always had to seem to be a child running errands for his grandmother, not an undersized war hero cashing in on his back pay.

Their passports caused them no problems, either. Again, Graff had been able to pull strings for them. Given the way they looked-both of Mediterranean ancestry-they carried passports from Catalonia. Carlotta knew Barcelona well, and Catalan was her childhood language. She barely spoke it now, but no matter-hardly anyone did. And no one would be surprised that her grandson couldn't speak the language at all. Besides, how many Catalans would they meet in their travels? Who would try to test their story? If someone got too nosy, they'd simply move on to some other city, some other country.

They landed in Miami, then Atlanta, then Greensboro. They were exhausted and slept the night at an airport hotel. The next day, they logged in and printed out guides to the county bus system. It was a fairly modern system, enclosed and electric, but the map made no sense to Bean.

"Why don't any of the buses go through here?" he asked.

"That's where the rich people live," said Sister Carlotta.

"They make them all live together in one place?"

"They feel safer," said Carlotta. "And by living close together, they have a better chance of their children marrying into other rich families."

"But why don't they want buses?"

"They ride in individual vehicles. They can afford the fees. It gives them more freedom to choose their own schedule. And it shows everyone just how rich they are."

"It's still stupid," said Bean. "Look how far the buses have to go out of their way."

"The rich people didn't want their streets to be enclosed in order to hold a bus system."

"So what?" asked Bean.

Sister Carlotta laughed. "Bean, isn't there plenty of stupidity in the military, too?"

"But in the long run, the guy who wins battles gets to make the decisions."

"Well, these rich people won the economic battles. Or their grandparents did. So now they get their way most of the time."

"Sometimes I feel like I don't know anything."

"You've lived half your life in a tube in space, and before that you lived on the streets of Rotterdam."

"I've lived in Greece with my family and in Araraquara, too. I should have figured this out."

„That was Greece. And Brazil. This is America."

"So money rules in America, but not those other places?"

"No, Bean. Money rules almost everywhere. But different cultures have different ways of displaying it. In Araraquara, for instance, they made sure that the tram lines ran out to the rich neighborhoods. Why? So the servants could come to work. In America, they're more afraid of criminals coming to steal, so the sign of wealth is to make sure that the only way to reach them is by private car or on foot."

"Sometimes I miss Battle School."

"That's because in Battle School, you were one of the very richest in the only coin that mattered there."

Bean thought about that. As soon as the other kids realized that, young and small as he was, he could outperform them in every class, it gave him a kind of power. Everyone knew who he was. Even those who mocked him had to give him a grudging respect. But. . . "I didn't always get my way."

"Graff told me some of the outrageous things you did," said Carlotta. "Climbing through the air ducts to eavesdrop. Breaking into the computer system."

"But they caught me."

"Not as soon as they'd like to have caught you. And were you punished? No. Why? Because you were rich."

"Money and talent aren't the same thing."

"That's because you can inherit money that was earned by your ancestors," said Sister Carlotta. "And everybody recognizes the value of money, while only select groups recognize the value of talent."

"So where does Peter live?"

She had the addresses of all the Wiggin families. There weren't many-the more common spelling had an s at the end. "But I don't think this will help us," said Carlotta. "We don't want to meet him at home."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know whether his parents are aware of what he's doing or not. Graff was pretty sure they don't know. If two foreigners come calling, they're going to start to wonder what their son is doing on the nets."

"Where, then?"

"He could be in secondary school. But given his intelligence, I'd bet on his being in college." She was accessing more information as she spoke. "Colleges colleges colleges. Lots of them in town. The biggest first, the better for him to disappear in . . ."

"Why would he need to disappear? Nobody knows who he is."

"But he doesn't want anyone to realize that he spends no time on his schoolwork. He has to look like an ordinary kid his age. He should be spending all his free time with friends. Or with girls. Or with friends looking for girls. Or with friends trying to distract themselves from the fact that they can't find any girls."

"For a nun, you seem to know a lot about this."

"I wasn't born a nun."

"But you were born a girl."

"And no one is a better observer of the folkways of the adolescent male than the adolescent female."

"What makes you think he doesn't do all those things?"

"Being Locke and Demosthenes is a fulltime job.

"So why do you think he's in college at all?"

"Because his parents would be upset if he stayed home all day, reading and writing email."

Bean wouldn't know about what might make parents upset. He'd only known his parents since the end of the war, and they'd never found anything serious to criticize about him. Or maybe they never felt like he was really theirs. They didn't criticize Nikolai much, either. But ... more than they did Bean. There simply hadn't been enough time together for them to feel as comfortable, as parental, with their new son Julian.

"I wonder how my parents are doing."

"If anything was wrong, we would have heard," said Carlotta.

"I know," said Bean. "That doesn't mean I can't wonder."

She didn't answer, just kept working her desk, bringing new pages into the display. "Here he is," she said. "A nonresident student. No address. Just email and a campus box."

"What about his class schedule?" asked Bean.

"They don't post that."

Bean laughed. "And that's supposed to be a problem?"

"No, Bean, you aren't going to crack their system. I can't think of a better way for you to attract attention than to trip some trap and get a mole to follow you home."

"I don't get followed by moles."

"You never see the ones that follow you."

"It's just a college, not some intelligence service."

"Sometimes people with the least that is worth stealing are the most concerned with giving the appearance of having great treasures hidden away."

"Is that from the Bible?"

"No, it's from observation."

"So what do we do?"

"Your voice is too young," said Sister Carlotta. "I'll work the phone."

She talked her way to the head registrar of the university. "He was a very nice boy to carry all my things after the wheel broke on my cart, and if these keys are his I want to get them back to him right away, before he worries.... No I will not drop them in the mail, how would that be 'right away'? Nor will I leave them with you, they might not be his, and then what would I do? If they are his keys, he will be very glad you told me where his classes are, and if they aren't his keys, then what harm will it cause? ... All right, I'll wait."

Sister Carlotta lay back on the bed. Bean laughed at her. "How did a nun get so good at lying?"

She held down the MUTE button. "It isn't lying to tell a bureaucrat whatever story it takes to get him to do his job properly."

"But if he does his job properly, he won't give you any information about Peter."

"If he does his job properly, he'll understand the purpose of the rules and therefore know when it is appropriate to make exceptions."

"People who understand the purpose of the rules don't become bureaucrats," said Bean. "That's something we learned really fast in Battle School."

"Exactly," said Carlotta. "So I have to tell him the story that will help him overcome his handicap." Abruptly she refocused her attention on the phone. "Oh, how very nice. Well, that's fine. I'll see him there."

She hung up the phone and laughed. "Well, after all that, the registrar emailed him. His desk was connected, he admitted that he had lost his keys, and he wants to meet the nice old lady at Yum-Yum."

"What is that?" asked Bean.

"I haven't the slightest idea, but the way she said it, I figured that if I were an old lady living near campus, I'd already know." She was already deep in the city directory. "Oh, it's a restaurant near campus. Well, this is it. Let's go meet the boy who would be king."

"Wait a minute," said Bean. "We can't go straight there."

"Why not?"

"We have to get some keys."

Sister Carlotta looked at him like he was crazy. "I made up the bit about the keys, Bean."

"The registrar knows that you're meeting Peter Wiggin to give him back his keys. What if he happens to be going to Yum-Yum right now for lunch? And he sees us meet Peter, and nobody gives anybody any keys?"

"We don't have a lot of time."

"OK, I have a better idea. Just act flustered and tell him that in your hurry to get there to meet him, you forgot to bring the keys, so he should come back to the house with you."

"You have a talent for this, Bean."

"Deception is second nature to me."

The bus was on time and moved briskly, this being an off-peak time, and soon they were on campus. Bean was better at translating maps into real terrain, so he led the way to Yum-Yum.

The place looked like a dive. Or rather, it was trying to look like a dive from an earlier era. Only it really was rundown and under-maintained, so it was a dive trying to look like a nice restaurant decorated to look like a dive. Very complicated and ironic, Bean decided, remembering what Father used to say about a neighborhood restaurant near their house on Crete: Abandon lunch, all ye who enter here.

The food looked like common-people's restaurant food everywhere—more about delivering fats and sweets than about flavor or nutrition. Bean wasn't picky, though. There were foods he liked better than others, and he knew something of the difference between fine cuisine and plain fare, but after the streets of Rotterdam and years of dried and processed food in space, anything that delivered the calories and nutrients was fine with him. But he made the mistake of going for the ice cream. He had just come from Araraquara, where the sorvete was memorable, and the American stuff was too fatty, the flavors too syrupy. "Mmmm, deliciosa," said Bean.

"Fecha a boquinha, menino," she answered. "E nao fala portugues aqui."

"I didn't want to critique the ice cream in a language they'd understand."

"Doesn't the memory of starvation make you more patient?"

"Does everything have to be a moral question?"

"I wrote my dissertation on Aquinas and Tillich," said Sister Carlotta. "All questions are philosophical."

"In which case, all answers are unintelligible."

"And you're not even in grad school yet."

A tall young man slid onto the bench beside Bean. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "You got my keys?"

"I feel so foolish," said Sister Carlotta. "I came all the way here and then I realized I left them back home. Let me buy you some ice cream and then you can walk home with me and get them."

Bean looked up at Peter's face in profile. The resemblance to Ender was plain, but not close enough that anyone could ever mistake one for the other.

So this is the kid who brokered the ceasefire that ended the League War. The kid who wants to be Hegemon. Good looking, but not movie-star handsome-people would like him, but still trust him. Bean had studied the vids of Hitler and Stalin. The difference was palpable-Stalin never had to get elected; Hitler did. Even with that stupid mustache, you could see it in Hitler's eyes, that ability to see into you, that sense that whatever he said, wherever he looked, he was speaking to you, looking at you, that he cared about you. But Stalin, he looked like the liar that he was. Peter was definitely in the charismatic category. Like Hitler.

Perhaps an unfair comparison, but those who coveted power invited such thoughts. And the worst was seeing the way Sister Carlotta played to him. True, she was acting a part, but when she spoke to him, when that gaze was fixed on her, she preened a little, she warmed to him. Not so much that she'd behave foolishly, but she was aware of him with a heightened intensity that Bean didn't like. Peter had the seducer's gift. Dangerous.

"I'll walk home with you," said Peter. "I'm not hungry. Have you already paid?"

"Of course," said Sister Carlotta. "This is my grandson, by the way. Delfino."

Peter turned to notice Bean for the first time-though Bean was quite sure Peter had sized him up thoroughly before he sat down. "Cute kid," he said. "How old is he? Does he go to school yet?"

"I'm little," said Bean cheerfully, "but at least I'm not a yelda."

"All those vids of Battle School life," said Peter. "Even little kids are picking up that stupid polyglot slang."

"Now, children, you must get along, I insist on it." Sister Carlotta led the way to the door. "My grandson is visiting this country for the first time, young man, so he doesn't understand American banter."

"Yes I do," said Bean, trying to sound like a petulant child and finding it quite easy, since he really was annoyed.

"He speaks English pretty well. But you better hold his hand crossing this street, the campus trams zoom through here like Daytona."

Bean rolled his eyes and submitted to having Carlotta hold his hand across the street. Peter was obviously trying to provoke him, but why? Surely he wasn't so shallow as to think humiliating Bean would give him some advantage. Maybe he took pleasure in making other people feel small.

Finally, though, they were away from campus and had taken enough twists and turns to make sure they weren't being followed.

"So you're the great Julian Delphiki," said Peter.

"And you're Locke. They're touting you for Hegemon when Sakata's term is over. Too bad you're only virtual."

"I'm thinking of going public soon," said Peter.

"Ah, that's why you got the plastic surgery to make you so pretty," said Bean.

"This old face?" said Peter. "I only wear it when I don't care how I look."

"Boys," said Sister Carlotta. "Must you display like baby chimps?"

Peter laughed easily. "Come on, Mom, we was just playin'. Can't we still go to the movies?"

"Off to bed without supper, the lot of you," said Sister Carlotta.

Bean had had enough of this. "Where's Petra?" he demanded.

Peter looked at him as if he were insane. "I don't have her."

"You have sources," said Bean. "You know more than you're telling me."

"You know more than you're telling me, too," said Peter. "I thought we were working on trusting each other, and then we open the floodgates of wisdom."

"Is she dead?" said Bean, not willing to be deflected.

Peter looked at his watch. "At this moment. I don't know."

Bean stopped walking. Disgusted, he turned to Sister Carlotta. "We wasted a trip," he said. "And risked our lives for nothing."

"Are you sure?" said Sister Carlotta.

Bean looked back at Peter, who seemed genuinely bemused. "He wants to be Hegemon," said Bean, "but he's nothing." Bean walked away. He had memorized the route, of course, and knew how to get to the bus station without Sister Carlotta's help. Ender had ridden these buses as a child younger than Bean. It was the only consolation for the bitter disappointment of finding out that Peter was a gameplaying fool.

No one called after him, and he did not look back.

Bean took, not the bus to the hotel, but the one that passed nearest the school Ender had attended just before being taken into Battle School. The whole story of Ender's life had come out in the inquiry into Graff's conduct: Ender's first killing had taken place here, a boy named Stilson who had set on Ender with his gang. Bean had been there for Ender's second killing, which was pretty much the same situation as the first. Ender-alone, outnumbered, surrounded talked his way into single combat and then fought to destroy his enemy so no will to fight would remain. But he had known it here, at the age of six.

I knew things at that age, thought Bean. And younger, too. Not how to kill-that was beyond me, I was too small. But how to live, that was hard.

For me it was hard, but not for Ender. Bean walked through the neighborhoods of modest old houses and even more modest new ones-but to him they were all miracles. Not that he hadn't had plenty of chances, living with his family in Greece after the war, to see how most children grew up. But this was different. This was the place that had spawned Ender Wiggin.

I had more native talent for war than Ender had. But he was still the better commander. Was this the difference? He grew up where he never worried about finding another meal, where people praised him and protected him. I grew up where if I found a scrap of food I had to worry that another street kid might kill me for it. Shouldn't that have made me the one who fought desperately, and Ender the one who held back?

It wasn't the place. Two people in identical situations would

never make exactly the same choices. Ender is who he is, and I am who I am. It was in him to destroy the Formics. It was in me to stay alive.

So what's in me now? I'm a commander without an army. I have a mission to perform, but no knowledge of how to perform it. Petra, if she's still alive, is in desperate peril, and she counts on me to free her. The others are all free. She alone remains hidden. What has Achilles done to her? I will not have Petra end like Poke.

There it was. The difference between Ender and Bean. Ender came out of his bitterest battle of childhood undefeated. He had done what was required. But Bean had not even realized the danger his friend Poke was in until too late. If he had seen in time how immediate her peril was, he could have warned her, helped her. Saved her. Instead, her body was tossed into the Rhine, to be found bobbing like so much garbage among the wharves.

And it was happening again.

Bean stood in front of the Wiggin house. Ender had never spoken of it, nor had pictures of it been shown at the court of inquiry. But it was exactly what Bean had expected. A tree in the front yard, with wooden slats nailed into the trunk to form a ladder to the platform in a high crotch of the tree. A tidy, well-tended garden. A place of peace and refuge. What did Ender ever know of fear?

Where is Petra's garden? For that matter, where is mine?

Bean knew he was being unreasonable. If Ender had come back to Earth, he too would no doubt be in hiding, if Achilles hadn't simply killed him straight off. And even as things stood, he couldn't help but wonder if Ender might not prefer to be living as Bean was, on Earth, in hiding, than where he was now, in space, bound for another world and a life of permanent exile from the world of his birth.

A woman came out of the front door of the house. Mrs. Wiggin?

"Are you lost?" she asked.

Bean realized that in his disappointment-no, call it despair-he had forgotten his vigilance. This house might be watched. Even if it was not, Mrs. Wiggin herself might remember him, this young boy who appeared in front of her house during school hours.

"Is this where Ender Wiggin grew up?"

A cloud passed across her face, just momentarily, but Bean saw how her expression saddened before her smile could be put back. "Yes, it is," she said. "But we don't give tours."

For reasons Bean could not understand, on impulse he said, "I was with him. In the last battle. I fought under him."

Her smile changed again, away from mere courtesy and kindness, toward something like warmth and pain. "Ali," she said. "A veteran." And then the warmth faded and was replaced by worry. "I know all the faces of Ender's companions in that last battle. You're the one who's dead. Julian Delphiki."

Just like that, his cover was blown-and he had done it to himself, by telling her that he was in Ender's jeesh. What was he thinking? There were only eleven of them. "Obviously, there's someone who wants to kill me," he said. "If you tell anyone I came here, it will help him do it."

"I won't tell. But it was careless of you to come here."

"I had to see," said Bean, wondering if that was anything like a true explanation.

She didn't wonder. "That's absurd," she said. "You wouldn't risk your life to come here without a reason." And then it came together in her mind. "Peter's not home right now."

"I know," Bean said. "I was just with him at the university." And then he realized-there was no reason for her to think he was coming to see Peter, unless she had some idea of what Peter was doing. "You know," he said.

She closed her eyes, realizing now what she had confessed. "Either we are both very great fools," she said, "or we must have trusted each other at once, to let our guard down so readily."

"We're only fools if the other can't be trusted," said Bean.

"We'll find out, won't we?" Then she smiled. "No use leaving you standing out here on the street, for people to wonder why a child your size is not in school."

He followed her up the walkway to the front door. When Ender left home, did he walk down this path? Bean tried to imagine the scene. Ender never came home. Like Bonzo, the other casualty of the war. Bonzo, killed; Ender, missing in action; and now Bean coming up the walk to Ender's home. Only this was no sentimental visit with a grieving family. It was a different war now, out war it was, and she had another son at risk these days.

She was not supposed to know what he was doing. Wasn't that the whole point of Peter's having to camouflage his activities by pretending to be a student?

She made him a sandwich without even asking, as if she simply assumed that a child would be hungry. It was, of all things, that plain American cliché, peanut butter on white bread. Had she made such sandwiches for Ender?

"I miss him," said Bean, because he knew that would make her like him.

"If he had been here," said Mrs. Wiggin, "he probably would have been killed. When I read what ... Locke ... wrote about that boy from Rotterdam, I couldn't imagine he would have let Ender live. You knew him, too, didn't you. What's his name,?"

"Achilles," said Bean.

"You're in hiding," she said. "But you seem so young."

"I travel with a nun named Sister Carlotta," said Bean. "We claim we're grandmother and grandson."

"I'm glad you're not alone."

"Neither is Ender."

Tears came to her eyes. "I suppose he needed Valentine more than we did."

On impulse-again, an impulsive act instead of a calculated decision-Bean reached out and set his hand in hers. She smiled at him.

The moment passed. Bean realized again how dangerous it was to be here. What if this house was under surveillance? The I.F. knew about Peter-what if they were observing the house?

"I should go," said Bean.

"I'm glad you came by," she said. "I must have wanted very much to talk to someone who knew Ender without being envious of him."

"We were all envious," said Bean. "But we also knew he was the best of us."

"Why else would you envy him, if you didn't think he was better?"

Bean laughed. "Well, when you envy somebody, you tell yourself he isn't really better after all."

"So ... did the other children envy his abilities?" asked Mrs. Wiggin. "Or only the recognition he received?"

Bean didn't like the question, but then remembered who it was that was asking. "I should turn that question back on you. Did Peter envy his abilities? Or only the recognition?"

She stood there, considering whether to answer or not. Bean knew that family loyalty worked against her saying anything. "I'm not just idly asking," Bean said. "I don't know how much you know about what Peter's doing. . ."

"We read everything he publishes," said Mrs. Wiggin. "And then we're very careful to act as if we hadn't a clue what's going on in the world."

"I'm trying to decide whether to throw in with Peter," said Bean. "And I have no way of knowing what to make of him. How much to trust him."

"I wish I could help you," said Mrs. Wiggin. "Peter marches to a different drummer. I've never really caught the rhythm."

"Don't you like him?" asked Bean, knowing he was too blunt, but knowing also that he wasn't going to get many chances like this, to talk to the mother of a potential ally---or rival.

"I love him," said Mrs. Wiggin. "He doesn't show us much of himself. But that's only fair-we never showed our children much of ourselves, either."

"Why not?" asked Bean. He was thinking of the openness of his mother and father, the way they knew Nikolai, and Nikolai knew them. It had left him almost gasping, the unguardedness of their conversations with each other. Clearly the Wiggin household did not have that custom.

"It's very complicated," said Mrs. Wiggin.

"Meaning that you think it's none of my business."

"On the contrary, I know it's very much your business." She sighed and sat back down. "Come on, let's not pretend this is only a doorstep conversation. You came here to find out about Peter. The easy answer is simply to tell you that we don't know a thing. He never tells anyone anything they want to know, unless it would be useful to him for them to know it."

"But the hard answer?"

"We've been hiding from our children, almost from the start," said Mrs. Wiggin. "We can hardly be surprised or resentful when they learned at a very early age to be secretive."

"What were you hiding?"

"We don't tell our children, and I should tell you?" But she answered her own question at once. "If Valentine and Ender were here, I think we would talk to them. I even tried to explain some of this to Valentine before she left to join Ender in ... space. I did a very bad job, because I had never put it in words before. Let me just ... let me start by saying ... we were going to have a third child anyway, even if the I.F. hadn't asked us to."

Where Bean had grown up, the population laws hadn't meant much—the street children of Rotterdam were all extra people and knew perfectly well that by law not one of them should have been born but when you're starving, it's hard to care much about whether you're going to get into the finest schools. Still, when the laws were repealed, he read about them and knew the significance of their decision to have a third child. "Why would you do that?" asked Bean. "It would hurt all your children. It would end your careers."

"We were very careful not to have careers," said Mrs. Wiggin. "Not careers that we'd hate to give up. What we had was only jobs. You see, we're religious people."

"There are lots of religious people in the world."

"But not in America," said Mrs. Wiggin. "Not the kind of fanatic that does something so selfish and antisocial as to have more than two children, just because of some misguided religious ideas. And when Peter tested so high as a toddler, and they started monitoring him well, that was a disaster for us. We had hoped to be ... unobtrusive. To disappear. We're very bright people, you know."

"I wondered why the parents of such geniuses didn't have noted careers of their own," said Bean. "Or at least some kind of standing in the intellectual community."

"Intellectual community," said Mrs. Wiggin scornfully. "America's intellectual community has never been very bright. Or honest. They're all sheep, following whatever the intellectual fashion of the decade happens to be. Demanding that everyone follow their dicta in lockstep. Everyone has to

be open-minded and tolerant of the things they believe, but God forbid they should ever concede, even for a moment, that someone who disagrees with them might have some fingerhold on truth."

She sounded bitter.

"I sound bitter," she said.

"You've lived your life," said Bean. "So you think you're smarter than the smart people."

She recoiled a bit. "Well, that's the kind of comment that explains why we never discuss our faith with anyone."

"I didn't mean it as an attack," said Bean. "I think I'm smarter than anybody I've ever met, because I am. I'd have to be dumber than I am not to know it. You really believe in your religion, and you resent the fact that you had to hide it from others. That's all I was saying."

"Not religion, religions," she said. "My husband and I don't even share the same doctrine. Having a large family in obedience to God, that was about the only thing we agreed on. And even at that, we both had elaborate intellectual justifications for our decision to defy the law. For one thing, we didn't think it would hurt our children at all. We meant to raise them in faith, as believers."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because we're cowards after all," said Mrs. Wiggin. "With the I.F. watching, we would have had constant interference. They would have intervened to make sure we didn't teach our children anything that would prevent them from fulfilling the role that Ender and you ended up fulfilling. That's when we started hiding our faith. Not really from our children, just from the Battle School people. We were so relieved when Peter's monitor was taken away. And then Valentine's. We thought we were done. We were going to move to a place where we wouldn't be so badly treated, and have a third child, and a fourth, as many as we could have before they arrested us. But then they came to us and requisitioned a third child. So we didn't have to move. You see? We were lazy and frightened. If the Battle School was going to give us a cover to allow us to have one more child, then why not?"

"But then they took Ender."

"And by the time they took him, it was too late. To raise Peter and Valentine in our faith. If you don't teach children when they're little, it's never really inside them. You have to hope they'll come to it later, on their own. It can't come from the parents, if you don't begin when they're little."

"Indoctrinating them."

"That's what parenting is," said Mrs. Wiggin. "Indoctrinating your children in the social patterns that you want them to live by. The intellectuals have no qualms about using the schools to indoctrinate our children in their foolishness."

"I wasn't trying to provoke you," said Bean.

"And yet you use words that imply criticism."

"Sorry," said Bean.

"You're still a child," said Mrs. Wiggin. "No matter how bright you are, you still absorb a lot of the attitudes of the ruling class. I don't like it, but there you are. When they took Ender away, and we finally could live without constant scrutiny of every word that we said to our children, we realized that Peter was already completely indoctrinated in the foolishness of the schools. He would never have gone along with our earlier plan. He would have denounced us. We would have lost him. So do you cast off your firstborn child in order to give birth to a fourth or fifth or sixth? Peter seemed sometimes not to have any conscience at all. If ever anyone needed to believe in God, it was Peter, and he didn't."

"He probably wouldn't have anyway," said Bean.

"You don't know him," said Mrs. Wiggin. "He lives by pride. If we had made him proud of being a secret believer, he would have been valiant in that struggle. Instead he's ... not."

"So you never even tried to convert him to your beliefs?" asked Bean.

"Which ones?" asked Mrs. Wiggin. "We had always thought that the big struggle in our family would be over which religion to teach them, his or mine. Instead we had to watch over Peter and find ways to help him find ... decency. No, something much more important than that. Integrity. Honor. We monitored him the way that the Battle School had monitored all three of them. It took all our patience to keep our hands off when he forced Valentine to become Demos-thenes. It was so contrary to her spirit. But we soon saw that it was not changing her-that her nobility of heart was, if anything, stronger through resistance to Peter's control."

"You didn't try to simply block him from what he was doing?"

She laughed harshly. "Oh, now, you're supposed to be the smart one. Could someone have blocked you? And Peter failed to get into Battle School because he was too ambitious, too rebellious, too unlikely to fulfill assignments and follow orders. We were supposed to influence him by forbidding him or blocking him?"

"No, I can see you couldn't," said Bean. "But you did nothing at all?"

"We taught him as best we could," said Mrs. Wiggin. "Comments at meals. We could see how he tuned us out, how he despised our opinions. It didn't help that we were trying so hard to conceal that we knew everything he'd written as Locke; our conversations really were ... abstract. Boring, I suppose. And we didn't have those intel-lectual credentials. Why should he respect us? But he heard our ideas. Of what nobility is. Goodness and honor. And whether he believed us at some level or simply found such things within himself, we've seen him grow. So ... you ask me if you can trust him, and I can't answer, because ... trust him to do what? To act as you want him to? Never."

To act according to some predictable pattern? I should laugh. But we've seen signs of honor. We've seen him do things that were very hard, but that seemed to be not just for show, but because he really believed in what he was doing. Of course, he might have simply been doing things that would make Locke seem virtuous and admirable. How can we know, when we can't ask him?"

"So you can't talk to him about what matters to you, because you know he'll despise you, and he can't talk to you about what matters to him, because you've never shown him that you actually have the understanding to grasp what he's thinking."

Tears sprang to her eyes and glistened there. "Sometimes I miss Valentine so much. She was so breathtakingly honest and good."

"So she told you she was Demosthenes?"

"No," said Mrs. Wiggin. "She was wise enough to know that if she didn't keep Peter's secret, it would split the family apart forever. No, she kept that hidden from us. But she made sure we knew just what kind of person Peter was. And about everything else in her life, everything Peter left for her to decide for herself, she told us that, and she listened to us, too, she cared what we thought."

"So you told her what you believe?"

"We didn't tell her about our faith," said Mrs. Wiggin. "But we taught her the results of that faith. We did the best we could."

"I'm sure you did," said Bean.

"I'm not stupid," said Mrs. Wiggin. "I know you despise us, just as we know Peter despises us."

"I don't," said Bean.

"I've been lied to enough to recognize it when you do it."

"I don't despise you for ... I don't despise you at all," said Bean. "But you have to see that the way you all hide from each other, Peter growing up in a family where nobody tells anybody anything that matters-that doesn't make me really optimistic about ever being able to trust him. I'm about to put my life in his hands. And now I find out that in his whole life, he's never had an honest relationship with anybody."

Her eyes grew cold and distant then. "I see that I've provided you with useful information. Perhaps you should go now."

"I'm not judging you," said Bean.

"Don't be absurd, of course you are," said Mrs. Wiggin.

"I'm not condemning you, then."

"Don't make me laugh. You condemn us, and you know what? I agree with you. I condemn us too. We set out to do God's will, and we've ended up damaging the one child we have left to us. He's grimly determined to make his mark in the world. But what sort of mark will it be?"

"An indelible one," said Bean. "If Achilles doesn't destroy him first."

"We did some things right," said Mrs. Wiggin. "We gave him the freedom to test his own abilities. We could have stopped him from publishing, you know. He thinks he outsmarted us, but only because we played incredibly dumb. How many parents would have let their teenage son meddle in world affairs? When he wrote against ... against letting Ender come home-you don't know how hard it was for me not to claw his arrogant little eyes out

For the first time, he saw something of the rage and frustration she must have been going through. He thought: This is how Peter's mother feels about him. Maybe orphanhood wasn't such a drawback.

"But I didn't, did IT' said Mrs. Wiggin.

"Didn't what?"

"Didn't stop him. And he turned out to be right. Because if Ender were here on Earth, he'd either be dead, or he would have been one of the kidnapped children, or he'd be in hiding like you. But I still ... Ender is his brother, and he exiled him from Earth forever. And I couldn't help but remember the terrible threats he made when Ender was still little, and lived with us. He told Ender and Valentine then that someday he would kill Ender, and pretend that it was an accident."

"Ender's not dead."

"My husband and I have wondered, in the dark nights when we try to make sense of what has happened to our family, to all our dreams, we've wondered if Peter got Ender exiled because he loved him and knew the dangers he'd face if he returned to Earth. Or if he exiled him because he feared that if Ender came home Peter would kill him, just as he threatened to-so then, exiling Ender could be viewed as a sort of, I don't know, an elementary kind of self-control. Still, a very selfish thing, but still showing a sort of vague respect for decency. That would be progress."

"Or maybe none of the above."

"Or maybe we're all guided by God in this, and God has brought you here."

"So Sister Carlotta says."

"She might be right."

"I don't much care either way," said Bean. "If there is a God, I think he's pretty lousy at his job."

"Or you don't understand what his job is."

"Believe me, Sister Carlotta is the nunnish equivalent of a Jesuit. Let's not even get into trading sophistries, I've been trained by an expert and, as you say, you're not in practice."

"Julian Delphiki," said Mrs. Wiggin, "I knew when I saw you out on the front sidewalk that I not only could, I must tell you things that I have spoken of to no one but my husband, and I've even said things that I've never said to him. I've told you things that Peter never imagined that I knew or thought or saw or felt. If you have a low opinion of my mothering, please keep in mind that whatever you know, you know because I told you, and I told you because I think that someday Peter's future may depend on your knowing what he's going to do, or how to help him. Or-Peter's future as a decent human being might depend on his helping you. So I bared my heart to you. For Peter's sake. And I face your scorn, Julian Delphiki, for Peter's sake as well. So don't fault my love for my son. Whether he thinks he cares or not, he grew up with parents who love him and have done everything we could for him. Including lie to him about what we believe, what we know, so that he can move through his world like Alexander, boldly reaching for the ends of the earth, with the complete freedom that comes from having parents who are too stupid to stop you. Until you've had a child of your own and sacrificed for that child and twisted your life into a pretzel, into a knot for him, don't you dare to judge me and what I've done."

"I'm not judging you," said Bean. "Truly I'm not. As you said, I'm just trying to understand Peter."

"Well, do you know what I think?" said Mrs. Wiggin. "I think you've been asking all the wrong questions. 'Can I trust him?' " She mimicked him scornfully. "Whether you trust somebody or distrust him has a lot more to do with the kind of person you are than the kind of person he is. The real question you ought to be asking is, Do you really want Peter Wiggin to rule the world? Because if you help him, and he somehow lives through all this, that's where it will lead. He won't stop until he achieves that. And he'll bum up your future along with anybody else's, if it will help him reach that goal. So ask yourself, will the world be a better place with Peter Wiggin as Hegemon? And not some benign ceremonial figurehead like the ineffectual toad who holds that office now. I mean Peter Wiggin as the Hegemon who reshapes this world into whatever form he wants it to have."

" But you're assuming that I care whether the world is a better place," said Bean. "What if all I care about is my own survival or advancement? Then the only question that would matter is, Can I use Peter to advance my own plans?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Do you believe that about yourself? Well, you are a child."

"Pardon me, but did I ever pretend to be anything else?"

"You pretend," said Mrs. Wiggin, "to be a person of such enormous value that you can speak of 'allying' with Peter Wiggin as if you brought armies with you."

"I don't bring armies," said Bean, "but I bring victory for whatever army he gives me."

"Would Ender have been like you, if he had come home? Arrogant? Aloof?"

"Not at all," said Bean. "But I never killed anybody."

"Except buggers," said Mrs. Wiggin.

"Why are we at war with each other?" said Bean.

"I've told you everything about my son, about my family, and you've given me nothing back. Except your ... sneer."

"I'm not sneering," said Bean. "I like you."

"Oh, thank you very much."

"I can see in you the mother of Ender Wiggin," said Bean. "You understand Peter the way Ender understood his soldiers. The way Ender understood his enemies. And you're bold enough to act instantly when the opportunity presents itself. I show up on your doorstep, and you give me all this. No, ma'am, I don't despise you at all. And you know what I think? I think that, perhaps without even realizing it yourself, you believe in Peter completely. You want him to succeed. You think he should rule the world. And you've told me all this, not because I'm such a nice little boy, but because you think that by telling me, you'll help Peter move that much closer toward ultimate victory."

She shook her head. "Not everybody thinks like a soldier."

"Hardly anyone does," said Bean. "Precious few soldiers, for that matter."

"Let me tell you something, Julian Delphiki. You didn't have a mother and father, so you need to be told. You know what I dread most? That Peter will pursue these ambitions of his so relentlessly that he'll never have a life."

"Conquering the world isn't a life?" asked Bean.

"Alexander the Great," said Mrs. Wiggin. "He haunts my nightmares for Peter. All his conquests, his victories, his grand achievements—they were the acts of an adolescent boy. By the time he got around to marrying, to having a child, it was too late. He died in the midst of it. And he probably wouldn't have done a very good job of it either. He was already too powerful before he even tried to find love. That's what I fear for Peter."

"Love? That's what this all comes down to?"

"No, not just love. I'm talking about the cycle of life. I'm talking about finding some alien creature and deciding to marry her and stay with her forever, no matter whether you even like each other or not a few years down the road. And why will you do this? So you can make babies together, and try to keep them alive and teach them what they need to know so that someday they'll have babies, and

keep the whole thing going. And you'll never draw a secure breath until you have grandchildren, a double handful of them, because then you know that your line won't die out, your influence will continue. Selfish, isn't it? Only it's not selfish, it's what life is for. It's the only thing that brings happiness, ever, to anyone. All the other things-victories, achievements, honors, causes-they bring only momentary flashes of pleasure. But binding yourself to another person and to the children you make together, that's life. And you can't do it if your life is centered on your ambitions. You'll never be happy. It will never be enough, even if you rule the world."

"Are you telling me? Or telling Peter?" asked Bean.

"I'm telling you what I truly want for Peter," said Mrs. Wiggin. "But if you're a tenth as smart as you think you are, you'll get that for yourself. Or you'll never have real joy in this life."

"Excuse me if I'm missing something here," said Bean, "but as far as I can tell, marrying and having children has brought you nothing but grief. You've lost Ender, you've lost Valentine, and you spent your life pissed off at Peter or fretting about him."

"Yes," she said. "Now you're getting it."

"Where's the joy? That's what I'm not getting."

"The grief is the joy," said Mrs. Wiggin. "I have someone to grieve for. Whom do you have?"

Such was the intensity of their conversation that Bean had no barrier in place to block what she said. It stirred something inside him. All the memories of people that he'd loved--despite the fact that he refused to love anyone. Poke. Nikolai. Sister Carlotta. Ender. His parents, when he finally met them. "I have someone to grieve for," said Bean.

"You think you do," said Mrs. Wiggin. "Everyone thinks they do, until they take a child into their heart. Only then do you know what it is to be a hostage to love. To have someone else's life matter more than your own."

"Maybe I know more than you think," said Bean.

"Maybe you know nothing at all," said Mrs. Wiggin.

They faced each other across the table, a loud silence between them. Bean wasn't even sure they'd been quarreling. Despite the heat of their exchange, he couldn't help but feel that he'd just been given a strong dose of the faith that she and her husband shared with each other.

Or maybe it really was objective truth, and he simply couldn't grasp it because he wasn't married.

And never would be. If there was ever anyone whose life virtually guaranteed that he'd be a terrible father, it was Bean. Without ever exactly saying it aloud, he'd always known that he would never marry, never have children.

But her words had this much effect: For the first time in his life, he found himself almost wishing that it were not SO.

In that silence, Bean heard the front door open, and Peter's and Sister Carlotta's voices. At once Bean and Mrs. Wiggin rose to their feet, feeling and looking guilty, as if they had been caught in some kind of clandestine rendezvous. Which, in a way, they had.

"Mother, I've met a traveler," said Peter when he came into the room.

Bean heard the beginning of Peter's lie like a blow to the face for Bean knew that the person Peter was lying to knew his story was false, and yet would lie in return by pretending to believe.

This time, though, the lie could be nipped in the bud.

"Sister Carlotta," said Mrs. Wiggin. "I've heard so much about you from young Julian here. He says you are the world's only Jesuit nun."

Peter and Sister Carlotta looked at Bean in bafflement. What was he doing there? He almost laughed at their consternation, in part because he couldn't have answered that question himself.

"He came here like a pilgrim to a shrine," said Mrs. Wiggin. "And he very bravely told me who he really is. Peter, you must be very careful not to tell anyone that this is one of Ender's companions. Julian Delphiki. He wasn't killed in that explosion, after all. Isn't that wonderful? We must make him welcome here, for Ender's sake, but he's still in danger, so it has to be our secret who he is."

"Of course, Mother," said Peter. He looked at Bean, but his eyes betrayed nothing of what he was feeling. Like the cold eyes of a rhinoceros, unreadable, yet with enormous danger behind them all the same.

Sister Carlotta, though, was obviously appalled. "After all our security precautions," she said, "and you just blurt it out? And this house is bound to be watched."

"We had a good conversation," said Bean. "That's not possible in the midst of lies."

"It's my life you were risking here, too, you know," said Carlotta.

Mrs. Wiggin touched her arm. "Do stay here with us, won't you? We have room in our house for visitors."

"We can't," said Bean. "She's right. Coming here at all has compromised us both. We'll probably want to fly out of Greensboro first thing in the morning."

He glanced at Sister Carlotta, knowing that she would understand that he was really saying they should leave by train that night. Or by bus the day after tomorrow. Or rent an apartment under assumed names and stay here for a week. The lying had begun again, for safety's sake.

"At least stay for dinner?" asked Mrs. Wiggin. "And meet my husband? I think he'll be just as intrigued as I was to meet a boy who is so famously dead."

Bean saw Peter's eyes glaze over. He understood why-to Peter, a dinner with his parents would be an excruciating social exercise during which nothing important could be said. Wouldn't all your lives be simpler if you could all just tell each other the truth? But Mrs. Wiggin had said that Peter needed to feel that he was on his own. If he knew that his parents knew of his secret activities, that would infantilize him, apparently. Though if he were really the sort of man that could rule the world, surely he could deal with knowing that his parents were in on his secrets.

Not my decision. I gave my word.

"We'd be glad to," said Bean. "Though there's a danger of having your house blown up because we're in it."

"Then we'll eat out," said Mrs. Wiggin. "See how simple things can be? If something's going to be blown up, let it be a restaurant. They carry insurance for that sort of thing."

Bean laughed. But Peter didn't. Because, Bean realized, Peter doesn't know how much she knows, and therefore he thinks her comment was idiocy instead of irony.

"Not Italian food," said Sister Carlotta.

"Oh, of course not," said Mrs. Wiggin. "There's never been a decent Italian restaurant in Greensboro."

With that, the conversation turned to safe and meaningless topics. Bean took a certain relish in watching how Peter squirmed at the utter waste of time that such chitchat represented. I know more about your mother than you do, thought Bean. I have more respect for her.

But you're the one she loves.

Bean was annoyed to notice the envy in his own heart. Nobody's immune from those petty human emotions, he knew that. But somehow he had to learn how to distinguish between true observations and what his envy told him. Peter had to learn the same. The trust that Bean had given so easily to Mrs. Wiggin would have to be earned step by step between him and Peter. Why?

Because he and Peter were so alike. Because he and Peter were natural rivals. Because he and Peter could so easily be deadly enemies.

As I am a second Ender in his eyes, is he a second Achilles in mine? If there were no Achilles in the world, would I think of Peter as the evil I must destroy?

And if we do defeat Achilles together, will we then have to turn and fight each other, undoing all our triumphs, destroying everything we've built?

BROTHERS IN ARMS

To: RuSFriend%BabaYagagMosPub.net

From: VladDragon%slavnet.com

Re: allegiance

Let's make one thing clear. I never "joined" with Achilles. From all I could see, Achilles was speaking for Mother Russia. It was Mother Russia that I agreed to serve, and that is a decision I did not and do not regret. I believe the artificial divisions among the peoples of Greater Slavia serve only to keep any of us from achieving our potential in the world. In the chaos that has resulted from the exposure of Achilles' true nature, I would be glad of any opportunity to serve. The things I learned in Battle School could well make a difference to the future of our people. If my link with Achilles makes it impossible for me to be of service, so be it. But it would be a shame if we all suffered from that last act of sabotage by a psychopath. It is precisely now that I am most needed. Mother Russia will find no more loyal son than this one.

For Peter, the dinner at Leblon with his parents and Bean and Carlotta consisted of long periods of excruciating boredom interrupted by short passages of sheer panic. Nothing that anyone was saying mattered in the slightest. Because Bean was passing himself off as little more than a tourist visiting Ender's shrine, all anyone could talk about was Ender Ender Ender. But inevitably the conversation would skirt topics that were highly sensitive, things that might give away what Peter was really doing and the role that Bean might end up playing.

The worst was when Sister Carlotta—who, nun or not, clearly knew how to be a malicious bitch when she wanted to—began probing Peter about his studies at UNCG, even though she knew perfectly well that his schoolwork there was merely a cover for far more important matters. "I'm just surprised, I suppose, that you spend your time on a regular course of study when clearly you have abilities that should be used on a broader stage," she said.

"I need the degree, just like anyone else," said Peter, writhing inside.

"But why not study things that will prepare you to play a role on the great stage of world affairs?"

Ironically, it was Bean who rescued him. "Come now, Grandmother," he said. "A man of Peter Wiggin's ability is ready to do anything he wants, whenever he wants. Formal study is just busywork to him anyway. He's only doing it to prove to other people that he's able to live by the rules when he needs to. Right, Peter?"

"Close enough," Peter said. "I'm even less interested in my studies than you all are, and you shouldn't be interested in them at all."

"Well, if you hate it so much, why are we paying for tuition?" asked Father.

"We're not," Mother reminded him. "Peter has such a nice scholarship that they're paying him to attend there."

"Not getting their money's worth, though, are they?" said Father. "They're getting what they want," said Bean. "For the rest of his life, whatever Peter here accomplishes, it will be mentioned that he studied at UNCG. He'll be a walking advertisement for them. I'd call that a pretty good return on investment, wouldn't you?"

The kid had mastered the kind of language Father understood. Peter had to credit Bean with knowing his audience when he spoke. Still, it annoyed Peter that Bean had so easily sussed what kind of idiots his parents were, and how easily they could be pandered to. It was as if, by pulling Peter's conversational irons out of the fire, Bean was rubbing it in about Peter's still being a child living at home, while Bean was out dealing with life more directly. It made Peter chafe all the more.

Only at the end of the dinner, as they left the Brazilian restaurant and headed for the Market/Holden station, did Bean drop his bombshell. "You know that since we've compromised ourselves here, we have to go back into hiding at once." Peter's parents made little noises of sympathy, and then Bean said, "What I was wondering was, why doesn't Peter go with us? Get out of Greensboro for a while? Would YOU like to, Peter? Do you have a passport?"

"No, he doesn't," said Mother, at exactly the same moment that Peter said, "Of course I do."

"You do?" asked Mother.

"Just in case," said Peter. He didn't add: I have six passports from four countries, as a matter of fact, and ten different bank identities with funds from my writing gigs socked away.

"But you're in the middle of a semester," said Father.

"I can take a leave whenever I want," said Peter. "It sounds interesting. Where are you going?"

"We don't know," said Bean. "We don't decide until the last minute. But we can email you and tell you where we are."

"Campus email addresses aren't secure," said Father helpfully.

"No email is really secure, is it?" asked Mother.

"It will be a coded message," said Bean. "Of course."

"It doesn't sound very sensible to me," said Father. "Peter may think his studies are just busywork, but in fact you have to have that degree just to get started in life. You need to stick to something long term and finish it, Peter. If your transcript shows that you did your education in fits and starts, that won't look good to the best companies."

"What career do you think I'm going to pursue?" Peter asked, annoyed. "Some kind of corporate dull bob?"

"I really hate it when you use that ersatz Battle School slang," said Father. "You didn't go there, and it makes you sound like some kind of teenage wannabe."

"I don't know about that," said Bean, before Peter could blow up. "I was there, and I think that stuff is just part of the language. I mean, the word 'wannabe' was once slang, wasn't it? It can grow into the language just by people using it."

"It makes him sound like a kid," said Father, but it was just a parting shot, Father's pathetic need to have the last word.

Peter said nothing. But he wasn't grateful to Bean for taking his side. On the contrary, the kid really pissed him off. It's like Bean thought he could come into Peter's life and intervene between him and his parents like some kind of savior. It diminished Peter in his own eyes. None of the people who wrote to him or read his work as Locke or Demosthenes ever condescended to him, because they didn't know he was a kid. But the way Bean was acting was a warning of things to come. If Peter did come out under his real name, he would immediately have to start dealing with condescension. People who had once trembled at the idea of coming under Demosthenes' scrutiny, people who had once eagerly sought Locke's imprimatur, would now poo-poo anything Peter wrote, saying, Of course a child would think that way, or, more kindly but no less devastatingly, When he has more experience, he'll come to see that.... Adults were always saying things like that. As if experience actually had some correlation with increased wisdom; as if most of the stupidity in the world were not propounded by adults.

Besides, Peter couldn't help but feel that Bean was enjoying it, that he loved having Peter at such a disadvantage. Why had the little weasel gone to his house? Oh, pardon, to Ender's house, naturally. But he knew it was Peter's house, and to come home and find Bean sitting there talking to his mother, that was like catching a burglar in the act. He hadn't liked Bean from the beginning--especially not after the petulant way he walked off just because Peter didn't immediately answer the question he was asking. Admittedly, Peter had been teasing him a little, and there was an element of condescension about ittoying with the little kid before telling him what he wanted to know. But Bean's retaliation had gone way overboard. Especially this miserable dinner.

And yet ...

Bean was the real thing. The best that Battle School had produced. Peter could use him. Peter might actually even need him, precisely because he could not yet afford to come out publicly as himself. Bean had the credibility despite his size and age, because he'd fought the fight. He could actually do things instead of having to pull strings in the background or try to manipulate government decisions by influencing public opinion. If Peter could secure some kind of working alliance with him, it might go a long way toward compensating for his impotence. If only Bean weren't so insufferably smug.

Can't let my personal feelings interfere with the work at hand.

"Tell you what," Peter said. "Mom and Dad, you've got stuff to do tomorrow, but my first class isn't till noon. Why don't I go with these two wherever they're spending the night and talk through the possibility of maybe taking a field trip with them."

"I don't want you just taking off and leaving your mother to worry about what's happening to you," said Father. "I think it's very clear to all of us that young Mr. Delphiki here is a trouble magnet, and I think your mother has lost enough children without having to worry about something even worse happening to you."

It made Peter cringe the way Father always talked as if it were only Mother who would be worried, only Mother who cared what happened to him. And if it was true—who could tell, with Father?—that was even worse. Either Father didn't care what happened to Peter, or he did care but was such a git that he couldn't admit it.

"I won't leave town without checking in with Mommy," said

"You don't need to be sarcastic," said Father.

"Dear," said Mother, "Peter isn't five, to be rebuked in front of company." Which, of course, made him seem to be maybe six years old. Thanks so much for helping, Mom.

"Aren't families complicated?" said Sister Carlotta.

Oh, thanks, thou holy bitch, said Peter silently. You and Bean are the ones who complicated the situation, and now you make smug little comments about how much better it is for unconnected people like you. Well, these parents are my cover. I didn't pick them, but I have to use them. And for you to mock my situation only shows your ignorance. And, probably, your envy, seeing how you are never going to have children or even get laid in your whole life, Mrs. Jesus.

"Poor Peter has the worst of both worlds," said Mother. "He's the oldest, so he was always held to a higher standard, and yet he's the last of our children left at home, which means he also gets babied more than he can bear. It's so awful, the fact that parents are mere human beings and constantly make mistakes. I think sometimes Peter wishes he had been raised by robots."

Which made Peter want to slide right down into the sidewalk and spend the rest of his life as an invisible patch of concrete. I converse with spies and military officers, with political leaders and power brokers—and my mother still has the power to humiliate me at will!

"Do what you want," said Father. "It's not like you're a minor. We can't stop you."

"We could never stop him from doing what he wanted even when he was a minor," said Mother.

Damn right, thought Peter.

"The curse of having children who are smarter than you," said Father, "is that they think their superior rational process is enough to compensate for their lack of experience."

If I were a little brat like Bean, that comment would have been the last straw. I would have walked away and not come home for a week, if ever. But I'm not a child and I can control my personal resentments and do what's expedient. I'm not going to throw off my camouflage out of pique.

At the same time, I can't be faulted, can I, for wondering if there's any chance that my father might have a stroke and go permanently mute.

They were at the station. With a round of good-byes, Father and Mother took the bus north toward home, and Peter got on an eastbound bus with Bean and Carlotta.

And, as Peter expected, they got off at the first stop and crossed over to catch the westbound bus. They really made a religion out of paranoia.

Even when they got back to the airport hotel, they did not enter the building. Instead they walked through the shopping mall that had once been a parking garage back when people drove cars to the airport. "Even if they bug the mall," said Bean, "I doubt they can afford the manpower to listen to everything people say."

"If they're bugging your room," said Peter, "that means they're already on to you."

"Hotels routinely bug their rooms," said Bean. "To catch vandals and criminals in the act. It's a computer scan, but nothing stops the employees from listening in."

"This is America," said Peter.

"You spend way too much time thinking about global affairs," said Bean. "If you ever do have to go underground, you won't have a clue how to survive."

"You're the one who invited me to join you in hiding," said Peter. "What was that nonsense about? I'm not going anywhere. I have too much work to do."

"Ah, yes," said Bean. "Pulling the world's strings from behind a curtain. The trouble is, the world is about to move from politics to war, and your strings are going to be snipped."

"It's still politics."

"But the decisions are made on the battlefield, not in the conference rooms."

"I know," said Peter. "That's why we should work together."

"I can't think why," said Bean. "The one thing I asked you for information about where Petra is—you tried to sell me instead of just giving it to me. Doesn't sound like you want an ally. Sounds like you want a customer."

"Boys," said Sister Carlotta. "Bickering isn't how this is going to work."

"If it's going to work," said Peter, "it's going to work however Bean and I make it work. Between us."

Sister Carlotta stopped cold, grabbed Peter's shoulder, and drew him close. "Get this straight right now, you arrogant twit. You're not the only brilliant person in the world, and you're far from being the only one who thinks he pulls all the strings. Until you have the courage to come out from behind the veil of these ersatz personalities, you don't have much to offer those of us who are working in the real world."

"Don't ever touch me like that again," said Peter.

"Oh, the personage is sacred?" said Sister Carlotta. "You really do live on Planet Peter, don't you?"

Bean interrupted before Peter could answer the bitch. "Look, we gave you everything we had on Ender's jeesh, no strings attached."

"And I used it. I got most of them out, and pretty damn fast, too."

"But not the one who sent the message," said Bean. "I want Petra."

"And I want world peace," said Peter. "You think too small."

"I may think too small for you," said Bean, "but you think too small for me. Playing your little computer games, juggling stories back and forth-well, my friend trusted me and asked me for help. She was trapped with a psychopathic killer and she doesn't have anyone but me who cares a rat's ass what happens to her."

"She has her family," murmured Sister Carlotta. Peter was pleased to learn that she corrected Bean, too. An all-purpose bitch.

"You want to save the world, but you're going to have to do it one battle at a time, one country at a time. And you need people like me, who get our hands dirty," said Bean.

"Oh, spare me your delusions," said Peter. "You're a little boy in hiding."

"I'm a general who's between armies," said Bean. "If I weren't, you wouldn't be talking to me."

"And you want an army so you can go rescue Petra," said Peter.

"So she's alive?"

"How would I know?"

"I don't know how you'd know. But you know more than you're telling me, and if you don't give me what you have, right now, you arrogant oomay, I'm done with you, I'll leave you here playing your

little net games, and go find somebody who's not afraid to come out of Mama's house and take some risks."

Peter was almost blind with rage. For a moment.

And then he calmed himself, forced himself to stand outside the situation. What was Bean showing him? That he cared more for personal loyalty than for longterm strategy. That was dangerous, but not fatal. And it gave Peter leverage, knowing what Bean cared about more than personal advancement.

"What I know about Petra," said Peter, "is that when Achilles disappeared, so did she. My sources inside Russia tell me that the only liberation team that was interfered with was the one rescuing her. The driver, a bodyguard, and the team leader were shot dead. There was no evidence that Petra was injured, though they know she was present for one of the killings."

"How do they know?" asked Bean.

"The spatter pattern from a head shot had been blocked in a silhouette about her size on the inside wall of the van. She was covered with the man's blood. But there was no blood from her body."

"They know more than that."

"A small private jet, which once belonged to a crimelord but was confiscated and used by the intelligence service that sponsored Achilles, took off from a nearby airfield and flew, after a refueling stop, to India. One of the airport maintenance personnel said that it looked to him like a honeymoon trip. Just the pilot and the young couple. But no luggage."

"So he has her with him," said Bean.

"In India," said Sister Carlotta.

"And my sources in India have gone silent," said Peter.

"Dead?" asked Bean.

"No, just careful," said Peter. "The most populous country on Earth. Ancient enmities. A chip on the national shoulder from being treated like a second-class country by everyone."

"The Polemarch is an Indian," said Bean.

"And there's reason to believe he's been passing I.F. data to the Indian military," said Peter. "Nothing that can be proved, but Chamrajnagar is not as disinterested as he pretends to be."

"So you think Achilles may be just what India wants to help them launch a war."

"No," said Peter. "I think India may be just what Achilles wants to help him launch an empire. Petra is what they want to help them launch a war."

"So Petra is the passport Achilles used to get into a position of power in India."

"That would be my guess," said Peter. "That's all I know, and all I guess. But I can also tell you that your chance of getting in and rescuing her is nil."

"Pardon me," said Bean, "but you don't know what I'm capable of doing."

"When it comes to intelligence-gathering," said Peter, "the Indians aren't in the same league as the Russians. I don't think your paranoia is needed anymore. Achilles isn't in a position to do anything to you right now."

"Just because Achilles is in India," said Bean, "doesn't mean that he's limited to knowing only what the Indian intelligence service can find out for him."

"The agency that's been helping him in Russia is being taken over and probably will be shut down," said Peter.

"I know Achilles," said Bean, "and I can promise you-if he really is in India, working for them, then it is absolutely certain that he has already betrayed them and has connections and fallback positions in at least three other places. And at least one of them will have an intelligence service with excellent worldwide reach. If you make the mistake of thinking Achilles is limited by borders and loyalties, he'll destroy you."

Peter looked down at Bean. He wanted to say, I already knew all that. But it would be a lie if he said that. He hadn't known that about Achilles, except in the abstract sense that he tried never to underestimate an opponent. Bean's knowledge of Achilles was better than his. "Thank you," said Peter. "I wasn't taking that into account."

"I know," said Bean ungraciously. "It's one of the reasons I think you're headed for failure. You think you know more than you actually know."

"But I listen," said Peter. "And I learn. Do you?"

Sister Carlotta laughed. "I do believe that the two most arrogant boys in the world have finally met, and they don't much like what they see."

Peter did not even glance at her, and neither did Bean. "Actually," said Peter, "I do like what I see."

"I wish I could say the same," said Bean.

"Let's keep walking," said Peter. "We've been standing in one place too long."

"At least he's picking up on our paranoia," said Sister Carlotta.

"Where will India make its move?" asked Peter. "The obvious thing would be war with Pakistan."

"Again?" said Bean. "Pakistan would be an indigestible lump. It would block India from further expansion, just trying to get the Muslims under control. A terrorist war that would make the old struggle with the Sikhs look like a child's birthday party."

"But they can't move anywhere else as long as they have Pakistan poised to plunge a dagger in their back," said Peter.

Bean grinned. "Burma? But is it worth taking?"

"It's on the way to more valuable prizes, if China doesn't object," said Peter. "But are you just ignoring the Pakistan problem?"

"Molotov and Ribbentrop," said Bean.

The men who negotiated the nonaggression pact between Russia and Germany in the 1930s that divided Poland between them and freed Germany to launch World War II. "I think it will have to be deeper than that," said Peter. "I think, at some level, an alliance."

"What if India offers Pakistan a free hand against Iran? It can go for the oil. India is free to move east. To scoop up the countries that have long been under her cultural influence. Burma. Thailand. Not Muslim countries, so Pakistan's conscience is clear."

"Is China going to sit and watch?" asked Peter.

"They might if India tosses them Vietnam," said Bean. "The world is ripe to be divided up among the great powers. India wants to be one. With Achilles directing their strategy, with Chamrajnagar feeding them information, with Petra to command their armies, they can play on the big stage. And then, when Pakistan has exhausted itself fighting Iran . . ."

The inevitable betrayal. If Pakistan didn't strike first. "That's too far down the line to predict now," said Peter.

"But it's the way Achilles thinks," said Bean. "Two betrayals ahead. He was using Russia, but maybe he already had this deal with India in place. Why not? In the long run, the whole world is the tail, and India is the dog."

More important than Bean's particular conclusions was the fact that Bean had a good eye. He lacked detailed intelligence, of course how would he get that?-but he saw the big picture. He thought the way a global strategist had to think.

He was worth talking to.

"Well, Bean," said Peter, "here's my problem. I think I can get you in position to help block Achilles. But I can't trust you not to do something stupid."

"I won't mount a rescue operation for Petra until I know it will succeed."

"That's a foolish thing to say. You never know a military operation will succeed. And that's not what worries me. I'm sure if you mounted a rescue, it would be a well-planned and well-executed one."

"So what worries you about me?" asked Bean.

"That you're making the assumption that Petra wants to be rescued."

"She does," said Bean.

"Achilles seduces people," said Peter. "I've read his files, his history. This kid has a golden voice, apparently. He makes people trust him--even people who know he's a snake. They think, He won't betray me, because we have such a special closeness."

"And then he kills them. I know that," said Bean.

"But does Petra? She hasn't read his file. She didn't know him on the streets of Rotterdam. She didn't even know him in the brief time he was in Battle School."

;",She knows him now," said Bean.

"You're sure of that?" asked Peter.

"But I'll promise you-I won't try to rescue her until I've been in communication with her."

Peter mulled this over for a moment. "She might betray you."

"No," said Bean.

"Trusting people will get you killed," said Peter. "I don't want you to bring me down with you."

"You have it backward," said Bean. "I don't trust anybody, except to do what they think is necessary. What they think they have to do. But I know Petra, and I know the kind of thing she'll think she has to do. It's me I'm trusting, not her."

"And he can't bring you down," said Sister Carlotta, "because you're not up."

Peter looked at her, making little effort to conceal his contempt. "I am where I am," he said. "And it's not down."

"Locke is where Locke is," said Carlotta. "And Demosthenes. But Peter Wiggin is nowhere. Peter Wiggin is nothing."

"What's your problem?" Peter demanded. "Is it bothering you that your little puppet here might actually be cutting a few of the strings you pull?"

"There are no strings," said Carlotta. "And you're too stupid, apparently, to realize that I'm the one who believes in what you're doing, not Bean. He couldn't care less who rules the world. But I do. Arrogant and condescending as you are, I've already made up my mind that if anybody's going to stop Achilles, it's you. But you're fatally weakened by the fact that you are ripe to be blackmailed by the threat of exposure. Chamrajnagar knows who you are. He's feeding information to India. Do you really think for one moment that Achilles won't find out-and soon, if not already exactly who is behind Locke? The one who got him booted out of Russia? Do you really think he isn't already working on plans to kill you?"

Peter blushed with shame. To have this nun tell him what he should have realized by himself was humiliating. But she was right he wasn't used to thinking of physical danger.

"That's why we wanted you to come with us," said Bean.

"Your cover is already blown," said Sister Carlotta.

"The moment I go public as a kid," said Peter Wiggin, "most of my sources will dry up."

"No," said Sister Carlotta. "It all depends on how you come out."

"Do you think I haven't thought this through a thousand times?" said Peter. "Until I'm old enough. . ."

"No," said Sister Carlotta. "Think for a minute, Peter. National governments have just gone through a nasty little scuffle over ten children that they want to have command their armies. You're the older brother of the greatest of them all. Your youth is an asset. And if you control the way the information comes out, instead of having somebody else expose you. . ."

"It will be a momentary scandal," said Peter. "No matter how my identity comes out, there'll be a flurry of commentary on it, and then I'll be old news--only I'll have been fired from most of my writing gigs. People won't return my calls or answer my mail. I really will be a college student then."

"That sounds like something you decided years ago," said Sister Carlotta, "and haven't looked at with fresh eyes since then."

"Since this seems to be tell-Peter-he's-stupid day, let's hear your plan."

Sister Carlotta grinned at Bean. "Well, I was wrong. He actually can listen to other people."

"I told you," said Bean.

Peter suspected that this little exchange was designed merely to make him think Bean was on his side. "Just tell me your plan and skip the sucking-up phase."

"The term of the current Hegemon will end in about eight months," said Sister Carlotta. "Let's get several influential people to start floating the name of Locke as the replacement."

"That's your plan? The office of Hegemon is worthless."

"Wrong," said Sister Carlotta, "and wrong. The office is not worthless--eventually you'll have to have it in order to make you the legitimate leader of the world against the threat posed by Achilles. But that's later. Right now, we float the name of Locke, not so you'll get the office, but so that you can have an excuse to publically announce, as Locke, that you can't be considered for such an office because you are, after all, merely a teenager. You tell people that you're Ender Wiggin's older brother, that you and Valentine worked for years to try to hold the League together and to prepare for the League War so that your little brother's victory didn't lead to the selfdestruction of humanity. But you are still too young to take an actual office of public trust. See how it works? Now your announcement won't be a confession or a scandal. It will be one more example of how nobly you place the interest of world peace and good order ahead of your own personal ambition."

"I'll still lose some of my contacts," said Peter.

"But not many. The news will be positive. It will have the right spin. All these years, Locke has been the brother of the genius Ender Wiggin. A prodigy."

"And there's no time to waste," said Bean. "You have to do it before Achilles can strike. Because you will be exposed within a few months."

"Weeks," said Sister Carlotta.

Peter was furious with himself. "Why didn't I see this? It's obvious."

"You've been doing this for years," said Bean. "You had a pattern that worked. But Achilles has changed everything. You've never had anybody gunning for you before. What matters to me is not that you failed to see it on your own. What matters is that when we pointed it out to you, you were willing to hear it."

"So I've passed your little test?" said Peter nastily.

"Just as I hope I'll pass yours," said Bean. "If we're going to work together, we have to be able to tell each other the truth. Now I know you'll listen to me. You just have to take my word for it that I'll listen to you. But I listen to her, don't IT"

Peter was churning with dread. They were right, the time had come, the old pattern was over. And it was frightening. Because now he had to put everything on the line, and he might fail.

But if he didn't act now, if he didn't risk everything, he would certainly fail. Achilles' presence in the equation made it inevitable.

"So how," said Peter, "will we get this groundswell started so I can decline the honor of being a candidate for the Hegemony?"

"Oh, that's easy," said Carlotta. "If you give the OK, then by tomorrow there can be news stories about how a highly placed source at the Vatican confirms that Locke's name is being floated as a possible successor when the current Hegemon's term expires."

"And then," said Bean, "a highly placed officer in the Hegemony the Minister of Colonization, to be exact, though no one will say that-will be quoted as saying that Locke is not just a good candidate, he's the best candidate, and may be the only candidate, and with the support of the Vatican he thinks Locke is the frontrunner."

"You've planned this all out," said Peter.

"No," said Sister Carlotta. "It's just that the only two people we know are my highly placed friend in the Vatican and our good friend ex-Colonel Graff."

"We're committing all our assets," said Bean, "but they'll be enough. The moment those stories run-tomorrow-you be ready to reply for the next morning's nets. At the same time that everybody's giving their first reactions to your brand-new frontrunner status, the world will be reading your announcement that you refuse to be considered for such an office because your youth would make it too difficult for you to wield the authority that the office of Hegemon requires."

"And that," said Sister Carlotta, "is the very thing that gives you the moral authority to be accepted as Hegemon when the time comes."

"By declining the office," said Peter, "I make it more likely that I'll get it."

"Not in peacetime," said Carlotta. "Declining an office in peacetime takes you out of the running. But there's going to be war. And then the fellow who sacrificed his own ambition for the good of the world will look better and better. Especially when his last name is Wiggin."

Do they have to keep bringing up the fact that my relationship to Ender is more important than my years of work?

"You aren't against using that family connection, are you?" asked Bean.

"I'll do what it takes," said Peter, "and I'll use whatever works. But ... tomorrow?"

"Achilles got to India yesterday, right?" said Bean. "Every day we delay this is a day that he has a chance to expose you. Do you think he'll wait? You exposed him-he'll crave the turnabout, and Chainrajnagar won't be shy about telling him, will he?"

"No," said Peter. "Chamrajnagar has already shown me how he feels about me. He'll do nothing to protect me."

"So here we are once again," said Bean. "We're giving you something, and you're going to use it. Are you going to help me? How can I get into a position where I have troops to train and command? Besides going back to Greece, I mean."

"No, not Greece," said Peter. "They're useless to you, and they'll end up doing only what Russia permits. No freedom of action."

"Where, then?" said Sister Carlotta. "Where do you have influence?"

"In all modesty," said Peter, "at this moment, I have influence everywhere. Day after tomorrow, I may have influence nowhere."

"So let's act now," said Bean. "Where?"

"Thailand," said Peter. "Burma has no hope of resisting an Indian attack, or of putting together an alliance that might have a chance. But Thailand is historically the leader of southeast Asia. The one nation that was never colonized. The natural leader of the Taispeaking peoples in the surrounding nations. And they have a strong military."

"But I don't speak the language," said Bean.

"Not a problem," said Peter. "The Thai have been multilingual for centuries, and they have a long history of allowing foreigners to take positions of power and influence in their government, as long as they're loyal to Thailand's interests. You have to throw in your lot with them. They have to trust you. But it seems plain enough that you know how to be loyal."

"Not at all," said Bean. "I'm completely selfish. I survive. That's all I do."

"But you survive," said Peter, "by being absolutely loyal to the few people you depend on. I read just as much about you as I did about Achilles."

"What was written about me reflects the fantasies of the newspeople," said Bean.

"I'm not talking about the news," said Peter. "I read Carlotta's memos to the I.F. about your childhood in Rotterdam."

They both stopped walking. Ali, have I surprised you? Peter couldn't help but take pleasure in knowing that he had shown that he, too, knew some things about them.

"Those memos were eyes only," said Carlotta. "There should have been no copies."

"Ali, but whose eyes?" said Peter. "There are no secrets to people with the right friends."

"I haven't read those memos," said Bean.

Carlotta looked searchingly at Peter. "Some information is worthless except to destroy," she said.

And now Peter wondered what secrets she had about Bean. Because when he spoke of "memos," he in fact was thinking of a report that had been in Achilles' file, which had drawn on a couple of those memos as a source about life on the streets of Rotterdam. The comments about Bean had been merely ancillary matters. He really hadn't read the actual memos. But now he wanted to, because there was clearly something that she didn't want Bean to know.

And Bean knew it, too.

"What's in those memos that you don't want Peter to tell me?" Bean demanded.

"I had to convince the Battle School people that I was being impartial about you," said Sister Carlotta. "So I had to make negative statements about you in order to get them to believe the positive ones."

"Do you think that would hurt my feelings?" said Bean.

"Yes, I do," said Carlotta. "Because even if you understand the reason why I said some of those things, you'll never forget that I said them."

"They can't be worse than what I imagine," said Bean.

"It's not a matter of being bad or worse. They can't be too bad or you wouldn't have got into Battle School, would you? You were too young and they didn't believe your test scores and they knew there wouldn't be time to train you unless you really were ... what I said. I just don't want you to have my words in your memory. And if you have any sense, Bean, you'll never read them."

"Toguro," said Bean. "I've been gossiped about by the person I trust most, and it's so bad she begs me not to try to find out."

"Enough of this nonsense," said Peter. "We've all faced some nasty blows today. But we've got an alliance started here, haven't we? You're acting in my interest tonight, getting that groundswell started so I can reveal myself on the world's stage. And I've got to get you into Thailand, in a position of trust and influence, before I expose myself as a teenager. Which of us gets to sleep first, do you think?"

"Me," said Sister Carlotta. "Because I don't have any sins on my conscience."

"Kuso," said Bean. "You have all the sins of the world on your mind."

"You're confusing me with somebody else," said Sister Carlotta.

To Peter their banter sounded like family chatter--old jokes, repeated because they're comfortable.

Why didn't his own family have any of that? Peter had bantered with Valentine, but she had never really opened up to him and played that way. She always resented him, even feared him. And their parents were hopeless. There was no clever banter there, there were no shared jokes and memories.

Maybe I really was raised by robots, Peter thought.

"Tell your parents we really appreciated the dinner," said Bean.

"Home to bed," said Sister Carlotta.

"You won't be sleeping in your hotel tonight, will you?" said Peter. "You'll be leaving."

"We'll email you how to contact us," said Bean.

"You'll have to leave Greensboro yourself, you know," said Sister Carlotta. "Once you reveal your identity, Achilles will know where you are. And even though India has no reason to kill you, Achilles does. He kills anyone who has even seen him in a position of helplessness. You actually put him in that position. You're a dead man, as soon as he can reach you."

Peter thought of the attempt that had been made on Bean's life. "He was perfectly happy to kill your parents right along with you, wasn't he?" Peter asked.

"Maybe," said Bean, "you should tell your mom and dad who you are before they read about it on the nets. And then help them get out of town."

"At some point we have to stop hiding from Achilles and face him openly."

"Not until you have a government committed to keeping you alive," said Bean. "Until then, you stay in hiding. And your parents, too."

"I don't think they'll even believe me," said Peter. "My parents, I mean. When I tell them that I'm really Locke. What parents would? They'll probably try to commit me as delusional."

"Trust them," said Bean. "I think you think they're stupid. But I can assure you that they're not. Or at least your mother isn't. You got your brains from somebody. They'll deal with this."

So it was that when Peter got home at ten o'clock, he went to his parents' room and knocked on their door.

"What is it?" asked Father.

"Are you awake?" Peter asked.

"Come in," said Mother.

They chatted mindlessly for a few minutes about dinner and Sister Carlotta and that delightful little Julian Delphiki, so hard to believe that a child that young could possibly have done all that he had done in his short life. And on and on, until Peter interrupted them.

"I have something to tell you," said Peter. "Tomorrow, some friends of Bean's and Carlotta's will be starting a phony movement to get Locke nominated as Hegemon. You know who Locke is? The political commentator?"

They nodded.

"And the next morning," Peter went on, "Locke is going to come out with a statement that he has to decline such an honor because he's just a teenage boy living in Greensboro, North Carolina."

"Yes?" said Father.

Did they really not get it? "It's me, Dad," said Peter. "I'm Locke."

They looked at each other. Peter waited for them to say something stupid.

"Are you going to tell them that Valentine was Demosthenes, too?" asked Mother.

For a moment he thought she was saying that as a joke, that she thought that the only thing more absurd than Peter being Locke would be Valentine being Demosthenes.

Then he realized that there was no irony in her question at all. It was an important point, and one he needed to address-the contradiction between Locke and Demosthenes had to be resolved, or there would still be something for Chamrajnagar and Achilles to expose. And blaming Valentine for Demosthenes right from the start was an important thing to do.

But not as important to him as the fact that Mother knew it. "How long have you known?" he asked.

"We've been very proud of what you've accomplished," said Father.

"As proud as we've ever been of Ender," Mother added.

Peter almost staggered under the emotional blow. They had just told him the thing that he had wanted most to hear his entire life, without ever quite admitting it to himself. Tears sprang to his eyes.

"Thanks," he murmured. Then he closed the door and fled to his room. Somehow, fifteen minutes later, he got enough control of his emotions that he could write the letters he had to write to Thailand, and begin writing his self-exposure essay.

They knew. And far from thinking him a second-rater, a disappointment, they were as proud of him as they had ever been of Ender.

His whole world was about to change, his life would be transformed, he might lose everything, he might win everything. But all he could feel that night, as he finally went to bed and drifted off to sleep, was utter, foolish happiness.

BANGKOK

Posted on Military History Forum by HectorVictorious@firewall.net

Topic: Who Remembers Briseis?

When I read the Iliad, I see the same things everyone else does-the poetry, of course, and the information about heroic bronze-age warfare. But I see something else, too. It might have been Helen whose face launched a thousand ships, but it was Briseis who almost wrecked them. She was a powerless captive, a slave, and yet Achilles almost tore the Greek alliance apart because he wanted her.

The mystery that intrigues me is: Was she extraordinarily beautiful? or was it her mind that Achilles coveted? No, seriously: Would she have been happy for long as Achilles' captive? Would she, perhaps, have gone to him willingly? or remained a surly, resistant slave?

Not that it would have mattered to Achilles-he would have used his captive the same way, regardless of her feelings. But one imagines Briseis taking note of the tale about Achilles' heel and slipping that information to someone within the walls of Troy .

Briseis, if only I could have heard from you!

-Hector Victorious

Bean amused himself by leaving messages for Petra scattered all over the forums that she might visit-if she was alive, if Achilles allowed her to browse the nets, if she realized that a topic heading like "Who Remembers Briseis?" was a reference to her, and if she was free to reply as his message covertly begged her to do. He wooed her under other names of women loved by military leaders: Guinevere, Josephine, Roxane-even Barsine, the Persian wife of Alexander that Roxane murdered soon after his death. And he signed himself with the name of a nemesis or chief rival or successor: Mordred, Hector, Wellington, Cassander.

He took the dangerous step of allowing these identities to continue to exist, each consisting only of a forwarding order to another anonymous net identity that held all mail it received as encrypted postings on an open board with no-tracks protocols. He could visit and read the postings without leaving a trace. But firewalls could be pierced, protocols broken.

He could afford to be a little more careless now about his online identities, if only because his real-world location was now known to people whose trustworthiness he could not assess. Do you worry about the fifth lock on the back door, when the front door is open?

They had welcomed him generously in Bangkok. General Naresuan promised him that no one would know his real identity, that he would be given soldiers to train and intelligence to analyze and his advice would be sought constantly as the Thai military prepared for all kinds of future contingencies. "We are taking seriously Locke's assessment that India will soon pose a threat to Thai security, and we will of course want your help in preparing contingency plans." All so warm

and courteous. Bean and Carlotta were installed in a general officer-level apartment on a military base, given unlimited privileges concerning meals and purchases, and then ... ignored.

No one called. No one consulted. The promised intelligence did not flow. The promised soldiers were never assigned.

Bean knew better than to even inquire. The promises were not forgotten. If he asked about them, Naresuan would be embarrassed, would feel challenged. That would never do. Something had happened. Bean could only imagine what.

At first, of course, he feared that Achilles had gotten to the Thai government somehow, that his agents now knew exactly where Bean was, that his death was imminent.

That was when he sent Carlotta away.

It was not a pleasant scene. "You should come with me," she said. "They won't stop you. Walk away."

"I'm not leaving," said Bean. "Whatever has gone wrong is probably local politics. Somebody here doesn't like having me around maybe Naresuan himself, maybe someone else."

"If you feel safe enough to stay," said Sister Carlotta, "then there's no reason for me to go."

"You can't pass yourself off as my grandmother here," said Bean. "The fact that I have a guardian weakens me."

"Spare me the scene you're trying to play," said Carlotta. "I know there are reasons why you'd be better off without me, and I know there are ways that I could help you greatly."

"If Achilles knows where I am already, then his penetration of Bangkok is deep enough that I'll never get away," said Bean. "You might. The information that an older woman is with me might not have reached him yet. But it will soon, and he wants you dead as much as he wants to kill me. I don't want to have to worry about YOU here."

"I'll go," said Carlotta. "But how do I write to you, since you never keep the same address?"

He gave her the name of his folder on the no-tracks board he was using, and the encryption key. She memorized it.

"One more thing," said Bean. "In Greensboro, Peter said something about reading your memos."

"I think he was lying," said Carlotta.

"I think the way you reacted proved that whether he read them or not, there were memos, and you don't want me to read them."

"There were, and I don't," said Carlotta.

"And that's the other reason I want you to leave," said Bean.

The expression on her face turned fierce. "You can't trust me when I tell you that there is nothing in those memos that you need to know right now?"

"I need to know everything about myself My strengths, my weaknesses. You know things about me that you told Graff and you didn't tell me. You're still not telling me. You think of yourself as my master, able to decide things for me. That means we're not partners after all."

"Very well," said Carlotta. "I am acting in your best interest, but I understand that you don't see it that way." Her manner was cold, but Bean knew her well enough to recognize that it was not anger she was controlling, but grief and frustration. It was a cold thing to do, but for her own sake he had to send her away and keep her from being in close contact with him until he understood what was going on here in Bangkok. The contretemps about the memos made her willing to go. And he really was annoyed.

She was out the door in fifteen minutes and on her way to the airport. Nine hours later he found a posting from her on his encrypted board: She was in Manila, where she could disappear within the Catholic establishment there. Not a word about their quarrel, if that's what it had been. Only a brief reference to "Locke's confession," as the newspeople were calling it. "Poor Peter," wrote Carlotta. "He's been hiding for so long, it's going to be hard for him to get used to having to face the consequences of his words."

To her secure address at the Vatican, Bean replied, "I just hope Peter has the brains to get out of Greensboro. What he needs right now is a small country to run, so he can get some administrative and political experience. Or at least a city water department."

And what I need, thought Bean, is soldiers to command. That's why I came here.

For weeks after Carlotta left, the silence continued. It became obvious, soon enough, that whatever was going on had nothing to do with Achilles, or Bean would be dead by now. Nor could it have had anything to do with Locke being revealed as Peter Wiggin-the freeze-out had already begun before Peter published his declaration.

Bean busied himself with whatever tasks seemed meaningful. Though he had no access to military-level maps, he could still access the publicly available satellite maps of the terrain between India and the heart of Thailand-the rough mountain country of northern and eastern Burma, the Indian Ocean coastal approaches. India had a substantial fleet, by Indian Ocean standards-might they attempt to run the Strait of Malacca and strike at the heart of Thailand from the gulf. All possibilities had to be prepared for.

Some basic intelligence about the makeup of the Indian and Thai military was available on the nets. Thailand had a powerful air force-there was a chance of achieving air dominance, if they could protect their bases. Therefore it would be essential to have the capability of laying down emergency

airstrips in a thousand different places, an engineering feat well within the reach of the Thai military-if they trained for it now and dispersed crews and fuel and spare parts throughout the country. That, along with mines, would be the best protection against a coastal landing.

The other Indian vulnerability would be supply lines and lanes of advance. Since India's military strategy would inevitably depend on throwing vast, irresistible armies against the enemy, the defense was to keep those vast armies hungry and harry them constantly from the air and from raiding parties. And if, as was likely, the Indian Army reached the fertile plain of the Chao Phraya or the Aoray Plateau, they had to find the land utterly stripped, the food supplies dispersed and hidden-those that weren't destroyed.

It was a brutal strategy, because the Thai people would suffer along with the Indian Army-indeed, they would suffer more. So the destruction had to be set up so it would only take place at the last minute. And, as much as possible, they had to be able to evacuate women and children to remote areas or even to camps in Laos and Cambodia. Not that borders would stop the Indian army, but terrain might. Having many isolated targets for the Indians would force them to divide their forces. Then-and only then-would it make sense for the Thai military to take on smaller portions of the Indian army in hit-and-run engagements or, where possible, in pitched battles where the Thai side would have temporary numerical parity and superior air support.

Of course, for all Bean knew this was already the longstanding Thai military doctrine and if he made these suggestions he would only annoy them-or make them feel that he had contempt for them.

So he worded his memo very carefully. Lots of phrases like, "No doubt you already have this in place," and "as I'm sure you have long expected." Of course, even those phrases could backfire, if they hadn't thought of these things-it would sound patronizing. But he had to do something to break this stalemate of silence.

He read the memo over and over, revising each time. He waited days to send it, so he could see it in new perspectives. Finally, certain that it was as rhetorically inoffensive as he could make it, he put it into an email and sent it to the Office of the Chakri-the supreme military commander. It was the most public and potentially embarrassing way he could deliver the memo, since mail to that address was inevitably sorted and read by aides. Even printing it out and carrying it by hand would have been more subtle. But the idea was to stir things up; if Naresuan wanted him to be subtle, he would have given him a private email address to write to.

Fifteen minutes after he sent the memo, his door unceremoniously opened and four military police came in. "Come with us, sir," said the sergeant in charge.

Bean knew better than to delay or to ask questions. These men knew nothing but the instructions they had been given, and Bean would find out what those were by waiting to see what they did.

They did not take him to the office of the Chakri. Instead he was taken to one of the temporary buildings that had been set up on the old parade grounds-the Thai military had only recently given up marching as part of the training of soldiers and the display of military might. Only three hundred

years after the American Civil War had proven that the days of marching in formation into battle were over. For military organizations, that was about the normal time lag. Sometimes Bean half-expected to find some army somewhere that was still training its soldiers to fight with sabers from horseback.

There was no label, not even a number, on the door they led him to. And when he came inside, none of the soldier-clerks even looked up at him. His arrival was both expected and unimportant, their attitude said. Which meant, of course, that it was very important, or they would not be so studiously perfect about not noticing him.

He was led to an office door, which the sergeant opened for him. He went in; the military police did not. The door closed behind him.

Seated at the desk was a major. This was an awfully high rank to have manning a reception desk, but today, at least, that seemed to be the man's duty. He depressed the button on an intercom. "The package is here," he said.

"Send it in." The voice that came back sounded young. So young that Bean understood the situation at once.

Of course. Thailand had contributed its share of military geniuses to Battle School. And even though none of Ender's jeesh had been of Thai parentage, Thailand, like many east and south Asian countries, was overrepresented in the population of Battle School as a whole.

There had even been three Thai soldiers who served with Bean in Dragon Army. Bean remembered every kid in that army very well, along with his complete dossier, since he was the one who had drawn up the list of soldiers who should make up Ender's army. Since most countries seemed to value their returning Battle School graduates in proportion to their closeness to Ender Wiggin, it was most likely one of those three who had been given a position of such influence here that he would be able to intercept a memo to the Chakri so quickly. And of the three, the one Bean would expect to see in the most prominent position, taking the most aggressive role, was ...

Surrey. Suriyawong. "Surly," as they called him behind his back, since he always seemed to be pissed off about something.

And there he was, standing behind a table covered with maps.

Bean saw, to his surprise, that he was actually almost as tall as Suriyawong. Surrey had not been very big, but everyone towered over Bean in Battle School. Bean was catching up. He might not spend his whole life hopelessly undersized. It was a promising thought.

There was nothing promising about Surrey's attitude, though. "So the colonial powers have decided to use India and Thailand to fight their surrogate wars," he said.

Bean knew at once what had gotten under Suriyawong's skin. Achilles was a Belgian Walloon by birth, and Bean, of course, was Greek. "Yes, of course," said Bean. "Belgium and Greece are bound to fight out their ancient differences on bloody battlefields in Burma."

"Just because you were in Ender's jeesh," said Suriyawong, "does not mean that you have any understanding of the military situation of Thailand."

"My memo was designed to show how limited my knowledge was, because Chakri Naresuan has not provided me with the access to intelligence that he indicated I would receive when I arrived."

"If we ever need your advice, we'll provide you with intelligence."

"If you only provide me with the intelligence you think I need," said Bean, "then my advice will only consist of telling you what you already know, and I might as well go home now."

"Yes," said Suriyawong. "That would be best."

"Suriyawong," said Bean, "you don't really know me."

"I know you were always an emossin' little showoff who always had to be smarter than everybody else."

"I was smarter than everybody else," said Bean. "I've got the test scores to prove it. So what? That didn't mean they made me commander of Dragon Army. It didn't mean Ender made me a toon leader. I know just how worthless being smart is, compared with being good at command. I also know just how ignorant I am here in Thailand. I didn't come here because I thought Thailand would be prostrate without my brilliant mind to lead you into battle. I came here because the most dangerous human on this planet is running the show in India and by my best calculations, Thailand is going to be his primary target. I came here because if Achilles is going to be stopped from setting up his tyranny over the world, this is where it has to be done. And I thought, like George Washington in the American revolution, you might actually welcome a Lafayette or a Steuben to help in the cause."

"If your foolish memo was an example of your 'help,' you can leave now."

"So you already have the capability of making temporary airstrips within the amount of time that a fighter is in the air? So they can land at an airstrip that didn't exist when they took off?"

"That is an interesting idea and we're having the engineers look at it and evaluate the feasibility."

Bean nodded. "Good. That tells me all I needed to know. I'll stay."

"No, you will not!"

"I'll stay because, despite the fact that you're pissed off that I'm here, you still recognized a good idea when you heard it and put it into play. You're not an idiot, and therefore you're worth working with."

Suriyawong slapped the table and leaned over it, furious. "You condescending little oomay, I'm not your moose."

Bean answered him calmly. "Suriyawong, I don't want your job. I don't want to run things here. I just want to be useful. Why not use me the way Ender did? Give me a few soldiers to train. Let me think of weird things to do and figure out how to do them. Let me be ready so that when the war comes, and there's some impossible thing you need done, you can call me in and say, Bean, I need you to do something to slow down this army for a day, and I've got no troops anywhere near there. And I'll say, Are they drawing water from a river? Good, then let's give their whole army dysentery for a week. That should slow them down. And I'll get in there, get a bioagent into the water, bypass their water purification system, and get out. Or do you already have a water-drugging diarrhea team?"

Suriyawong held his expression of cold anger for a few moments, and then it broke. He laughed. "Come on, Bean, did you make that up on the spot, or have you really planned an operation like that?"

"Made it up just now," said Bean. "But it's kind of a fun idea, don't you think? Dysentery has changed the course of history more than once."

"Everybody immunizes their soldiers against the known bioagents. And there's no way of stopping downstream collateral damage."

"But Thailand is bound to have some pretty hot and heavy bio research, right?"

"Purely defensive," said Suriyawong. Then he smiled and sat down. "Sit, sit. You really are content to take a background position?"

"Not only content, but eager," said Bean. "If Achilles knew I was here, he'd find a way to kill me. The last thing I need is to be prominent-until we actually get into combat, at which time it might be a nice psychological blow to give Achilles the idea that I'm running things. It won't be true, but it might make him even crazier to think it's me he's facing. I've outmaneuvered him before. He's afraid of me."

"It's not my own position I was trying to protect," said Suriyawong. Bean understood this to mean that of course it was his position he was protecting. "But Thailand kept its independence when every other country in this area was ruled by Europeans. We're very proud of keeping foreigners out."

"And yet," said Bean, "Thailand also has a history of letting foreigners in-and using them effectively."

"As long as they know their place," said Suriyawong.

"Give me a place, and I'll remember to stay in it," said Bean.

"What kind of contingent do you want to work with?"

What Bean asked for wasn't a large number of men, but he wanted to draw them from every branch of service. Only two fighterbombers, two patrol boats, a handful of engineers, a couple of light armored vehicles to go along with a couple of hundred soldiers and enough choppers to carry everything but the boats and planes. "And the power to requisition odd things that we think of. Rowboats, for instance. High explosives so we can train in making cliffs fall and bridges collapse. Whatever I think of."

"But you don't actually commit to combat without permission."

"Permission," said Bean, "from whom?"

"Me," said Suriyawong.

"But you're not Chakri," said Bean.

"The Chakri," said Suriyawong, "exists to provide me with everything I ask for. The planning is entirely in my hands."

"Glad to know who's aboon here." Bean stood up. "For what it's worth, I was most help to Ender when I had access to everything he knew."

"In your dreams," said Suriyawong.

Bean grinned. "I'm dreaming of good maps," said Bean. "And an accurate assessment of the current situation of the Thai military."

Suriyawong thought about that for a long moment.

"How many of your soldiers are you sending into battle blindfolded?" asked Bean. "I hope I'm the only one."

"Until I'm sure you really are my soldier," said Suriyawong, "the blindfold stays on. But ... you can have the maps."

"Thank you," said Bean.

He knew what Suriyawong feared: that Bean would use any information he got to come up with alternate strategies and persuade the Chakri that he would do a better job as chief strategist than Suriyawong. For it was patently untrue that Suriyawong was the aboon here. Chakri Naresuan might trust him and had obviously delegated great responsibility to him. But the authority remained

in Naresuan's hands, and Suriyawong served at his pleasure. That's why Suriyawong feared Bean—he could be replaced.

He'd find out soon enough that Bean was not interested in palace politics. If he remembered correctly, Suriyawong was of the royal family—though the last few polygynist kings of Siam had had so many children that it was hard to imagine that there were many Thais who were not royal to one degree or another. Chulalongkorn had established the principle, centuries ago, that princes had a duty to serve, but not a right to high office. Suriyawong's life belonged to Thailand as a matter of honor, but he would hold his position in the military only as long as his superiors considered him the best for the job.

Now that Bean knew who it was who had been keeping him down, it would be easy enough to destroy Surrey and take his place. After all, Suriyawong had been given the responsibility to carry out Naresuan's promises to Bean. He had deliberately disobeyed the Chakri's orders. All Bean really needed to do was use a back doorsome connection of Peter's, probably—to get word to Naresuan that Suriyawong had blocked Bean from getting what he needed, and there would be an inquiry and the first seeds of doubt about Suriyawong would be planted.

But Bean did not want Suriyawong's job.

He wanted a fighting force that he could train to work together so smoothly, so resourcefully, so brilliantly that when he made contact with Petra and found out where she was, he could go in and get her out alive. With or without Surly's permission. He'd help the Thai military as best he could, but Bean had his own objectives, and they had nothing to do with building a career in Bangkok.

"One last thing," said Bean. "I have to have a name here, something that won't alert anyone outside Thailand that I'm a child and a foreigner—that might be enough to tip off Achilles about who I am."

"What name do you have in mind? How about Sua--it means tiger."

"I have a better name," said Bean. "Borommakot."

Suriyawong looked puzzled for a moment, till he remembered the name from the history of Ayudhya, the ancient Tai city-state of which Siam was the successor. "That was the nickname of the uparat who stole the throne from Aphai, the rightful successor."

"I was just thinking of what the name means," said Bean. "'In the urn. Awaiting cremation.'" He grinned. "As far as Achilles is concerned, I'm just a walking dead man."

Suriyawong relaxed. "Whatever. I thought as a foreigner you might appreciate having a shorter name."

"Why? I don't have to say it."

"You have to sign it."

"I'm not issuing written orders, and the only person I'll be reporting to is you. Besides, Borommakot is fun to say."

"You know your Thai history," said Suriyawong.

"Back in Battle School," said Bean. "I got fascinated with Thailand. A nation of survivors. The ancient Tai people managed to take over vast reaches of the Cambodian Empire and spread throughout southeast Asia, all without anybody noticing. They were conquered by Burma and emerged stronger than ever. When other countries were falling under European domination, Thailand managed to expand its borders for a surprisingly long time, and even when it lost Cambodia and Laos, it held its core. I think Achilles is going to find what everybody else has found-the Thai are not easily conquered, and, once conquered, not easily ruled."

"Then you have some idea of the soul of the Thai," said Suriyawong. "But no matter how long you study us, you will never be one of us."

"You're mistaken," said Bean. "I already am one of you. A survivor, a free man, no matter what."

Suriyawong took this seriously. "Then as one free man to another, welcome to the service of Thailand."

They parted amicably, and by the end of the day, Bean saw that Suriyawong intended to keep his word. He was provided with a list of soldiers-four preexisting fifty-man companies with fair records, so they weren't giving him the dregs. And he would have his helicopters, his jets, his patrol boats to train with.

He should have been nervous, preparing to face soldiers who were bound to be skeptical about having him as their commander. But he had been in that situation before, in Battle School. He would win over these soldiers by the simplest expedient of all. Not flattery, not favors, not folksy friendliness. He would win their loyalty by showing them that he knew what to do with an army, so they would have the confidence that when they went into battle, their lives would not be wasted in some doomed enterprise. He would tell them, from the start, "I will never lead you into an action unless I know we can win it. Your job is to become such a brilliant fighting force that there is no action I can't lead you into. We're not in this for glory. We're in this to destroy the enemies of Thailand any way we can."

They'd get used to being led by a little Greek boy soon enough.

ISLAMABAD

TO: GuillaumeLeBon%Egalite@Haiti.gov

From: Locke%erasmus@polnet.gov

Re: Terms for Consultation

M. LeBon, I appreciate how difficult it was for you to approach me. I believe that I could offer you worthwhile views and suggestions, and, more to the point, I believe you are committed to acting

courageously on behalf of the people you govern and therefore any suggestions I made would have an excellent chance of being put into effect.

But the terms you suggest are unacceptable to me. I will not come to Haiti by dark of night or masked as a tourist or student, lest anyone find out that you are consulting a teenage boy from America. I am still the author of every word written by Locke, and it is as that widely known figure, whose name is on the proposals that ended the League War, that I will come openly to consult with you. If my previous reputation were not reason enough for you to be able to invite me openly, then the fact that I am the brother of Ender Wiggin, on whose shoulders the fate of all humanity so recently was placed, should set a precedent you can follow without embarrassment. Not to mention the presence of children from Battle School in almost every military headquarters on Earth. The sum you offered is a princely one. But it will never be paid, for under the terms you suggested, I will not come, and if you invite me openly, I will certainly come but will accept no payment not even for my expenses while I am in your country. As a foreigner, I could not possibly match your deep and abiding love for the people of Haiti, but I care very much that every nation and people on Earth share in the prosperity and freedom that are their birthright, and I will accept no fee for helping in that cause.

By bringing me openly, you decrease your personal risk, for if my suggestions are unpopular, you can lay the blame on me. And the personal risk I take by coming openly is far greater, for if the world judges my proposals to be unsound or if, in implementing them, you discover them to be unworkable, I will publicly bear the discredit. I speak candidly, because these are realities we both must face: Such is my confidence that my suggestions will be excellent and that you will be able to implement them effectively. When we have finished our work, you can play Cincinnatus and retire to your farm, while I will play Solon and leave the shores of Haiti, both of us confident that we have given your people a fair chance to take their proper place in the world.

Sincerely,
Peter Wiggin

Petra never forgot for an instant that she was a captive and a slave. But, like most captives, like most slaves, as she lived from day to day she became accustomed to her captivity and found ways to be herself within the tight boundaries around her.

She was guarded every moment, and her desk was crippled so she could send no outgoing messages. There would be no repetition of her message to Bean. And even when she saw that someone could it be Bean, not killed after all?-was trying to speak to her, leaving messages on every military, historical, and geographic forum that spoke about women held in bondage to some warrior or other, she did not let it fret her. She could not answer, so she would waste no time trying.

Eventually the work that was forced on her became a challenge that she found interesting for its own sake. How to mount a campaign against Burma and Thailand and, eventually, Vietnam that would sweep all resistance before it, yet never provoke China to intervene. She saw at once that the vast size of the Indian Army was its greatest weakness, for the supply lines would be impossible to defend. So, unlike the other strategists Achilles was using-mostly Indian Battle School graduates-Petra did not bother with the logistics of a sledgehammer campaign. Eventually the Indian forces

would have to divide anyway, unless the Burmese and Thai armies simply lined up to be slaughtered. So she planned an unpredictable campaign--dazzling thrusts by small, mobile forces that could live off the land. The few pieces of mobile armor would race forward, supplied with petrol by air tankers.

She knew her plan was the only one that made sense, and not just because of the intrinsic problems it solved. Any plan that involved putting ten million soldiers so near to the border with China would provoke Chinese intervention. Her plan would never put enough soldiers near China to constitute a threat. Nor would her plan lead to a war of attrition that would leave both sides exhausted and weak. Most of India's strength would remain in reserve, ready to strike wherever the enemy showed weakness.

Achilles gave copies of her plan to the others, of course--he called it "cooperation," but it functioned as an exercise in one-upmanship. All the others had quickly climbed into Achilles' pocket, and now were eager to please him. They sensed, of course, that Achilles wanted Petra humiliated, and duly gave him what he wanted. They mocked her plan as if any fool could see it was hopeless, even though their criticisms were specious and her main points were never even addressed. She bore it, because she was a slave, and because she knew that eventually, some of them were bound to catch on to the way Achilles manipulated them and used them. But she knew that she had done a brilliant job, and it would be a delicious irony if the Indian Army--no, be honest, if Achilles--did not use her plan, and marched head-on to destruction.

It did not bother her conscience to have come up with an effective strategy for Indian expansion in southeast Asia. She knew it would never be used. Even her strategy of small, quick strike forces did not change the fact that India could not afford a two-front war. Pakistan would not let the opportunity pass if India committed itself to an eastern war.

Achilles had simply chosen the wrong country to try to lead into war. Tikal Chapekar, the Indian prime minister, was an ambitious man with delusions of the nobility of his cause. He might very well believe in Achilles' persuasions and long to begin an attempt to "unify" southeast Asia. A war might even begin. But it would founder quickly as Pakistan prepared to attack in the west. Indian adventurism would evaporate as it always had.

She even said as much to Achilles when he visited her one morning after her plans had been so resoundingly rejected by her fellow strategists. "Follow whatever plan you like, nothing will ever work as you think it will."

Achilles simply changed the subject--when he visited her, he preferred to reminisce with her as if they were a couple of old people remembering their childhoods together. Remember this about Battle School? Remember that? She wanted to scream in his face that he had only been there for a few days before Bean had him chained up in an air shaft, confessing to his crimes. He had no right to be nostalgic for Battle School. All he was accomplishing was to poison her own memories of the place, for now when Battle School came up, she just wanted to change the subject, to forget it completely.

Who would have imagined that she would ever think of Battle School as her era of freedom and happiness? It certainly hadn't seemed that way at the time.

To be fair, her captivity was not painful. As long as Achilles was in Hyderabad, she had the run of the base, though she was never unobserved. She could go to the library and do research-though one of her guards had to thumb the ID pad, verifying that she had logged on as herself, with all the restrictions that implied, before she could access the nets. She could run through the dusty countryside that was used for military maneuvers-and sometimes could almost forget the other footfalls keeping syncopated rhythm with her own. She could eat what she wanted, sleep when she wanted. There were times when she almost forgot she wasn't free. There were far more times when, knowing she was not free, she almost decided to stop hoping that her captivity would ever end.

It was Bean's messages that kept her hope alive. She could not answer him, and therefore stopped thinking of his messages as actual communications. Instead they were something deeper than mere attempts at making contact. They were proof that she had not been forgotten. They were proof that Petra Arkanian, Battle School brat, still had a friend who respected her and cared for her enough to refuse to give up. Each message was a cool kiss to her fevered brow.

And then one day Achilles came to her and told her he was going on a trip.

She assumed at once that this meant she would be confined to her room, locked down and under guard, until Achilles returned.

"No locks this time," said Achilles. "You're coming with me."

"So it's someplace inside India?"

"In one sense yes," said Achilles. "In another, no."

"I'm not interested in your games," she said, yawning. "I'm not going."

"Oh, you won't want to miss this," said Achilles. "And even if you did, it wouldn't matter, because I need you, so you'll be there."

"What can you possibly need me for?"

"Oh, well, when you put it that way, I suppose I should be more precise. I need you to see what takes place at the meeting."

"Why? Unless there's a successful assassination attempt, there's nothing I want to see you do."

"The meeting," said Achilles, "is in Islamabad."

Petra had no smart reply to that. The capital of Pakistan. It was unthinkable. What possible business could Achilles have there? And why would he bring her?

They flew-which of course reminded her of the eventful flight that had brought her to India as Achilles' prisoner. The open door should I have pulled him out with me and brought him brutally down to earth?

During the flight Achilles showed her the letter he had sent to Ghaffar Wahabi, the "prime minister" of Pakistan-actually, of course, the military dictator ... or Sword of Islam, if you preferred it that way. The letter was a marvel of deft manipulation. It would never have attracted any attention in Islamabad, however, if it had not come from Hyderabad, the headquarters of the Indian Army. Even though Achilles' letter never actually said so, it would be assumed in Pakistan that Achilles came as an unofficial envoy of the Indian government.

How many times had an Indian military plane landed at this military airbase near Islamabad? How many times had Indian soldiers in uniform been allowed to set foot on Pakistani soil-bearing their sidearms, no less? And all to carry a Belgian boy and an Armenian girl to talk to whatever lower-level official the Pakistanis decided to fob off on them.

A bevy of stone-faced Pakistani officials led them to a building a short distance from where their plane was being refueled. Inside, on the second floor, the leading official said, "Your escort must remain outside."

"Of course," said Achilles. "But my assistant comes in with me. I must have a witness to remind me in case my memory flags."

The Indian soldiers stood near the wall at full attention. Achilles and Petra walked through the open door.

There were only two people in the room, and she recognized one of them immediately from his pictures. With a gesture, he indicated where they should sit.

Petra walked to her chair in silence, never taking her eyes off Ghaffar Wahabi, the prime minister of Pakistan. She sat beside and slightly behind Achilles, as a lone Pakistani aide sat just at Wahabi's right hand. This was no lower-level official. Somehow, Achilles' letter had opened all the doors, right to the very top.

They needed no interpreter, for Common was, though not their birth language, a childhood acquisition for both of them, and they spoke without accent. Wahabi seemed skeptical and distant, but at least he did not play any humiliation games-he did not keep them waiting, he ushered them into the room himself, and he did not challenge Achilles in any way.

"I have invited you because I wish to hear what you have to say," said Wahabi. "So please begin."

Petra wanted so badly for Achilles to do something horribly wrong-to simper and beam, or to try to strut and show off his intelligence.

"Sir, I'm afraid that it may sound at first as if I am trying to teach Indian history to you, a scholar in that field. It is from your book that I learned everything I'm about to say."

"It is easy to read my book," said Wahabi. "What did you learn from it that I do not already know?"

"The next step," said Achilles. "The step so obvious that I was stunned when you did not take it."

"So this is a book review?" asked Wahabi. But with those words he smiled faintly, to take away the edge of hostility.

"Over and over again, you show the great achievements of the Indian people, and how they are overshadowed, swallowed up, ignored, despised. The civilization of the Indus is treated as a poor also-ran to Mesopotamia and Egypt and even that latecomer China. The Aryan invaders brought their language and religion and imposed it on the people of India. The Moguls, the British, each with their overlay of beliefs and institutions. I must tell you that your book is regarded with great respect in the highest circles of the Indian government, because of the impartial way you treated the religions brought to India by invaders."

Petra knew that this was not idle flattery. For a Pakistani scholar, especially one with political ambitions, to write a history of the subcontinent without praising the Muslim influence and condemning the Hindu religion as primitive and destructive was brave indeed.

Wahabi raised a hand. "I wrote then as a scholar. Now I am the voice of the people. I hope my book has not led you into a quixotic quest for reunification of India. Pakistan is determined to remain pure.

"Please do not leap to conclusions," said Achilles. "I agree with you that reunification is impossible. Indeed, it is a meaningless term. Hindu and Muslim were never united except under an oppressor, so how could they be reunited?"

Wahabi nodded, and waited for Achilles to go on.

"What I saw throughout your account," said Achilles, "was a profound sense of the greatness inherent in the Indian people. Great religions have been born here. Great thinkers have arisen who have changed the world. And yet for two hundred years, when people think of the great powers, India and Pakistan are never on the list. And they never have been. And this makes you angry, and it makes you sad."

"More sad than angry," said Wahabi, "but then, I'm an old man, and my temper has abated."

"China rattles its swords, and the world shivers, but India is barely glanced at. The Islamic world trembles when Iraq or Turkey or Iran or Egypt swings one way or another, and yet Pakistan, stalwart for its entire history, is never treated as a leader. Why?"

"If I knew the answer," said Wahabi, "I would have written a different book."

"There are many reasons in the distant past," said Achilles, "but they all come down to one thing. The Indian people could never act together."

"Again, the language of unity," said Wahabi.

"Not at all," said Achilles. "Pakistan cannot take his rightful place of leadership in the Muslim world, because whenever he looks to the west, Pakistan hears the heavy steps of India behind him. And India cannot take her rightful place as the leader of the east, because the threat of Pakistan looms behind her."

Petra admired the deft way Achilles made his choice of pronouns seem casual, uncalculated-India the woman, Pakistan the man.

"The spirit of God is more at home in India and Pakistan than any other place. It is no accident that great religions have been born here, or have found their purest form. But Pakistan keeps India from being great in the east, and India keeps Pakistan from being great in the west."

"True, but insoluble," said Wahabi.

"Not so," said Achilles. "Let me remind you of another bit of history, from only a few years before Pakistan's creation as a state. In Europe, two great nations faced each other-Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. These two leaders were great monsters. But they saw that their enmity had chained them to each other. Neither could accomplish anything as long as the other threatened to take advantage of the slightest opening."

"You compare India and Pakistan to Hitler and Stalin?"

"Not at all," said Peter, "because so far, India and Pakistan have shown less sense and less self-control than either of those monsters."

Wahabi turned to his aide. "As usual, India has found a new way to insult us." The aide arose to help him to his feet.

"Sir, I thought you were a wise man," said Achilles. "There is no one here to see you posture. No one to quote what I have said. You have nothing to lose by hearing me out, and everything to lose by leaving."

Petra was stunned to hear Achilles speak so sharply. Wasn't this taking his non-flatterer approach a little far? Any normal person would have apologized for the unfortunate comparison with Hitler and Stalin. But not Achilles. Well, this time he had surely gone too far. If this meeting failed, his whole strategy would come to nothing, and the tension he was under had led to this misstep.

Wahabi did not sit back down. "Say what you have to say, and be quick," he said.

"Hitler and Stalin sent their foreign ministers, Ribbentrop and Molotov, and despite the hideous denunciations that each had made against the other, they signed a nonaggression pact and divided Poland between them. It's true that a couple of years later, Hitler abrogated this pact, which led to millions of deaths and Hitler's eventual downfall, but that is irrelevant to your situation, because

unlike Hitler and Stalin, you and Chapekar are men of honor-you are of India, and you both serve God faithfully."

"To say that Chapekar and I both serve God is blasphemy to one or the other of us, or both," said Wahabi.

"God loves this land and has given the Indian people greatness," said Achilles-so passionately that if Petra had not known better, she might have believed he had some kind of faith. "Do you really believe it is the will of God that both Pakistan and India remain in obscurity and weakness, solely because the people of India have not yet awakened to the will of Allah?"

"I do not care what atheists and madmen say about the will of Allah."

Good for you, thought Petra.

"Nor do I," said Achilles. "But I can tell you this. If you and Chapekar signed an agreement, not of unity, but of nonaggression, you could divide Asia between you. And if the decades pass and there is peace between these two great Indian nations, then will the Hindu not be proud of the Muslim, and the Muslim proud of the Hindu? Will it not be possible then for Hindus to hear the teachings of the Quran, not as the book of their deadly enemy, but rather as the book of their fellow Indians, who share with India the leadership of Asia? If you don't like the example of Hitler and Stalin, then look at Portugal and Spain, ambitious colonizers who shared the Iberian Peninsula. Portugal, to the west, was smaller and weaker-but it was also the bold explorer that opened up the seas. Spain sent one explorer, and he was Italian-but he discovered a new world."

Petra again saw the subtle flattery at work. Without saying so directly, Achilles had linked Portugal-the weaker but braver nation-to Pakistan, and the nation that prevailed through dumb luck to India.

"They might have gone to war and destroyed each other, or weakened each other hopelessly. Instead they listened to the Pope, who drew a fine on the earth and gave everything east of it to Portugal and everything west of it to Spain. Draw your line across the Earth, Ghaffar Wahabi. Declare that you will not make war against the great Indian people who have not yet heard the word of Allah, but will instead show to all the world the shining example of the purity of Pakistan. While in the meantime, Tikal Chapekar will unite eastern Asia under Indian leadership, which they have long hungered for. Then, in the happy day when the Hindu people heed the Book, Islam will spread in one breath from New Delhi to Hanoi."

Wahabi slowly sat back down.

Achilles said nothing.

Petra knew then that his boldness had succeeded.

"Hanoi," said Wahabi. "Why not Beijing?"

"On the day that the Indian Muslims of Pakistan are made guardians of the sacred city, on that day the Hindus may imagine entering the forbidden city."

Wahabi laughed. "You are outrageous."

"I am," said Achilles. "But I'm right. About everything. About the fact that this is what your book was pointing to. That this is the obvious conclusion, if only India and Pakistan are blessed to have, at the same time, leaders with such vision and courage."

"And why does this matter to you?" said Wahabi.

"I dream of peace on Earth," said Achilles.

"And so you encourage Pakistan and India to go to war?"

"I encourage you to agree not to go to war with each other."

"Do you think Iran will peacefully accept Pakistan's leadership? Do you think the Turks will embrace us? It will have to be by conquest that we create this unity."

"But you will create it," said Achilles. "And when Islam is united under Indian leadership, it will no longer be humiliated by other nations. One great Muslim nation, one great Hindu nation, at peace with each other and too powerful for any other nation to dare to attack. That is how peace comes to Earth. God willing."

"Inshallah," echoed Wahabi. "But now it is time for me to know by what authority you say these things. You hold no office in India. How do I know you have not been sent to lull me while Indian armies amass for yet another unprovoked assault?"

Petra wondered if Achilles had planned to get Wahabi to say something so precisely calculated to give him the perfect dramatic moment, or if it was just chance. For Achilles' only answer to Wahabi was to draw from his portfolio a single sheet of paper, bearing a small signature at the bottom in blue ink.

"What is that?" said Wahabi.

"My authority," said Achilles. He handed the paper to Petra. She arose and carried it to the middle of the room, where Wahabi's aide took it from her hand.

Wahabi perused it, shaking his head. "And this is what he signed?"

"He more than signed it," said Achilles. "Ask your satellite team to tell you what the Indian Army is doing even as we speak."

"They are withdrawing from the border?"

"Someone has to be the first to offer trust. It's the opportunity you've been waiting for, you and all your predecessors. The Indian Army is withdrawing. You could send your troops forward. You could turn this gesture of peace into a bloodbath. Or you could give the orders to move your troops west and north. Iran is waiting for you to show them the purity of Islam. The Caliphate of Istanbul is waiting for you to unshackle it from the chains of the secular government of Turkey. Behind you, you will have only your brother Indians, wishing you well as you show the greatness of this land that God has chosen, and that finally is ready to rise."

"Save the speech," said Wahabi. "You understand that I have to verify that this signature is genuine, and that the Indian troops are moving in the direction that you say."

"You will do what you have to do," said Achilles. "I will return to India now."

"Without waiting for my answer?"

"I haven't asked you a question," said Achilles. "Tikal Chapekar has asked that question, and it is to him you must give your answer. I am only the messenger."

With that, Achilles rose to his feet. Petra did, too. Achilles strode boldly to Wahabi and offered his hand. "I hope you will forgive me, but I could not bear to return to India without being able to say that the hand of Ghaffar Wahabi touched mine."

Wahabi reached out and took Achilles' hand. "Foreign meddler," said Wahabi, but his eyes twinkled, and Achilles smiled in reply.

Could this possibly have worked? Petra wondered. Molotov and Ribbentrop had to negotiate for weeks, didn't they? Achilles did this in a single meeting.

What were the magic words?

But as they walked out of the room, escorted again by the four Indian soldiers who had come with them-her guards-Petra realized there had been no magic words. Achilles had simply studied both men and recognized their ambitions, their yearning for greatness. He had told them what they most wanted to hear. He gave them the peace that they had secretly longed for.

She had not been there for the meeting with Chapekar that led to Achilles' getting that signed nonaggression pact and the promise to withdraw, but she could imagine it. "You must make the first gesture," Achilles must have said. "It's true that the Muslims might take advantage of it, might attack. But you have the largest army in the world, and govern the greatest people. Let them attack, and you will absorb the blow and then return to roll over them like water bursting from a dam. And no one will criticize you for taking a chance on peace."

And now it finally struck home. The plans she had been drawing up for the invasion of Burma and Thailand were not mere foolery. They would be used. Hers or someone else's. The blood would begin to flow. Achilles would get his war.

I didn't sabotage my plans, she realized. I was so sure they could not be used that I didn't bother to build weaknesses into them. They might actually work.

What have I done?

And now she understood why Achilles had brought her along. He wanted to strut in front of her, of course-for some reason, he felt the need to have someone witness his triumphs. But it was more than that. He also wanted to rub her face in the fact that he was actually going to do what she had so often said could not be done.

Worst of all, she found herself hoping that her plan would be used, not because she wanted Achilles to win his war, but because she wanted to stick it to the other Battle School brats who had mocked her plan so mercilessly.

I have to get word to Bean somehow. I have to warn him, so he can get word to the governments of Burma and Thailand. I have to do something to subvert my own plan of attack, or their destruction will be on my shoulders.

She looked at Achilles, who was dozing in his seat, oblivious to the miles racing by beneath him, returning him to the place where his wars of conquest would begin. If she could only remove his murders from the equation, on balance he would be quite a remarkable boy. He was a Battle School discard with the label "psychopath" attached to him, and yet somehow he had gotten not one but three major world governments to do his bidding.

I was a witness to this most recent triumph, and I'm still not sure how he brought it off.

She remembered the story from her childhood, about Adam and Eve in the garden, and the talking snake. Even as a little girl she had said-to the consternation of her family-What kind of idiot was Eve, to believe a snake? But now she understood, for she had heard the voice of the snake and had watched as a wise and powerful man had fallen under its spell.

Eat the fruit and you can have the desires of your heart. It's not evil, it's noble and good. You'll be praised for it.

And it's delicious.

WARNINGS

To: Carlotta%agape@vatican.net/orders/ sisters/ind From: Graff%bonpassage@colmin.gov Re: Found?

I think we've found Petra. A good friend in Islamabad who is aware of my interest in finding her tells me that a strange envoy from New Delhi came for a brief meeting with Wahabi yesterday-a teenage boy who could only be Achilles; and a teenage girl of the right description who said nothing. Petra? I think it likely.

Bean needs to know what I've learned. First, my friend tells me that this meeting was almost immediately followed by orders to the Pakistani military to move back from the border with India. Couple that with the already-noted Indian removal from that frontier, and I think we're witnessing the impossible-after two centuries of intermittent but chronic warfare, a real attempt at peace. And it seems to have been done by or with the help of Achilles. (Since so many of our colonists are Indian, there are those in my ministry who fear that an outbreak of peace on the subcontinent might jeopardize our work!)

Second, for Achilles to bring Petra along on this sensitive mission implies that she is not an unwilling participant in his projects. Given that in Russia Vlad also was seduced into working with Achilles, however briefly, it is not unthinkable that even as confirmed a skeptic as Petra might have become a true believer while in captivity. Bean must be made aware of this possibility, for he may be hoping to rescue someone who does not wish to be rescued.

Third, tell Bean that I can make contacts in Hyderabad, among former Battle School students working in the Indian high command. I will not ask them to compromise their loyalty to their country, but I will ask about Petra and find out what, if anything, they have seen or heard. I think old school loyalty may trump patriotic secrecy on this point.

Bean's little strike force was all that he could have hoped for. These were not elite soldiers the way Battle School students had been-they were not selected for the ability to command. But in some ways this made them easier to train. They weren't constantly analyzing and second-guessing. In Battle School, too, many soldiers kept trying to show off to everyone, so they could enhance their reputation in the school commanders constantly had to struggle to keep their soldiers focused on the overall goal of the army.

Bean knew from his studies that in real-world armies, the opposite was more usually the problem-that soldiers tried not to do brilliantly at anything, or learn too quickly, for fear of being thought a suckup or show-off by their fellow soldiers. But the cure for both problems was the same. Bean worked hard to earn a reputation for tough, fair judgment.

He played no favorites, made no friends, but always noticed excellence and commented on it. His praise, however, was not effusive. Usually he would simply make a note about it in front of others. "Sergeant, your team made no mistakes." Only when an accomplishment was exceptional did he praise it explicitly, and then only with a terse "Good."

As he expected, the rarity of his praise as well as its fairness soon made it the most valued coin in his strike force. Soldiers who did good work did not have special privileges and were given no special authority, so they were not resented by the others. The praise was not effusive, so it never embarrassed them. Instead, they were admired by the others, and emulated. And the focus of the soldiers became the earning of Bean's recognition.

That was true power. Frederick the Great's dictum that soldiers had to fear their officers more than they feared the enemy was stupid. Soldiers needed to believe they had the respect of their officers, and to value that respect more than they valued life itself. Moreover, they had to know that their

officers' respect was justified-that they really were the good soldiers their officers believed them to be.

In Battle School, Bean had used his brief time in command of an army to teach himself-he led his men to defeat every time, because he was more interested in learning what he could learn than in racking up points. This was demoralizing to his soldiers, but he didn't care-he knew that he would not be with them long, and that the time of the Battle School was nearly over. Here in Thailand, though, he knew that the battles coming up were real, the stakes high, and his soldiers' lives would be on the line. Victory, not information, was the goal. And, behind that obvious motive, there lay an even deeper one. Sometime in the coming war-or even before, if he was lucky-he would be using a portion of this strike force to make a daring rescue attempt, probably deep inside India. There would be zero tolerance for error. He would bring Petra out. He would succeed.

He drove himself as hard as he drove any of his men. He made it a point to train alongside them-a child going through all the exercises the men went through. He ran with them, and if his pack was lighter it was only because he needed to carry fewer calories in order to survive. He had to carry smaller, lighter weapons, but no one begrudged him that-besides, they saw that his bullets went to the mark as often as theirs. There was nothing he asked them to do that he did not do himself. And when he was not as good as his men, he had no qualms about going to one of the best of them and asking him for criticism and advice-which he then followed.

This was unheard of, for a commander to risk allowing himself to appear unskilled or weak in front of his men. And Bean would not have done it, either, because the benefits did not usually outweigh the risks. However, he was planning to go along with them on difficult maneuvers, and his training had been theoretical and game-centered. He had to become a soldier, so he could be there to deal with problems and emergencies during operations, so he could keep up with them, and so that, in a pinch, he could join effectively in a fight.

At first, because of his youth and small stature, some of the soldiers had tried to make things easier for him. His refusal had been quiet but firm. "I have to learn this too," he would say, and that was the end of the discussion. Naturally, the soldiers watched him all the more intensely, to see how he measured up to the high standard he set for them. They saw him tax his body to the utmost. They saw that he shrank from nothing, that he came out of mudwork slimier than anyone, that he went over obstacles just as high as anyone's, that he ate no better food and slept on no better a patch of ground on maneuvers.

They did not see how much he modeled this strike force on the Battle School armies. With two hundred men, he divided them into five companies of forty. Each company, like Ender's Battle School army, was divided into five toons of eight men each. Every toon was expected to be able to carry out operations entirely on its own; every company was expected to be able to deal with complete independence. At the same time, he made sure that they became skilled observers, and trained them to see the kinds of things he needed them to see.

"You are my eyes," he said. "You need to see what I would look for and what you would see. I will always tell you what I am planning and why, so you will know if you see a problem I didn't anticipate, which might change my plan. Then you will make sure I know. My best chance of

keeping you all alive is to know everything that is in your heads during battle, just as your best chance of staying alive is to know everything that is in my head."

Of course, he knew that he could not tell them everything. No doubt they understood this as well. But he spent an inordinate amount of time, by standard military doctrine, telling his men the reasoning behind his orders, and he expected his company and toon commanders to do the same with their men. "That way, when we give you an order without any reasons, you will know that it's because there's no time for explanation, that you must act now-but that there is a good reason, which we would tell you if we could."

Once when Suriyawong came to observe his training of his troops, he asked Bean if this was how he recommended training soldiers throughout the whole army.

"Not a chance," said Bean.

"If it works for you, why wouldn't it work everywhere?"

"Usually you don't need it and can't afford the time," said Bean.

"But you can?"

"These soldiers are going to be called on to do the impossible. They aren't going to be sent to hold a position or advance against an enemy posting. They're going to be sent to do difficult, complicated things right under the eyes of the enemy, under circumstances where they can't go back for new instructions but have to adapt and succeed. That is impossible if they don't understand the purpose behind all their orders. And they have to know exactly how their commanders think so that trust is perfect-and so they can compensate for their commanders' inevitable weaknesses."

"Your weaknesses?" asked Suriyawong.

"Hard to believe, Suriyawong, but yes, I have weaknesses."

That earned a faint smile from Surly-a rare prize. "Growing pains?" asked Suriyawong.

Bean looked down at his ankles. He had already had new uniforms made twice, and it was time for a third go. He was almost as tall now as Suriyawong had been when Bean first arrived in Bangkok half a year before. Growing caused him no pain. But it worried him, since it seemed unconnected with any other sign of puberty. Why, after all these years of being undersized, was his body now so determined to catch up?

He experienced none of the problems of adolescence-not the clumsiness that comes from having limbs that swing farther than they used to, not the rush of hormones that clouded judgment and distracted attention. So if he grew enough to carry better weapons, that could only be a plus.

"Someday I hope to be as fine a man as you," said Bean.

Suriyawong grunted. He knew that Surly would take it as a joke. He also knew that, somewhere deeper than consciousness, Suriyawong would also take it at face value, for people always did. And it was important for Suriyawong to have the constant reassurance that Bean respected his position and would do nothing to undermine him.

That had been months ago, and Bean was able to report to Suriyawong a long list of possible missions that his men had been trained for and could perform at any time. It was his declaration of readiness.

Then came the letter from Graff. Carlotta forwarded it to him as soon as she got it. Petra was alive. She was probably with Achilles in Hyderabad.

Bean immediately notified Suriyawong that an intelligence source of a friend of his verified an apparent nonaggression pact between India and Pakistan, and a movement of troops away from the shared border-along with his opinion that this guaranteed an invasion of Burma within three weeks.

As to the other matters in the letter, Graff's assertion that Petra might have gone over to Achilles' cause was, of course, absurd-if Graff believed that, he didn't know Petra. What alarmed Bean was that she had been so thoroughly neutralized that she could seem to be on Achilles' side. This was the girl who always spoke her mind no matter how much abuse it caused to come down on her head. If she had fallen silent, it meant she was in despair.

Isn't she getting my messages? Has Achilles cut her off from information so thoroughly that she doesn't even roam the nets? That would explain her failure to answer. But still, Petra was used to standing alone. That wouldn't explain her silence.

It had to be her own strategy for mastery. Silence, so that Achilles would forget how much she hated him. Though surely she knew him well enough by now to know that he never forgot anything. Silence, so that she could avoid even deeper isolation-that was possible. Even Petra could keep her mouth shut if every time she spoke up it cut her off from more and more information and opportunities.

Finally, though, Bean had to entertain the possibility that Graff was right. Petra was human. She feared death like anyone else. And if she had, in fact, witnessed the death of her two guardians in Russia, and if Achilles had committed the killings with his own hands which Bean believed likely-then Petra was facing something she had never faced before. She could speak up to idiotic commanders and teachers in Battle School because the worst that could happen was reprimands. With Achilles, what she had to fear was death.

And the fear of death changed the way a person saw the world, Bean knew that. He had lived his first years of life under the constant pressure of that fear. Moreover, he had spent a considerable time specifically under Achilles' power. Even though he never forgot the danger Achilles posed, even Bean had come to think Achilles wasn't such a bad guy, that in fact he was a good leader, doing brave and bold things for his "family" of street urchins. Bean had admired him and learned from him-right up to the moment when Achilles murdered Poke.

Petra, fearing Achilles, submitting to his power, had to watch him closely just to stay alive. And, watching him, she would come to admire him. It's a common trait of primates to become submissive and even worshipful toward one who has the power to kill them. Even if she fought off those feelings, they would still be there.

But she'll awaken from it, when she's out from under that power. I did. She will. So even if Graff is right, and Petra has become some thing of a disciple to Achilles, she will turn heretic once I get her out. Still, the fact remained-he had to be prepared to bring her out even if she resisted rescue or tried to betray them.

He added dartguns and will-bending drugs to his army's arsenal and training.

Naturally, he would need more hard data than he had if he was to mount an operation to rescue her. He wrote to Peter, asking him to use some of his old Demosthenes contacts in the U.S. to get what intelligence data they had on Hyderabad. Beyond that, Bean really had no resources to tap without giving away his location. Because it was a sure thing that he couldn't ask Suriyawong for information about Hyderabad. Even if Suriyawong was feeling favorably disposed-and he had been sharing more information with Bean lately-there was no way to explain why he could possibly need information about the Indian high command base at Hyderabad.

Only after days of waiting for Peter, while training his men and himself in the use of darts and drugs, did Bean realize another important implication of discovering that Petra might actually be cooperating with Achilles. Because none of their strategy was geared to the kind of campaign Petra might design.

He requested a meeting with both Suriyawong and the Chakri. After all these months of never seeing the Chakri's face, he was surprised that the meeting was granted-and without delay. He sent his request when he got up at five in the morning. At seven, he was in the Chakri's office, with Suriyawong beside him.

Suriyawong only had time to mumble, with annoyance, the words "What is this?" before the Chakri started the meeting.

"What is this?" said the Chakri. He smiled at Suriyawong; he knew he was echoing Suriyawong's question. But Bean also knew that it was a smile of mockery. You couldn't control this Greek boy after all.

"I just found out information that you both need to know," said Bean. Of course, this implied that Suriyawong; might not have recognized the importance of the information, so that Bean had to bring it to Chakri Naresuan directly. "I meant no lack of respect. Only that you must be aware of this immediately."

"What possible information can you have," said Chakri Naresuan, "that we don't already know?"

"Something that I learned from a well-connected friend," said Bean. "All our assumptions were based on the idea of the Indian Army using the obvious strategy-to overwhelm Burmese and Thai

defenses with huge armies. But I just learned that Petra Arkanian, one of Ender Wiggin's jeesh, may be working with the Indian Army. I never thought she would collaborate with Achilles, but the possibility exists. And if she's directing the campaign, it won't be a flood of soldiers at all."

"Interesting," said the Chakri. "What strategy would she use?"

"She would still overwhelm you with numbers, but not with massed armies. Instead there would be probing raids, incursions by smaller forces, each one designed to strike, draw your attention, and then fade. They don't even have to retreat. They just live off the land until they can re-form later. Each one is easily beaten, except that there's nothing to beat. By the time we get there, they're gone. No supply lines. No vulnerabilities, just probe after probe until we can't respond to them all. Then the probes start getting bigger. When we get there, with our thinly stretched forces, the enemy is waiting. One of our groups destroyed, then another."

The Chakri looked at Suriyawong. "What Borommakot says is possible," said Suriyawong. "They can keep up such a strategy forever. We never damage them, because they have an infinite supply of troops, and they risk little on each attack. But every loss we suffer is irreplaceable, and every retreat gives them ground."

"So why wouldn't this Achilles think of such a strategy on his own?" asked the Chakri. "He's a very bright boy, they say."

"It's a cautious strategy," said Bean. "One that is very frugal with the lives of the soldiers. And it's slow."

"And Achilles is never careful with the lives of his soldiers?"

Bean thought back to his days in Achilles' "family" on the streets of Rotterdam. Achilles was, in fact, careful of the lives of the other children. He took great pains to make sure they were not exposed to risk. But that was because his power base absolutely depended on losing none of them. If any of the children had been hurt, the others would have melted away. That would not be the case with the Indian Army. Achilles would spend them like autumn leaves.

Except that Achilles' goal was not to rule India. It was to rule the world. So it did matter that he earn a reputation as a beneficent leader. That he seem to value the lives of his people.

"Sometimes he is, when it suits him," said Bean. "That's why he would follow such a plan if Petra outlined it for him."

"So what would it mean," said the Chakri, "if I told you that the attack on Burma has just been launched, and it is a massive frontal assault by huge Indian forces, just as you originally outlined in your first memo to us?"

Bean was stunned. Already? The apparent nonaggression pact between India and Pakistan was only a few days old. They could not possibly have amassed troops that quickly.

Bean was surprised to see that Suriyawong also had been unaware that war had begun.

"It was an extremely well-planned campaign," said the Chakri. "The Burmese only had a day's warning. The Indian troops moved like smoke. Whether it is your evil friend Achilles or your brilliant friend Petra or the mere simpletons of the Indian high command, they managed it superbly."

"What it means," said Bean, "is that Petra is not being listened to. Or that she is deliberately sabotaging the Indian Army's strategy. I'm relieved to know this, and I apologize for raising a warning that was not needed. May I ask, sir, if Thailand is coming into the war now?"

"Burma has not asked for help," said the Chakri.

"By the time Burma asks Thailand for help," said Bean, "the Indian Army will be at our borders."

"At that point," said the Chakri, "we will not wait for them to ask."

"What about China?" asked Bean.

The Chakri blinked twice before answering. "What about China?"

"Have they warned India? Have they responded in any way?"

"Matters with China are handled by a different branch of government," said the Chakri.

"India may have twice the population of China," said Bean, "but the Chinese Army is better equipped. India would think twice before provoking Chinese intervention."

"Better equipped," said the Chakri. "But is it deployed in a usable way? Their troops are kept along the Russian border. It would take weeks to bring them down here. If India plans a lightning strike, they have nothing to fear from China."

"As long as the I.F. keeps missiles from flying," said Suriyawong. "And with Chamrajnagar as Polemarch, you can be sure no missiles will attack India."

"Oh, that's another new development," said the Chakri. "ChamraJnagar submitted his resignation from the I.F. ten minutes after the attack on Burma was launched. He will return to Earth-to India-to accept his new appointment as leader of a coalition government that will guide the newly enlarged Indian empire. For of course, by the time a ship can bring him back to Earth, the war will be over, one way or another."

"Who is the new Polemarch?" asked Bean.

"That is the dilemma," said the Chakri. "There are those who wonder whom the Hegemon can nominate, considering that no one can quite trust anyone now. Some are wondering why the

Hegemon should name a Polemarch at all. We've done without a Strategos since the League War. Why do we need the I.F. at all?"

"To keep the missiles from flying," said Suriyawong.

"That is the only serious argument in favor of keeping the I.F.," said the Chakri. "But many governments believe that the I.F. should be reduced to the role of policing above the atmosphere. There is no reason for any but a tiny fraction of the I.F.'s strength to be retained. And as for the colonization program, many are saying it is a waste of money, when war is erupting here on Earth. Well, enough of this little school class. There is grown-up work to be done. You will be consulted if we find that you are needed."

The Chakri's dismissive air was surprising. It revealed a high level of hostility to both of these Battle School graduates, not just the foreign one.

It was Suriyawong who challenged the Chakri on this. "Under what circumstances would we be called upon?" he asked. "Either the plans I drew up will work or they won't. If they work, you won't call on me. If they don't, you'll regard that as proof that I didn't know what I was doing, and you still won't call on me."

The Chakri pondered this for a few moments. "Why, I'd never thought of it that way. I believe you're right."

"No, you're wrong," said Suriyawong. "Nothing ever goes as planned during a war. We have to be able to adapt. I and the other Battle School graduates are trained for that. We should be kept informed of every development. Instead, you have cut me off from the intelligence that is flowing in. I should have seen this information the moment I woke up and looked at my desk. Why are you cutting me off?"

For the same reason you cut me off, Bean thought. So that when victory comes, all the credit can flow to the Chakri. "The Battle School children advised in the planning stages, but of course during the actual war, we did not leave it up to the children." And if things went badly, "We faithfully executed the plans drawn up by the Battle School children, but apparently schoolwork did not prepare them for the real world." The Chakri was covering his ass.

Suriyawong seemed to understand this also, for he gave no more argument. He arose. "Permission to leave, sir," he said.

"Granted. To you, too, Borommakot. Oh, and we'll probably be taking back the soldiers Suriyawong gave you to play with. Restoring them to their original units. Please prepare them to leave at once."

Bean also rose to his feet. "So Thailand is entering the war?"

"You will be informed of anything you need to know, when you need to know it."

As soon as they were outside the Chakri's office, Suriyawong sped up his pace. Bean had to run to catch up.

"I don't want to talk to you," said Suriyawong.

"Don't be a big baby about it," said Bean scornfully. "He's only doing to you what you already did to me. Did I run off and pout?"

Suriyawong stopped and whirled on Bean. "You and your stupid meeting!"

"He already cut you off," said Bean. "Already. Before I even asked to meet."

Suriyawong knew that Bean was right. "So I'm stripped of influence."

"And I never had any," said Bean. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Do?" said Suriyawong. "If the Chakri forbids it, no one will obey my orders. Without authority, I'm just a boy, still too young to enlist in the army."

"What we'll do first," said Bean, "is figure out what this all means."

"It means the Chakri is an oomay careerist," said Suriyawong.

"Come, let's walk out of the building."

"They can draw our words out of the open air, too, if they want," said Suriyawong.

"They have to try to do that. Here, anything we say is automatically recorded."

So Suriyawong walked with Bean out of the building that housed the highest of the Thai high command, and together they wandered toward the married officers' housing, to a park with playground equipment for the children of junior officers. When they sat on the swings, Bean realized that he was actually getting a little too big for them.

"Your strike force," said Suriyawong. "Just when it might have been most needed, it'll be dispersed."

"No it won't," said Bean.

"And why not?"

"Because you drew it from the garrison protecting the capital. Those troops won't be sent away. So they'll remain in Bangkok. The important thing is to keep all our materiel together and within easy reach. Do you think you still have authority for that?"

"As long as I call it routine cycling into storage," said Suriyawong, "I suppose so."

"And you'll know where these men are assigned, so when we need to, we can call them back to us."

"If I try that, I'll be cut off from the net," said Suriyawong.

"If we try that," said Bean, "it will be because the net doesn't matter."

"Because the war is lost."

"Think about it," said Bean. "Only a stupid careerist would openly disdain you like this. He wanted to shame and discourage you. Have you given him some offense?"

"I always give offense," said Suriyawong. "That's why everyone called me Surly behind my back in Battle School. The only person I know who is more arrogant than I seem is you."

"Is Naresuan a fool?" asked Bean.

"I had not thought so," said Suriyawong.

"So this is a day for people who are not fools to act like fools."

"Are you saying I am also a fool?"

"I was saying that Achilles is apparently a fool."

"Because he is attacking with massed forces? You told us that was what we should expect. Apparently Petra did not give him the better plan."

"Or he's not using it."

"But he'd have to be a fool not to use it," said Suriyawong.

"So if Petra gave him the better plan, and he declined to use it, then he and the Chakri are both fools today. As when the Chakri pretended that he has no influence over foreign policy."

"About China, you mean?" Suriyawong thought about this for a moment. "You're right, of course he has influence. But perhaps he simply didn't want us to know what the Chinese were doing. Perhaps that was why he was so sure he didn't need us, that he didn't need to enter Burma. Because he knows the Chinese are coming in."

"So," said Bean. "While we sit here, watching the war, we will learn much from the plain events as they unfold. If China intervenes to stop the Indians before Achilles ever gets to Thailand, then we know Chakri Naresuan is a smart careerist, not a stupid one. But if China does not intervene, then we have to wonder why Naresuan, who is not a foolish man, has chosen to act like one."

"What do you suspect him of?" asked Suriyawong.

"As for Achilles," said Bean, "no matter how we construe these events, he has been a fool."

"No, he's only a fool if Petra actually gave him the better plan and he's ignoring it."

"On the contrary," said Bean. "He's a fool no matter what. To enter into this war with even the possibility that China will intervene, that is foolish in the extreme."

"So perhaps he knows that China will not intervene, and then the Chakri would be the only fool," said Suriyawong.

"Let's watch and see."

"I'll watch and grind my teeth," said Suriyawong.

"Watch with me," said Bean. "Let's drop this stupid competition between us. You care about Thailand. I care about figuring out what Achilles is doing and stopping him. At this moment, those two concerns coincide almost perfectly. Let's share everything we know."

"But you know nothing."

"I know nothing that you know," said Bean. "And you know nothing that I know."

"What can you possibly know?" said Suriyawong. "I'm the eemo who cut you off from the intelligence net."

"I knew about the deal between India and Pakistan."

"So did we."

"But you didn't tell me," said Bean. "And yet I knew."

Suriyawong nodded. "Even if the sharing is mostly one way, from me to you, it's long overdue, don't you think?"

"I'm not interested in what's early or late," said Bean. "Only what happens next."

They went to the officers' mess and had lunch, then walked back to Suriyawong's building, dismissed his staff for the rest of the day, and, with the building to themselves, sat in Suriyawong's office and watched the progress of the war on Worldnet. Burmese resistance was brave but futile.

"Poland in 1939," said Bean.

"And here in Thailand," said Suriyawong, "we're being as timid as France and England."

"At least China isn't invading Burma from the north, the way Russia invaded Poland from the east," said Bean.

"Small mercies," said Suriyawong.

But Bean wondered. Why doesn't China step in? Beijing wasn't saying anything to the press. No comment, about a war on their doorstep? What does China have up its sleeve?

"Maybe Pakistan wasn't the only country to sign a nonaggression pact with India," said Bean.

"Why? What would China gain?" asked Suriyawong.

"Vietnam?" said Bean.

"Worthless, compared to the menace of having India poised with a vast army at the underbelly of China."

Soon, to distract themselves from the news-and from their loss of any kind of influence-they stopped paying attention to the vids and reminisced about Battle School. Neither of them brought up the really bad experiences, only the funny things, the ridiculous things, and they laughed their way into the evening, until it was dark outside.

This afternoon with Suriyawong, now that they were friends, reminded Bean of home-in Crete, with his parents, with Nikolai. He tried to keep from thinking about them most of the time, but now, laughing with Suriyawong, he was filled with a bittersweet longing. He had that one year of something like a normal life, and now it was over. Blown to bits like the house they had been vacationing in. Like the government-protected apartment Graff and Sister Carlotta had taken them away from in the nick of time.

Suddenly a thrill of fear ran through Bean. He knew something, though he could not say how. His mind had made some connection and he didn't understand how, but he had no doubt that he was right.

"Is there any way out of this building that can't be seen from the outside?" asked Bean, in a whisper so faint he could hardly hear himself.

Suriyawong, who had been in the middle of a story about Major Anderson's penchant for nose-picking when he thought nobody was watching, looked at him like he was crazy. "What, you want to play hide-and-peek?"

Bean continued to whisper. "A way out."

Suriyawong took the hint and whispered back. "I don't know. I always use the doors. Like most doors, they're visible from both sides."

"A sewer line? A heating duct?"

"This is Bangkok. We don't have heating ducts."

"Any way out."

Suriyawong's whisper changed back to voice. "I'll look at the blueprints. But tomorrow, man, tomorrow. It's getting late and we talked right through dinner."

Bean grabbed his shoulder, forced him to look into his eyes.

"Suriyawong," he whispered, even more softly "I'm not joking. Right now, out of this building unobserved."

Finally Suriyawong got it: Bean was genuinely afraid. His whisper was quiet again. "Why, what's happening?"

"Just tell me how."

Suriyawong closed his eyes. "Flood drainage," he whispered. "Old ditches. They just laid these temporary buildings down on top of the old parade ground. There's a shallow ditch that runs right under the building. You can hardly tell it's there, but there's a gap."

"Where can we get under the building from inside?"

Suriyawong rolled his eyes. "These temporary buildings are made of lint." To prove his point, he pulled away the corner of the large rug in the middle of the room, rolled it back, and then, quite easily, pried up a floor section.

Underneath it was sod that had died from lack of sunlight. There were no gaps between floor and sod.

"Where's the ditch?" asked Bean.

Suriyawong thought again. "I think it crosses the hall. But the carpet is tacked down there."

Bean turned up the volume of the vid and went out the door of Suriyawong's office and through the anteroom to the hall. He pried up a corner of the carpet and ripped. Carpet fluff flew, and Bean kept pulling until Suriyawong stopped him. "I think about here," he said.

They pulled up another floor section. This time there was a depression in the yellowed sod.

"Can you get through that?" asked Bean.

"Hey, you're the one with the big head," said Suriyawong.

Bean threw himself down. The ground was damp-this was Bangkok-and he was clammy and filthy in moments as he wriggled along. Every floor joist was a challenge, and a couple of times he had to dig with his army-issue knife to make way for his head. But he made good progress anyway, and wriggled out into the darkness only a few minutes later. He stayed down, though, and saw that Suriyawong, despite not knowing what was going on, did not raise his head when he emerged from under the building, but continued to creep along just as Bean was doing. They kept going until they reached the next point where the old eroded ditch went under another temporary building.

"Please tell me we're not going under another building."

Bean looked at the pattern of lights from the moon, from nearby porches and area lights. He had to count on his enemies being at least a little careless. If they were using infrared, this escape was meaningless. But if they were just eyeballing the place, watching the doors, he and Surly were already where slow, easy movement wouldn't be seen.

Bean started to roll himself up the incline.

Suriyawong grabbed him by the boot. Bean looked at him. Suriyawong pantomimed rubbing his cheeks, his forehead, his ears.

Bean had forgotten. His Greek skin was lighter than Suriyawong's. He would catch more light.

He rubbed his face, his ears, his hands with damp soil from under the grass. Suriyawong nodded.

They rolled-at a deliberate pace-up out of the ditch and wriggled slowly along the base of the building until they were around the corner. Here there were bushes to offer some shelter. They stood in the shadows for a moment, then walked, casually, away from the building as if they had just emerged from the door. Bean hoped not to be visible to anyone watching Suriyawong's building, but even if they could be seen, they shouldn't attract any attention, as long as no one noticed that they seemed to be just a little undersized.

Not until they were a quarter mile away did Suriyawong finally speak. "Do you mind telling me the name of this game?"

"Staying alive," said Bean.

"I never knew paranoid schizophrenia could strike so fast."

"They've tried twice," said Bean. "And they had no qualms about killing my family along with me."

"But we were just talking," said Suriyawong. "What did you see?"

"Nothing."

"Or hear?"

"Nothing," said Bean. "I had a feeling."

"Please don't tell me that you're a psychic."

"No, I'm not. But something about the events of the past few hours must have made some unconscious connection. I listen to my fears. I act on them."

"And this works?"

"I'm still alive," said Bean. "I need a public computer. Can we get off the base?"

"It depends on how all-pervasive this plot against you is," said Suriyawong. "You need a bath, by the way."

"What about some place with ordinary public computer access?"

"Sure, there are visitor facilities near the tram station entrance. But would it be ironic if your assassins were using it?"

"My assassins aren't visitors," said Bean.

This bothered Suriyawong. "You don't even know if anybody's really out to kill you, but you're sure it's somebody in the Thai Army?"

"It's Achilles," said Bean. "And Achilles isn't in Russia. India doesn't have any intelligence service that could carry out an operation like this inside the high command. So it has to be somebody that Achilles has corrupted."

"Nobody here is in the pay of India," said Suriyawong.

"Probably not," said Bean. "But India isn't the only place Achilles has friends by now. He was in Russia for a while. He has to have made other connections."

"It's so hard to take this seriously, Bean," said Suriyawong. "If you suddenly start laughing and say Gotcha that time, I will kill you."

"I might be wrong," said Bean, "but I'm not joking."

They got to the visitor facility and found no one using any of the computers. Bean logged on using one of his many false identities and wrote a message to Graff and Sister Carlotta.

You know who this is. I believe an attempt is about to be made on my life. Would you send immediate messages to contacts within the Thai government, warning them that such an attempt is coming and tell them that it involves conspirators inside the Chakri's inner circle. No one else could have the access. And I believe the Chakri had prior knowledge. Any Indians supposedly involved are fall guys.

"You can't write that," said Suriyawong. "You have no evidence to accuse Naresuan. I'm annoyed with him, but he's a loyal Thai."

"He's a loyal Thai," said Bean, "but you can be loyal and still want me dead."

"But not me," said Suriyawong.

"If you want it to look like the evil action of outsiders," said Bean, "then a brave Thai has to die along with me. What if they make our deaths look as if an Indian strike force did it? That would be provocation for a declaration of war, wouldn't it?"

"The Chakri doesn't need a provocation."

"He does if he wants the Burmese to believe that Thailand isn't just grabbing for a piece of Burma." Bean went back to his note.

Please tell them that Suriyawong and I are alive. We will come out of hiding when we see Sister Carlotta with at least one high government official who Suriyawong would recognize on sight. Please act immediately. If I am wrong, you will be embarrassed. If I am right, you will have saved my life.

"I'm sick to my stomach thinking of how humiliated I'm going to be. Who are these people you're writing to?"

"People I trust. Like you."

Then, before sending the message, he added Peter's "Locke" address to the destination box.

"You know Ender Wiggin's brother?" asked Suriyawong.

"We've met."

Bean logged off.

"What now?" asked Suriyawong.

"We hide somewhere, I guess," said Bean.

Then they heard an explosion. Windows rattled. The floor trembled. The power flickered. The computers began to reboot.

"Got that done just in time," said Bean.

"Was that it?" asked Suriyawong.

"E," said Bean. "I think we're dead."

"Where do we hide?"

"If they did the deed, it's because they think we were still in there. So they won't be watching for us now. We can go to my barracks. My men will hide me."

"You're willing to bet my life on that?" asked Suriyawong.

"Yes," said Bean. "My track record of keeping you alive is pretty good so far."

As they walked out of the building, they saw military vehicles rushing toward where gray smoke was billowing up into the moonlit night. Others were heading for the entrances to the base. No one would be getting in or out.

By the time they reached the barracks where Bean's strike force was quartered, they could hear bursts of gunfire. "Now they're killing all the fake Indian spies this will be blamed on," said Bean. "The Chakri will regretfully inform the government that they all resisted capture and none were taken alive."

"Again you accuse him," said Suriyawong. "Why? How did you know this would happen?"

"I think I knew because there were too many smart people acting stupidly," said Bean. "Achilles and the Chakri. And he treated us angrily. Why? Because killing us bothered him. So he had to convince himself that we were disloyal children who had been corrupted by the I.F. We were a danger to Thailand. Once he hated us and feared us, killing us was justified."

"That's a long stretch from there to knowing they were about to kill us."

"They were probably set to do it at my quarters. But I stayed with you. It was quite possible they were planning for another opportunity the Chakri would summon us to meet him somewhere, and we'd be killed instead. But when we stayed for hours and hours in your quarters, they realized this was the perfect opportunity. They had to check with the Chakri and get his consent to do it ahead of schedule. They probably had to rush to get the Indian stooges into place-they might even be genuine captured spies. Or they might be drugged Thai criminals who will have incriminating documents found on them."

"I don't care who they are," said Suriyawong. "I still don't understand how you knew."

"Neither do I," said Bean. "Most of the time, I analyze things very quickly and understand exactly why I know what I know. But sometimes my unconscious mind runs ahead of my conscious mind. It happened that way in the last battle, with Ender. We were doomed to defeat. I couldn't see a solution. And yet I said something, an ironic statement, a bitter joke-and it contained within it exactly the solution Ender needed. From then on, I've been trying to heed those unconscious processes that give me answers. I've thought back over my life and seen other times when I said things that were not really justified by my conscious analysis. Like the time when we stood over

Achilles as he lay on the ground, and I told Poke to kill him. She wouldn't do it, and I couldn't persuade her, because I truly didn't understand why. Yet I understood what he was. I knew he had to die, or he would kill her."

"You know what I think?" said Suriyawong. "I think you heard something outside. Or noticed something subliminally on the way in. Somebody watching. And that's what triggered you."

Bean could only shrug. "You may well be right. As I said, I don't know."

It was after hours, but Bean could still palm his way through the locks to get in without setting off alarms. They hadn't bothered to deauthorize him. His entry into the building would show up on a computer somewhere, but it was a drone program and by the time any human looked at it, Bean's friends should have things well in motion.

Bean was glad to see that even though his men were in their home barracks on the grounds of the Thai high command base, they had not slacked in their discipline. No sooner were they inside the door than both Bean and Suriyawong were seized and pressed against the wall while they were checked for weapons.

"Good work," said Bean.

"Sir!" said the surprised soldier.

"And Suriyawong," said Bean.

"Sir!" said both the sentries.

A few others had been wakened by the scuffle.

"No lights," Bean said quickly. "And no loud talking. Weapons loaded. Prepare to move out on a moment's notice."

"Move out?" said Suriyawong.

"If they realize we're in here and decide to finish the job," said Bean, "this place is indefensible."

While some soldiers quietly woke the sleepers and all were busy dressing and loading their weapons, Bean had one of the sentries lead them to a computer. "You sign on," he said to the soldier.

As soon as he had logged on, Bean took his place and wrote, using the soldier's identity, to Graff, Carlotta, and Peter.

Both packages safe and awaiting pickup. Please come right away before packages are returned to sender.

Bean sent out one toon, divided into four pairs, to reconnoiter. When each pair returned another pair from another toon replaced them. Bean wanted to have enough warning to get these men out of the barracks before any kind of assault could be mounted.

In the meanwhile, they turned on a vid and watched the news. Sure enough, here came the first report. Indian agents had apparently penetrated the Thai command base and blown up a temporary building, killing Suriyawong, Thailand's most distinguished Battle School graduate, who had headed military doctrine and strategic planning for the past year and a half, since returning from space. It was a great national tragedy. There was no confirmation yet, but preliminary reports indicated that some of the Indian agents had been killed by the heroic soldiers defending Suriyawong. A visiting Battle School graduate had also been killed.

Some of Bean's soldiers chuckled, but, soon enough they were all grim-faced. The fact that the reporters had been told Bean and Suriyawong were dead meant that whoever made the report believed they were both inside the offices at an hour when the only way anyone could know that was if the bodies had been found, or the building had been under observation. Since the bodies had obviously not been found, whoever was writing the official reports from the Chakri's office must have been part of the plot.

"I can understand someone wanting to kill Borommakot," said Suriyawong. "But why would anyone want to kill me?"

The soldiers laughed. Bean smiled.

Patrols returned and went out, again, again. No movement toward the barracks. The news carried the initial response from various commentators. India apparently wanted to cripple the Thai military by eliminating the nation's finest military mind. This was intolerable. The government would have no choice now but to declare war and join Burma in the struggle against Indian aggression.

Then new information came. The Prime Minister had declared that he would take personal control of this disaster. Someone in the military had obviously slipped badly to allow a foreign penetration of the high command's own base. Therefore, to protect the Chakri's reputation and make sure there was no hint of a cover-up of military errors, Bangkok city police would be supervising the investigation, and Bangkok city fire officials would investigate the wreckage of the exploded building.

"Good job," said Suriyawong. "The Prime Minister's cover story is strong and the Chakri won't resist letting police onto the base."

"If the fire investigators arrive soon enough," said Bean, "they might even prevent the Chakri's men from entering the building as soon as it cools enough from the fire. So they won't even know we weren't there."

Sirens moving through the base announced the arrival of the police and fire department. Bean kept waiting for the sound of gunfire. But it never came.

Instead, two of the patrols came rushing back.

"Someone is coming, but not soldiers. Bangkok police, sixteen of them, with a civilian."

"Just one?" asked Bean. "Is one of them a woman?"

"Not a woman, and just one. I believe, sir, that it is the Prime Minister himself"

Bean sent out more patrols to see if any military forces were within range.

"How did they know we were here?" asked Suriyawong.

"Once they took control of the Chakri's office," said Bean, "they could use the military personnel files to find out that the soldier who sent that last email was in this barracks when he sent it."

"So it's safe to come out?"

"Not yet," said Bean.

A patrol returned. "The Prime Minister wishes to enter this barracks alone, sir."

"Please," said Bean. "Invite him in."

"So you're sure he's not wired up with explosives to kill us all?" asked Suriyawong. "I mean, your paranoia has kept us alive so far."

As if in answer, the vid showed Chakri driving away from the main entrance to the base, under police escort. The reporter was explaining that Naresuan had resigned as Chakri, but the Prime Minister insisted that he merely take a leave of absence. In the meantime, the Minister of Defense was taking direct personal control of the Chakri's office, and generals from the field were being brought in to staff other positions of trust. Until then, the police had control of the command system. "Until we know how these Indian agents penetrated our most sensitive base," the Minister of Defense said, "we cannot be sure of our security."

The Prime Minister entered the barracks.

"Suriyawong," he said. He bowed deeply.

"Mr. Prime Minister," said Suriyawong, bowing noticeably less deeply. Ah, the vanity of a Battle School graduate, thought Bean.

"A certain nun is flying here as quickly as she can," said the Prime Minister, "but we hoped that you might trust me enough to come out without waiting for her arrival. She was on the opposite side of the world, you see."

Bean strode forward and spoke in his not-bad Thai. "Sir," he said, "I believe Suriyawong and I are safer here with these loyal troops than we would be anywhere else in Bangkok."

The Prime Minister looked at the soldiers standing, fully armed, at attention. "So someone has a private army right in the middle of this base," he said.

"I did not make my meaning clear," said Bean. "These soldiers are absolutely loyal to you. They are yours to command, because you are Thailand at this moment, sir."

The Prime Minister bowed, very slightly, and turned to the soldiers. "Then I order you to arrest this foreigner."

Immediately Bean's arms were gripped by the soldiers nearest to him, as another soldier patted him down for weapons.

Suriyawong's eyes widened, but he gave no other sign of surprise. The Prime Minister smiled. "You may release him now," he said. "The Chakri warned me, before he took his voluntary leave of absence, that these soldiers had been corrupted and were no longer loyal to Thailand. I see now that he was misinformed. And since that is the case, I believe you are right. You are safer here, under their protection, until we explore the limits of the conspiracy. In fact, I would appreciate it if I could deputize a hundred of your men to serve with my police force as it takes control of this base."

"I urge you to take all but eight of them," said Bean.

"Which eight?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Any of these toons of eight, sir, could stand for a day against the Indian Army."

This was, of course, absurd, but it had a fine ring to it, and the men loved hearing him say it.

"Then, Suriyawong," said the Prime Minister, "I would appreciate your taking command of all but eight of these men and leading them in taking control of this base in my name. I will assign one policeman to each group, so that they can clearly be identified as acting under my authority. And one group of eight will, of course, remain with you for your protection at all times."

"Yes sir," said Suriyawong.

"I remember saying in my last campaign," said the Prime Minister, "that the children of Thailand held the keys to our national survival. I had no idea at the time how literally and how quickly that would be fulfilled."

"When Sister Carlotta arrives," said Bean, "you can tell her that she is no longer needed, but I would be glad to see her if she has the time."

"I'll tell her that," said the Prime Minister. "Now let's get to work. We have a long night ahead of us."

Everyone was quite solemn as Suriyawong called out the toon leaders. Bean was impressed that he knew who they were by name and face. Suriyawong might not have sought out Bean's company very much, but he had done an excellent job of keeping track of what Bean was doing. Only when everyone had moved out on their assign merits each toon with its own cop like a battle flag, did Suriyawong and the Prime Minister allow themselves to smile. "Good work," said the Prime Minister.

"Thank you for believing our message," said Bean.

"I wasn't sure I could believe Locke," said the Prime Minister, "and the Hegemon's Minister of Colonization is, after all, just a politician now. But when the Pope telephoned me personally, I had no choice but to believe. Now I must go out and tell the people the absolute truth about what happened here."

"That Indian agents did indeed attempt to kill me and an unnamed foreign visitor," asked Suriyawong, "but we survived because of quick action by heroic soldiers of the Thai Army? Or did the unnamed foreign visitor die?"

"I fear that he died," Bean suggested. "Blown to bits in the explosion."

"In any event," said Suriyawong, "you will assure the people, the enemies of Thailand have learned tonight that the Thai military may be challenged, but we cannot be defeated."

"I'm glad you were trained for the military, Suriyawong," said the Prime Minister. "I would not want to face you as an opponent in a political campaign."

"It is unthinkable that we would be opponents," said Suriyawong, 66 since we could not possibly disagree on any subject."

Everyone got the irony, but no one laughed. Suriyawong left with the Prime Minister and eight soldiers. Bean remained in the barracks with the last toon, and together they watched as the lies unfolded on the vid.

And as the news droned on, Bean thought of Achilles. Somehow he had found out Bean was alive-but that would be the Chakri, of course. But if the Chakri had turned to Achilles' side, why was he spinning the story of Suriyawong's death as a pretext for war with India? It made no sense. Having Thailand in the war from the beginning could only work against India. Add that to India's use of the clunky, obvious, life-wasting strategy of mass attack, and it began to look as though Achilles were some kind of idiot.

He was not an idiot. Therefore he was playing some sort of deeper game, and despite the much-vaunted cleverness of his unconscious mind, Bean did not yet know what it was. And Achilles would know soon enough, if he did not know already, that Bean was not dead. He's in a killing mood, thought Bean. Petra, thought Bean. Help me find a way to save you.

HYDERABAD

Posted on the International Politics Forum by EnsiRaknor@TurkMilNet.gov

Topic: Where is Locke when we need him?

Am I the only one who wishes we had Locke's take on the recent developments in India? With India across the Burmese border and Pakistani troops massing in Baluchistan, threatening Iran and the gulf, we need a new way of looking at south Asia. The old models clearly don't work.

What I want to know is, did IntPolFor drop Locke's column when Peter Wiggin came forward as the author, or did Wiggin resign? Because if it was IPF's decision, it was, to put it bluntly, a stupid one. We never knew who Locke was—we listened to him because he made sense, and time after time he was the only one who made sense out of problematical situations, or at least was the first to see clearly what was going on. What does it matter if he's a teenager, an embryo, or a talking pig?

For that matter, as the Hegemon's term is near expiration, I am more and more uneasy with the current Hegemon-designate. Whoever suggested Locke almost a year ago had the right idea. Only now let's put him in office under his own name. What Ender Wiggin did in the Formic War, Peter Wiggin might be able to do in the conflagration that looms—put an end to it.

Reply 14, by Talleyrandophile@polnet.gov

I don't mean to be suspicious, but how do we know you're not Peter Wiggin, trying to put his name into play again?

Reply 14.1, by EnsiRaknor@TurkMilNet.gov

I don't mean to get personal, but Turkish Military Network IDs aren't given out to American teenagers doing consultation work in Haiti. I realize that international politics can make paranoids seem sane, but if Peter Wiggin could write under this ID, he must already run the world. But perhaps who I am does make a difference. I'm in my twenties now, but I'm a Battle School grad. So maybe that's why the idea of putting a kid in charge of things doesn't sound so crazy to me.

Virlomi knew who Petra was the moment she first showed up in Hyderabad—they had met before. Even though she was considerably older, so her time in Battle School overlapped Petra's by only a year, in those days Virlomi took notice of every girl in the place. An easy task, since Petra's arrival brought the total number of girls to ninefive of whom graduated at the same time as Virlomi. It seemed as though having girls in the school were regarded as an experiment that had failed.

Back in Battle School, Petra had been a tough launchy with a smart mouth, who proudly refused all offers of advice. She seemed determined to make it as a girl among boys, meeting the same standards, taking their guff without help. Virlomi understood. She had had the same attitude herself, at first. She just hoped that Petra would not have to have such painful experiences as those Virlomi had had before finally realizing that the hostility of boys was, in most cases, insuperable, and a girl needed all the friends she could get.

Petra was memorable enough that of course Virlomi recognized her name when the stories of Ender's jeesh came out after the war. The one girl among them, the Armenian Joan of Arc. Virlomi read the articles and smiled. So Petra had been as tough as she thought she'd be. Good for her.

Then Ender's jeesh was kidnapped or killed, and when the kidnapped ones were returned from Russia, Virlomi was heartsick to see that the only one whose fate remained unknown was Petra Arkanian.

Only she didn't have long to grieve. For suddenly the team of Indian Battle School graduates had a new commander, whom they immediately recognized as the same Achilles that Locke had accused of being a psychopathic killer. And soon they found that he was frequently shadowed by a silent, tired-looking girl whose name was never spoken.

But Virlomi knew her. Petra Arkanian.

Whatever Achilles' motive in keeping her name to himself, Virlomi didn't like it and so she made sure that everyone on the strategy team knew that this was the missing member of Ender's jeesh. They said nothing about Petra to Achilles, of course-merely responded to his instructions and reported to him as required. And soon enough Petra's silent presence was treated as if it were ordinary. The others hadn't known her.

But Virlomi knew that if Petra was silent, it meant something quite dreadful. It meant Achilles had some hold over her. A hostagesome kidnapped family member? Threats? Or something else? Had Achilles somehow overmastered Petra's will, which had once seemed so indomitable?

Virlomi took great pains to make sure that Achilles did not notice her paying special attention to Petra. But she watched the younger girl, learning all she could. Petra used her desk as the others did, and took part in reading intelligence reports and everything else that was sent to all of them. But something was wrong, and it took a while for Virlomi to realize what it was-Petra never typed anything at all while she was logged on to the system. There were a lot of netsites that required passwords or at least registration to sign on. But after typing her password to simply log on in the morning, Petra never typed again.

She's been blocked, Virlomi realized. That's why she never emails any of us. She's a prisoner here. She can't pass messages outside. And she doesn't talk to any of us because she's been forbidden to.

When she wasn't logged on, though, she must have been working furiously, because now and then Achilles would send a message to all of them, detailing new directions their planning should go. The language in these messages was not Achilles'-it was easy to spot the shift in style. He was getting these strategic insights-and they were good ones-from Petra, who was one of the nine who were chosen to save humanity from the Formics. One of the finest minds on Earth. And she was enslaved by this psychopathic Belgian.

So, while the others admired the brilliant strategies they were developing for aggressive war against Burma and Thailand, as Achilles' memos whipped up their enthusiasm for "India finally rising to take her rightful place among the nations," Virlomi grew more and more skeptical. Achilles cared

nothing for India, no matter how good his rhetoric sounded. And when she found herself tempted to believe in him, she had only to look at Petra to remember what he was.

Because the others all seemed to buy into Achilles' version of India's future, Virlomi kept her opinions to herself. And she watched and waited for Petra to look at her, so she could give her a wink or a smile.

The day came. Petra looked. Virlomi smiled.

Petra looked away as casually as if Virlomi had been a chair and not a person trying to make contact.

Virlomi was not discouraged. She kept trying for eye contact until finally one day Petra passed near her on the way to a water fountain and slipped and caught herself on Virlomi's chair. In the midst of the noise of Petra's scuffling feet, Virlomi clearly heard her words: "Stop it. He's watching."

And that was it. Confirmation of what Virlomi had suspected about Achilles, proof that Petra had noticed her, and a warning that her help was not needed.

Well, that was nothing new. Petra never needed help, did she?

Then came the day, only a month ago, when Achilles sent a memo around ordering that they needed to update the old plans—the original strategy of mass assault, throwing huge armies with their huge supply lines against the Burmese. They were all stunned. Achilles gave no explanation, but he seemed unusually taciturn, and they all got the message. The brilliant strategy had been set aside by the adults. Some of the finest military minds in the world had come up with the strategy, and the adults were going to ignore them.

Everyone was outraged, but they soon settled back into the routine of work, trying to get the old plans into shape for the coming war. Troops had moved, supplies had been replenished in one area or fallen short in another. But they worked out the logistics. And when they received Achilles'—or, as Virlomi assumed, Petra's—plan for moving the bulk of the army from the Pakistani border to face the Burmese, they admired the brilliance of it, fitting the needs of the army into the existing rail and air traffic so that from satellites, no unusual movements would be visible until suddenly the armies were on the border, forming up. At most the enemy would have two days' notice; if they were careless, only a single day before it became obvious.

Achilles left on one of his frequent trips, only this time Petra disappeared too. Virlomi feared for her. Had she served her purpose, and now that he was done with her, would he kill her?

But no. She came back the same night, when Achilles did.

And the next morning, word came to begin the movement of troops. Following Petra's deft plan to get them to the Burmese border. And then, ignoring Petra's equally deft plan, they would launch their clumsy mass attack.

It makes no sense, thought Virlomi.

Then she got the email from the Hegemony Minister of Colonization--Colonel Graff, that old sabeek.

I'm sure you're aware that one of our Battle School graduates, Petra Arkanian, was not returned with the others who took part with Ender Wiggin in the final battle. I am very interested in locating her, and believe she may have been transported against her will to a place within the borders of India. If you know anything about her whereabouts and present condition, could you let someone know? I'm sure you'd want someone to do the same for you.

Almost immediately there came an email from Achilles.

I'm sure you understand that because this is wartime, any attempt to convey information to someone outside the Indian military will be regarded as espionage and treason, and you will be killed forthwith.

So Achilles was definitely keeping Petra incommunicado, and cared very much that she remain hidden to outsiders.

Virlomi did not even have to think about what she would do. This had nothing to do with Indian military security. So, while she took his death threat seriously, she did not believe there was anything morally wrong with attempting to circumvent it.

She could not write directly to Colonel Graff. Nor could she send any kind of message containing any reference, however oblique, to Petra. Any email going out from Hyderabad was going to be scrutinized. And, now that Virlomi thought about it, she and the other Battle School graduates ensconced here in the Planning and Doctrine Division were only slightly more free than Petra. She could not leave the grounds. She could not have contact with anyone who was not military with a high-level security clearance.

Spies have radio equipment or dead drops, thought Virlomi. But how do you go about becoming a spy when you have no way to reach outside but writing letters, yet there's no one you can write a letter to and no way to say what you need to say without getting caught?

She might have thought of a solution on her own. But Petra simplified the process for her by coming up behind her at the drinking fountain. As Virlomi straightened up from drinking and Petra slipped in to take her place, Petra said, "I am Briseis."

And that was all.

The reference was obvious--everyone in Battle School knew the Iliad. And with Achilles being their overseer at the moment, the Briseis references was obvious. And yet it was not. Briseis had been held by someone else, and Achilles--the original one--had been furious because he felt slighted that he didn't have her. So what could she mean by saying she was Briseis?

It had to do with the letter from Graff and Achilles' warning. So it must be a key, a way to get word out about Petra. And to get word out required the net. So Briseis must mean something to someone out on the net. Perhaps there was some kind of coded electronic dead drop, keyed on the name Briseis. Perhaps Petra had already found someone to contact, but could not do it because she was cut off from the nets.

Virlomi didn't bother doing a general search. If someone out there was looking for Petra, the message would have to be at a site that Petra would be able to find without deviating from legitimate military research. Which meant that Virlomi probably already knew the site where the message was waiting.

The problem she was officially working on at the moment was to determine the most efficient way to minimize risk to supply helicopters while not consuming too much fuel. The problem was so technical that there was no way she could explain doing historical or theoretical research.

But Sayagi, a Battle School graduate five years her senior, was working on problems of pacifying and winning the allegiance of local populations in occupied countries. So Virlomi went to him. "I've gone greeyaz on my algorithms."

"You want my help?" he asked.

"No, no, I just need to set it aside for a couple of hours so I can come back to it fresh. Anything I can help you look for?"

Of course Sayagi had received the same messages as Virlomi, and he was sharp enough not to take Virlomi's offer at face value.

"I don't know, what kind of thing could you do?"

"Any historical research? Or theoretical? On the nets?" She was tipping him to what she needed. And he understood.

"Toguro. I hate that stuff. I need data on failed approaches to pacification and conciliation. Besides killing or deporting everybody and moving in a new population."

"What do you already have?"

"You're wide open, I've been avoiding it."

"Thanks. You want a report or just links?"

"Paste-ups are enough. No links, though. That's too much like doing the work myself."

A perfectly innocent exchange. Virlomi had her cover now.

She went back to her desk and began browsing the historical and theoretical sites. She never actually ran a search on the name "Briseis"-that would be too obvious, the monitoring software would pick that right up and Achilles, if he saw it, would make the connection. Instead, Virlomi browsed through the sites, looking at subject headings.

Briseis showed up on the second site she tried.

It was a posting from someone calling himself Hector Victorious. Hector was not exactly an auspicious name-he was a hero, and the only person who was any kind of match for Achilles, but in the end Hector was killed and Achilles dragged his corpse around the walls of Troy.

Still, the message was clear, if you knew to think of Briseis as a codename for Petra.

Virlomi worked her way through several other postings, pretending to read them while actually composing her reply to Hector Victorious. When she was ready, she went back and typed it in, knowing as she did it that it might well be the cause of her own immediate execution.

I vote for her remaining a resistant slave. Even if she was forced into silence, she would find a way to hold on to her soul. 'As for slipping a message to someone inside Troy, how do you know she didn't? And what good would it have done? It wasn't that long afterward that everyone in Troy was dead. Or didn't you ever hear of the Trojan horse? I know-Briseis should have warned the Trojans to beware of Greeks bearing gifts. Or found a friendly native to do it for her.

She signed it with her own name and email address. After all, this was supposed to be a perfectly innocent posting. Indeed, she worried that it might be too innocent. What if the person who was looking for Petra didn't realize that her references to Briseis resisting and being forced into silence were actually eyewitness reports? Or that the "friendly native" reference was to Virlomi herself?

But her address inside the Indian military network should alert whoever this was to pay special attention.

Now, of course, with the message posted, Virlomi had to continue going through the motions of doing the useless research that Sayagi had "asked" her to do. It would be a couple of tedious hours-wasted time, if no one got the message.

Petra tried not to be obvious about watching what Virlomi was doing. After all, if Virlomi was as smart as she needed to be in order to bring this off, she wouldn't do anything that was worth watching. But Petra saw when Virlomi went over to Sayagi and talked for a while. And Petra noticed that Virlomi seemed to be browsing when she got back to her desk, mousing through online pages instead of writing or calculating. Was she going to spot those HectorVictorious postings?

Either she would or she wouldn't. Petra couldn't allow herself to think about it any more. Because in a way it would be better for everyone if Virlomi simply didn't get it. Who knew how subtle Achilles was? For all Petra knew, those postings might be traps designed to catch her getting someone else to help her. That could be fatal all the way around.

But Achilles couldn't be everywhere. He was bright, he was suspicious, he played a deep game. But he was only one person and he couldn't think of everything. Besides, how important was Petra to him, really? He hadn't even used her campaign strategy. Surely he kept her around as a vanity, nothing more.

The reports coming back from the front were just what one might expect-Burmese resistance was only token, since they were massing their main forces in places where the terrain favored them. Canyons. River crossings.

All futile, of course. No matter where the Burmese made their stand, the Indian Army would simply flow around them. There weren't enough Burmese soldiers to make serious efforts at more than a handful of places, while there were so many Indians that they could press forward at every point, leaving only enough men at the Burmese strong points to keep them pinned down while the bulk of the Indian Army completed the takeover of Burma and moved on toward the mountain passes into Thailand.

That's where the challenge would begin, of course. For Indian supply lines would stretch all the way across Burma by then, and the Thai Air Force was formidable, especially since they had been observed testing a new temporary airfield system that could be built in many cases during the time a bomber was airborne. Not really worth it, bombing airfields when they could be replaced in two or three hours.

So even though the intelligence reports from inside Thailand were very good--detailed, accurate, and recent-on the most important points they didn't matter. There were few meaningful targets, given the strategy the Thai were using.

Petra knew Suriyawong, the Battle School grad who was running strategy and doctrine in Bangkok. He was good. But to Petra it looked a little suspicious that the new Thai strategy began, abruptly, only a few weeks after Petra and Achilles arrived in India from Russia. Suriyawong had already been in place in Bangkok for a year. Why the sudden change? It might be that someone had tipped them off about Achilles' presence in Hyderabad and what that might mean. Or it might be that someone else had joined Suriyawong and influenced his thinking.

Bean.

Petra refused to believe that he was dead. Those messages had to be from him. And even though Suriyawong was perfectly capable of thinking of the new Thai strategy himself, it was such a comprehensive set of changes, without any sign of gradual development, that it cried out for the obvious explanation-it came from a fresh set of eyes. Who else but Bean?

The trouble was, if it was Bean, Achilles' intelligence sources inside Thailand were so good that it was quite possible Bean would be spotted. And if Achilles' earlier attempt to kill Bean had failed, there was no chance that Achilles would refrain from trying again.

She couldn't think about that. If he had saved himself once, he could do it again. After all, maybe someone had excellent intelligence sources inside India, too.

And it might not be Bean leaving those Briseis messages. It might be Dink Meeker, for instance. Only that really wasn't Dink's style. Bean had always been something of a sneak. Dink was confrontational. He would go on the nets proclaiming that he knew Petra was in Hyderabad and demanding that she be released at once. Bean was the one who had figured out that the Battle School kept track of where students were by monitoring transmitters in their clothing. Take off all your clothes and go around buck naked, and the Battle School administrators wouldn't have a clue where you were. Not only had Bean thought of it, he had done it, climbing around in airshafts in the middle of the night. When he told her about it, as they waited around on Eros for the League War to settle down so they could go home, Petra hadn't really believed him at first. Not until he looked her coldly in the eye and said, "I don't joke, and if I did, this isn't particularly funny."

"I didn't think you were joking," said Petra. "I thought you were bragging."

"I was," said Bean. "But I wouldn't waste my time bragging about things I hadn't actually done."

That was Bean-admitting his faults right along with his virtues. No false modesty, and no vanity, either. If he bothered to talk to you at all, he never shaped his words to make himself look better or worse than he was.

She hadn't really known him in Battle School. How could she? She was older, and even though she noticed him and spoke to him a few times-she always made a point of speaking to new kids who were getting the pariah treatment, since she knew they needed friends, even if it was only a girl-she simply hadn't had much reason to talk to him.

And then there was the disastrous time when Petra had been suckered into trying to give Ender a warning-which turned out to be bogus, and in fact Ender's enemies were using Petra's attempt to warn Ender as the opportunity to jump him and beat him up. Bean was the one who saw through it and broke it up. And, quite naturally, he leapt to the conclusion that Petra was part of the conspiracy against Ender. He had continued to suspect her for quite a while. Petra wasn't really sure when he finally believed in her innocence. But it had been a barrier between them for a long time on Eros. So it wasn't until after the war ended that they even had a chance to get to know each other.

That was when Petra realized what Bean really was. It was hard to see past his small size and think of him as anything other than a preschooler or launchy or something. Even though everyone knew that he was the one that would have been chosen to take Ender's place, if Ender had broken under the strain of battle. A lot of them resented the fact. But Petra didn't. She knew Bean was the best of Ender's jeesh. It didn't bother her.

What was Bean, really? A dwarf. That's what she had to realize. With adult dwarfs, you could see in their faces that they were older than their size would indicate. But because Bean was still a child, and had none of the short-limbed deformations of dwarfism, he looked like the age his size implied. If you talked to him like a child, though, he tuned you out. Petra never had done that, so except when he thought she was a traitor to Ender, Bean always treated her with respect.

The funny thing was, it was all based on a misunderstanding. Bean thought Petra talked to him like a regular human being because she was so mature and wise that she didn't treat him like a little kid. But the truth was, she did treat him exactly the way she treated little kids. It's just that she always treated little kids like adults. So she got credit for being understanding, when in fact she was just lucky.

By the time the war was over, though, it didn't matter. They knew they were going home—all of them, it turned out, but Ender—and once they got back to Earth, they expected they wouldn't see each other again. So there was a kind of freedom, caution tossed to the wind. You could say what you wanted. You didn't have to take offense at anything because it wouldn't matter in a few months. It was the first time they could actually have fun.

And the person Petra enjoyed the most was Bean.

Dink, who had been close to Petra for a while in Battle School, was a little miffed by the way Petra was always with Bean. He even accused her—obliquely, because he didn't want to get frozen out completely—of having something romantic going on with Bean. Well, of course he thought that way—puberty had already struck Dink Meeker, and like all boys that age, he thought everybody's mental processes were infused with testosterone.

It was something else, though, between Petra and Bean. Not brother and sister, either. Not mother-son or any other weird psychofake analogy she could think of. She just... liked him. She had spent so long having to prove to prickly, envious, and frightened boys that she was, in fact, smarter and better at everything than they were, that it took her quite by surprise to be with someone so arrogant, so absolutely sure of his own brilliance, that he didn't feel at all threatened by her. If she knew something that he didn't know, he listened, he watched, he learned. The only other person she'd known who was like that with her was Ender.

Ender. She missed him terribly sometimes. She had tutored him—and taken a lot of heat from Bonzo Madrid, their commander at the time, for doing it. And as it became clear what Ender was, and she joined gladly with those who followed him, obeyed him, gave themselves to him, she nevertheless had a secret place in her memory where she kept the knowledge that she had been Ender's friend at a time when no one else had the courage. She had made a difference in his life, and even when others thought she had betrayed him, Ender never thought that.

She loved Ender with a helpless mixture of worship and longing that led to foolish dreams of impossible futures, tying her life with his until they died. She fantasized about raising children together, the most brilliant children in the world. About being able to stand beside the greatest human being in the world—for so she thought he was—and having everybody recognize that he had chosen her to stand with him forever.

Dreams. After the war, Ender was beaten down. Broken. Finding out that he had actually caused the extermination of the Formics was more than he could bear. And because she, too, had broken during the war, her shame kept her away from him until it was too late, until they had divided Ender from the rest of them.

Which is why she knew that her feelings toward Bean were completely different. No such dreams and fantasies. Just a sense of complete acceptance. She belonged with Bean, not the way a wife belonged with a husband or, God forbid, a girlfriend with a boyfriend, but rather the way a left hand belonged with the right. They simply fit. Nothing exciting about it, nothing to write home about. But it could be counted on. She imagined that, of all the Battle School kids, of all the members of Ender's jeesh, it would be Bean that she would remain close to.

Then they got off the shuttle and were dispersed throughout the world. And even though Armenia and Greece were relatively close together----compared to, say, Shen in Japan or Hot Soup in China--they never saw each other, they never even wrote. She knew that Bean was going home to meet a family that he had never known, and she was busy trying to get involved with her own family again. She didn't exactly pine for him, or he for her. And besides, they didn't need to hang out together or chat all the time for her to know that, left hand with right hand, they were still friends, still belonged together. That when she needed someone, the first person she should call on was Bean.

In a world that didn't have Ender Wiggin in it, that meant he was the person she loved most. That she would miss most if anything happened to him.

Which is why she could pretend that she wasn't going to worry about Bean getting folded by Achilles, but it wasn't true. She worried all the time. Of course, she worried about herself, too--and maybe a little more about herself than about him. But she'd already lost one love in her life, and even though she told herself that these childhood friendships wouldn't matter in twenty years, she didn't want to lose the other.

Her desk beeped at her.

There was a message in the display.

When did I designate this as naptime? Come see me.

Only Achilles wrote with such peremptory rudeness. She hadn't been napping. She had been thinking. But it wasn't worth arguing with him about it.

She logged off and got up from her desk.

It was evening, getting dark outside. Her mind really had wandered. Most of the others on the day shift in Planning and Doctrine had already left, and the night response team was coming in. A couple of the day shift were still at their desks, though.

She caught a glance from Virlomi one of the late ones. The girl looked worried. That meant she probably had done something in response to the Briseis posting, and now feared repercussions. Well, she was right to worry. Who knew how Achilles would speak or write or act if he was planning to kill somebody? Petra's personal opinion was that he was always planning to kill someone, so there was no difference in his behavior to warn you if you were next. Go home and try to get some sleep, Virlomi. Even if Achilles has caught you trying to help me and has decided to

have you killed, you won't be able to do anything about it, so you might as well sleep the sleep of a child. Petra left the big barn of a room they all worked in and moved through the corridors as if in a trance. Had she been asleep when Achilles wrote to her? Who cared.

As far as Petra knew, she was the only one in Planning and Doctrine who even knew where Achilles' office was. She had been in it often, but was not impressed by the privilege. She had the freedom of a slave or a captive. Achilles let her intrude on his privacy because he didn't think of her as a person.

One wall of his office was a 2D computer display, now showing a detailed map of the India-Burma border region. As reports came in from troops in the field and from satellites, it was updated by clerks, so Achilles could glance at it any time and see the best available intelligence on placement. Apart from that, the room was spartan. Two chairs-not comfortable ones-a table, a bookcase, and a cot. Petra suspected that somewhere on the base there was a comfortable suite of rooms with a soft bed that was never used. Whatever else Achilles was, he wasn't a hedonist. He never cared much about personal comfort, not that she had seen, anyway.

He didn't take his eyes off the map when she came in-but she was used to that. When he made a point of ignoring her, she took it as his perverse way of paying attention to her. It was when he looked right at her without seeing her that she felt truly invisible.

"The campaign's going very well," said Achilles.

"It's a stupid plan, and the Thai are going to cut it to shreds."

"They had a sort of coup a few minutes ago," said Achilles. "The commander of the Thai military blew up young Suriyawong. Terrible case of professional jealousy, apparently."

Petra tried to keep from showing her sadness at Suriyawong's death and her disgust at Achilles. "You're not seriously expecting me to believe you had nothing to do with it?"

"Well, they're blaming it on Indian spies, of course. But there were no Indian spies involved."

"Not even the Chakri?"

"Definitely not spying for India," said Achilles.

"For whom, then?"

Achilles laughed. "You're so untrusting. My Briseis."

She had to work at staying relaxed, at not betraying anything when he called her that.

"Ah, Pet, you are my Briseis, don't you realize?"

"Not really," said Petra. "Briseis was in somebody else's tent."

"Oh, I have your body with me, and I get the product of your brain, but your heart still belongs to someone else."

"It belongs to me," said Petra.

"It belongs to Hector," said Achilles. "But ... how can I bear to tell you this? Suriyawong was not alone in his office when the building was blown to bits. Another person contributed scraps of flesh and bone and a fine aerosol of blood to the general gore. Unfortunately, this means I can't drag his body around the walls of Troy."

Petra was sick inside. Had he heard her tell Virlomi, "I am Briseis"? And whom was he talking about, saying those things about Hector?

"Just tell me what you're talking about or don't," said Petra.

"Oh, don't tell me you haven't seen those little messages all over the forums," said Achilles. "About Briseis, and Guinevere, and every other tragic romantic heroine who got trapped with some overbearing bunduck."

"What about them?"

"You know who wrote them," said Achilles.

"Do IT"

"I forgot. You refuse to play guessing games. All right, it was Bean, and you knew that."

Petra felt unwanted emotions welling up-she suppressed them. If those messages were posted by Bean, then he had lived through the previous assassination attempt. But that would mean Bean was "HectorVictorious," and Achilles' little allegory meant that Bean was indeed in Bangkok, and Achilles had spotted him and tried again to kill him. He had died along with Suriyawong.

"I'm glad to have you to tell me what I know. It saves my having to actually use my own memory."

"I know it's tearing you up, my poor Pet. The funny thing is, dear Briseis, Bean was just a bonus. It was Suriyawong that we targeted from the start."

"Fine. Congratulations. You're a genius. Whatever it is you want me to say so you'll shut up and let me get some dinner."

Talking rudely to Achilles was the only illusion of freedom Petra was able to retain. She figured it amused him. And she wasn't dumb enough to talk to him that way in front of anyone else.

"You had your heart set on Bean saving you, didn't you?" said Achilles. "That's why when old Graff sent that stupid request for information, you tipped that Virlomi kid to try responding to Bean."

Petra tasted despair. Achilles really did monitor everything.

"Come on, the water fountain's the most obvious place to bug," said Achilles.

"I thought you had important things to do."

"Nothing's more important in my life than you, Pet," said Achilles. "If I could just get you to come into my tent."

"You've kidnapped me twice. You watch me wherever I go. I don't know how I could be farther in your tent than I am."

"In ... my ... tent," said Achilles. "You're still my enemy."

"Oh, I forgot, I'm supposed to be so eager to please my captor that I surrender my volition to you."

"If I wanted that, I'd have you tortured, Pet," said Achilles. "But I don't want you that way."

"How kind of you."

"No, if I can't have you freely with me, as my friend and ally, then I'll just kill you. I'm not into torture."

"After you've used my work."

"But I'm not using your work," said Achilles.

"Oh, that's right. Because Suriyawong is dead, so you don't need to worry now about having any real opposition."

Achilles laughed. "Sure. That's it."

Which meant, of course, that she hadn't understood at all.

"It's easy to fool a person you keep living in a box. I only know what you tell me."

"But I tell you everything," said Achilles, "if only you were bright enough to get it."

Petra closed her eyes. She kept thinking of poor Suriyawong. So serious all the time. He had done his best for his country, and then it was his own commander-in-chief who killed him. Did he know? I hope not.

If she kept thinking of poor Suriyawong, she wouldn't have to think of Bean at all.

"You're not listening," said Achilles.

"Oh, thanks for telling me that," said Petra. "I thought I was."

Achilles was about to say something else, but then he cocked his head. The hearing aid he wore was a radio receiver tied to his desk. Somebody had just started talking to him.

Achilles turned from her to his desk. He typed a few things, read a few things. His face showed no emotion-but that was a real change, since he had been smiling and pleasant until the voice came. Something had gone wrong. Indeed, Petra knew him well enough now that she thought she recognized the signs of anger. Or maybe-she wondered, she hoped-fear.

"They aren't dead," Petra said.

"I'm busy," he said.

She laughed. "That's the message, isn't it? Once again, your assassins have piffed it. If you want a job done right, Achilles, you've got to do it yourself."

He turned away from the desk display and looked her in the eye. "He sent out a message from the barracks of his strike force there in Thailand. Of course the Chakri saw it."

"Not dead," said Petra. "He just keeps beating you."

"Narrowly escaping with his life while my plans are never interfered with at all . . ."

"Come on, you know he got you booted out of Russia."

Achilles raised his eyebrows. "So you admit you sent a coded message."

"Bean doesn't need coded messages to beat you," she said.

Achilles rose from his chair and walked over to her. She braced herself for a slap. But he planted a hand in her chest and shoved the chair over backward.

Her head hit the floor. It left her dazed, lights flashing through her peripheral vision. And then a wave of pain and nausea.

"He sent for dear old Sister Carlotta," said Achilles. His voice betrayed no emotion. "She's flying around the world to help him. Isn't that nice of her?"

Petra could barely comprehend what he was saying. The only thought she could hold on to was: Don't let there be any permanent brain damage. That was her whole self. She'd rather die than lose the brilliance that made her who she was.

"But that gives me time to set up a little surprise," said Achilles. "I think I'll make Bean very sorry that he's alive."

Petra wanted to say something to that, but she couldn't remember what. Then she couldn't remember what he had said. "What?"

"Oh, is your poor little head swimming, my Pet? You should be more careful with the way you lean back on that chair."

Now she remembered what he had said. A surprise. For Sister Carlotta. To make Bean sorry he's alive.

"Sister Carlotta is the one who got you off the streets of Rotterdam," said Petra. "You owe her everything. Your leg operation. Going to Battle School."

"I owe her nothing," said Achilles. "You see, she chose Bean. She sent him. Me, she passed over. I'm the one who brought civilization to the streets. I'm the one who kept her precious little Bean alive. But him she sends up into space, and me she leaves in the dirt."

"Poor baby," said Petra.

He kicked her, hard, in the ribs. She gasped.

"And as for Virlomi," he said, "I think I can use her to teach you a lesson about disloyalty to me."

"That's the way to bring me into your tent," said Petra.

Again he kicked her. She tried not to groan, but it came out anyway. This passive resistance strategy was not working.

He acted as if he hadn't done it. "Come on, why are you lying there? Get up."

"Just kill me and have done with it," she said. "Virlomi was just trying to be a decent human being."

"Virlomi was warned what would happen."

"Virlomi is nothing to you but a way to hurt me."

"You're not that important. And if I want to hurt you, I know how." He made as if to kick her again. She stiffened, curled away from the blow. But it didn't come. Instead he reached down a hand to her. "Get up, my Pet. The floor is no place to nap."

She reached up and took his hand. She let him bear most of her weight as she rose up, so he was pulling hard.

Fool, she thought. I was trained for personal combat. You weren't in Battle School long enough to get that training.

As soon as her legs were under her, she shoved upward. Since that was the direction he had been pulling, he lost his balance and went over backward, falling over the legs of her chair.

He did not hit his head. He immediately tried to scramble to his feet. But she knew how to respond to his movements, kicking sharply at him with her heavy army-issue shoes, shifting her weight so that her kicks never came at the place he was protecting. Every kick hurt him. He tried to scramble backward, but she pressed on, relentless, and because he was using his arms to help him scuttle across the floor, she was able to kick him in the head, a solid blow that rocked him back and laid him out.

Not unconscious, but a little dizzy. Well, see how you like it.

He tried to do some kind of street-fighting move, kicking out with his legs while his eyes were looking elsewhere, but it was pathetic. She easily jumped over his legs and landed a scuffing kick right up between his legs.

He cried out in pain.

"Come on, get up," she said. "You're going to kill Virlomi, so kill me first. Do it. You're the killer. Get your gun. Come on."

And then, without her quite seeing how he did it, there was indeed a gun in his hand.

"Kick me again," he said through gritted teeth. "Kick me faster than this bullet."

She didn't move.

"I thought you wanted to die," he said.

She could see it now. He wouldn't shoot her. Not till he had shot Virlomi in front of her.

She had missed her chance. While he was down, before he got the gun-from the back of his waistband? from under the furniture?-she should have snapped his neck. This wasn't a wrestling match, this was her chance to put an end to him. But her instinct had taken over, and her instinct was not to kill, only to disable her opponent, because that's what she had practiced in Battle School.

Of all the things I could have learned from Ender, the killer instinct, going for the final blow from the start, why was that the one I overlooked?

Something Bean had explained about Achilles. Something Graff had told him, after Bean had gotten him shipped back to Earth. That Achilles had to kill anyone who had ever seen him helpless.

Even the doctor who had repaired his gimp leg, because she'd seen him laid out under anaesthetic and taken a knife to him.

Petra had just destroyed whatever feeling it was that had made him keep her alive. Whatever he had wanted from her, he wouldn't want it now. He wouldn't be able to bear having her around. She was dead.

Yet, no matter what else was going on, she was still a tactician. Thick headed as she was, her mind could still do this dance. The enemy saw things this way; so change it so he sees them another way.

Petra laughed. "I never thought you'd let me do that," she said.

He slowly, painfully, was getting to his feet, the gun trained on her.

She went on. "You always had to be el supremo, like the bunducks in Battle School. I never thought you had the guts to be like Ender or Bean, till now."

Still he said nothing. But he was standing there. He was listening.

"Crazy, isn't it? But Bean and Ender, they were so little. And they didn't care. Everybody looking down at them, me towering over them, they were the only guys in Battle School who weren't terrified of having somebody see a girl be better than them, bigger than them." Keep it going, keep spinning it. "They put Ender in Bonzo's army too early, he hadn't been trained. Didn't know how to do anything. And Bonzo gave orders, nobody was to work with him. So here I had this little kid, helpless, didn't know anything. That's what I like, Achilles. Smarter than me, but smaller. So I taught him. Chisel Bonzo, I didn't care. He was like you've always been, constantly showing me who's boss. But Ender knew how to let me run it. I taught him everything. I would have died for him."

"You're sick," said Achilles.

"Oh, you're going to tell me you didn't know that? You had the gun the whole time, why did you let me do that, if it wasn't-if you weren't trying to . . ."

"Trying to what?" he said. He was keeping his voice steady, but the craziness was plainly visible, and his voice trembled just a little. She had pushed him past the borders of sanity, deep into his madness. It was Caligula she was seeing now. But he was listening. If she found the right story to put on what just happened, maybe he would settle for ... something else. Making his horse consul. Making Petra ...

"Weren't you trying to seduce me?" she said.

"You don't even have your tits yet," he said.

"I don't think it's tits you're looking for," she said. "Or you would never have dragged me around with you in the first place. What was all that talk about wanting me in your tent? Loyal? You

wanted me to belong to you. And all the time you did that sabeek stuff, pushing me around-that just made me feel contempt for you. I was looking down on you the whole time. You were nothing, just another sack of testosterone, another chimp hooting and beating his chest. But then you let me-you did let me, didn't you? You don't expect me to believe I really could have done that?"

A faint smile touched the comers of his lips.

"Doesn't that spoil it, if you think I did it on purpose?" he said.

She strode to him, right to the barrel of the gun, and, letting it press into her abdomen, she reached up, grabbed him by the neck, and pulled his head down to where she could kiss him.

She had no idea how to do it, except what she'd seen in movies. But she was apparently doing it well enough. The gun stayed in her belly, but his other arm wrapped around her, pulled her closer.

In the back of her mind, she remembered what Bean told her that the last thing he had seen Achilles do before killing Bean's friend Poke was kiss her. Bean had had nightmares about it. Achilles kissing her, and then in the middle of the kiss, strangling her. Not that Bean actually saw that part. Maybe it didn't happen that way at all.

But no matter how you cut it, Achilles was a dangerous boy to kiss. And there, was that gun in her belly. Maybe this was the moment he longed for. Maybe his dreams were about this-kissing a girl, and blowing a hole in her body while he did.

Well, blow away, she thought. Before I watch you kill Virlomi for the crime of having compassion for me and courage enough to act, I'd rather be dead myself. I'd rather kiss you than watch you kill her, and there's nothing in the world that could disgust me more than having to pretend that you're the ... thing ... I love.

The kiss ended. But she did not let go of him. She would not step back, she would not break this embrace. He had to believe that she wanted him. That she was in his emossin' tent.

He was breathing lightly, quickly. His heartbeat was rapid. Prelude to a kill? Or just the aftermath of a kiss.

"I said I'd kill anyone who tried to answer Graff," he said. "I have to."

"She didn't answer Graff, did she?" said Petra. "I know you have to keep control of things, but you don't have to be a strutting yelda about it. She doesn't know you know what she did."

"She'll think she got away with it."

"But I'll know," said Petra, "that you weren't afraid to give me what I want."

"What, you think you've found some way to make me do what you want?" he said.

Now she could back away from him. "I thought I'd found a man who didn't have to prove he was big by pushing people around. I guess I was wrong. Do what you want. Men like you disgust me." She put as much contempt into her voice, onto her face, as she could. "Here, prove you're a man. Shoot me. Shoot everybody. I've known real men. I thought you were one of them."

He lowered the gun. She did not show her relief. Just kept her eyes looking into his.

"Don't ever think you've got me figured out," he said.

"I don't care whether I figure you out or not," she said. "All I care about is, you're the first man since Ender and Bean who had guts enough to let me stand over him."

"Is that what you're going to say?" he asked.

"Say? Who to? I don't have any friends out there. The only person worth talking to in this whole place is you."

He stood there, breathing heavily again, a bit of the craziness back in his eyes.

What am I saying wrong?

"You're going to bring this off," she said. "I don't know how you're going to do it, but I can taste it. You're going to run the whole show. They're all going to be under you, Achilles. Governments, universities, corporations, all eager to please you. But when we're alone, where nobody else can see, we'll both know that you're strong enough to keep a strong woman with you."

"You?" said Achilles. "A woman?"

"If I'm not a woman, what were you doing with me in here?"

"Take off your clothes," he said.

The craziness was still there. He was testing her somehow. Waiting for her to show ...

To show that she was faking. That she was really afraid of him, after all. That her story was all a lie, designed to trick him.

"No," she said. "You take off yours."

And the craziness faded.

He smiled.

He tucked the gun into the back of his pants.

"Get out of here," he said. "I've got a war to run."

"It's night," she said. "Nobody's moving."

"There's a lot more to this war than the armies," said Achilles.

"When do I get to stay in your tent?" she asked. "What do I have to do?" She could hardly believe she was saying this, when all she wanted was to get out.

"You have to be the thing I need," he said. "And right now, you're not." .

He walked to his desk, sat down.

"And pick up your chair on the way out."

He started typing. Orders? For what? To kill whom?

She didn't ask. She picked up the chair. She walked out.

And kept walking, through the corridors to the room where she slept alone. Knowing, with every step, that she was monitored. There would be vids. He would check them, to see how she acted. To see if she meant what she'd said. So she couldn't stop and press her face against the wall and cry. She had to be ... what? How would this play in a movie or a vid if she were a woman who was frustrated because she wanted to be with her man?

I don't know! she screamed inside. I'm not an actress!

And then, a much quieter voice in her head answered. Yes you are. And a pretty good one. Because for another few minutes, maybe another hour, maybe another night, you're alive.

No triumph, either. She couldn't seem to gloat, couldn't show relief. Frustration, annoyance-and some pain where he kicked her, where her head hit the floor-that's all she could show.

Even alone in her bed, the lights off, she lay there, pretending, lying. Hoping that whatever she did in her sleep would not provoke him. Would not bring that crazy frightened searching look into his eyes.

Not that it would be any guarantee, of course. There was no sign of craziness when he shot those men in the bread van back in Russia. Don't ever think you've got me figured out, he said.

You win, Achilles. I don't think I've got you figured out. But I've learned how to play one lousy string. That's something.

I also knocked you onto the floor, beat the goffno out of you, kicked you in your little kintamas, and made you think you liked it. Kill me tomorrow or whenever you want-my shoe going into your face, you can't take that away from me.

In the morning, Petra was pleased to find that she was still alive, considering what she had done the night before. Her head ached, her ribs were sore, but nothing was broken.

And she was starving. She had missed dinner the night before, and perhaps there was something about beating up her jailer that made her especially hungry. She didn't usually eat breakfast, so she had no accustomed place to sit. At other meals, she sat by herself, and others, respecting her solitude or fearing Achilles' displeasure, did not sit with her.

But today, on impulse, she took her tray to a table that had only a couple of empty spots. The conversation grew quiet when she first sat down, and a few people greeted her. She smiled back at them, but then concentrated on her food. Their conversation resumed.

"There's no way she got off the base."

"So she's still here."

"Unless someone took her."

"Maybe it's a special assignment or something."

"Sayagi says he thinks she's dead."

A chill ran through Petra's body.

"Who?" she asked.

The others glanced at her, but then glanced away. Finally one of them said, "Virlomi."

Virlomi was gone. And no one knew where she was.

He killed her. He said he would, and he did. The only thing I gained by what I did last night was that he didn't do it in front of me.

I can't stand this. I'm done. My life is not worth living. To be his captive, to have him kill anyone who tries to help me in any way . . .

No one was looking at her. Nor were they talking.

They know Virlomi tried to answer Graff, because she must have said something to Sayagi when she walked over to him yesterday. And now she's gone.

Petra knew she had to eat, no matter how sick at heart she felt, no matter how much she wanted to cry, to run screaming from the room, to fall on the floor and beg their forgiveness for ... for what? For being alive when Virlomi was dead.

She finished all she could bear to eat, and left the mess hall.

But as she walked through the corridors to the room where they all worked, she realized: Achilles would not have killed her like this. There was no point in killing her if the others didn't get to see her arrested and taken away. It wouldn't do what he needed it to do, if she just disappeared in the night.

At the same time, if she had escaped, he couldn't announce it. That would be even worse. So he would simply remain silent, and leave the impression with everyone that she was probably dead.

Petra imagined Virlomi walking boldly out of the building, her sheer bravado carrying the day. Or perhaps, dressed as one of the women who cleaned floors and windows, she had slipped out unnoticed. Or had she climbed a wall, or run a minefield? Petra didn't even know what the perimeter looked like, or how closely guarded it might be. She had never been given a tour. Wishful thinking, that's all this is, she told herself as she sat down to the day's work. Virlomi is dead, and Achilles is simply waiting to announce it, to make us all suffer from not knowing.

But as the day wore on, and Achilles did not appear, Petra began to believe that perhaps she had gotten away. Maybe Achilles was staying away because he didn't want anyone speculating about any visible bruises he might have. Or maybe he's having some scrotal problems and he's having some doctor check him out-though heaven help him if Achilles decided that having a doctor handle his injured testes was worthy of the death penalty.

Maybe he was staying away because Virlomi was gone and Achilles did not want them to see him frustrated and helpless. When he caught her and could drag her into the room and shoot her dead in front of them, then he could face them.

And as long as that didn't happen, there was a chance Virlomi was alive.

Stay that way, my friend. Run far and don't pause for anything. Cross some border, find some refuge, swim to Sri Lanka, fly to the moon. Find some miracle, Virlomi, and live.

MURDER

To:Graff%pilgrimage@colmin.gov
From:Carlotta%agape@vatican.net/
orders/sisters/ind
Re: Please forward

The attached file is encrypted. Please wait twelve hours after the time of sending and if you don't hear from me, forward it to Bean. He'll know the key.

It took less than four hours to secure and inspect the entire high command base in Bangkok. Computer experts would be probing to try to find out whom it was that Naresuan had been communicating with outside, and whether he was in fact involved with a foreign power or this gambit was a private venture. When Suriyawong's work with the Prime Minister was finished, he came alone to the barracks where Bean was waiting.

Most of Bean's soldiers had already returned, and Bean had sent most of them to bed. He still watched the news in a desultory fashion nothing new was being said, so he was interested only in seeing how the talking heads were spinning it. In Thailand, everything was charged with patriotic fervor. Abroad, of course, it was a different story. All the Common broadcasts were taking a more skeptical view that Indian operatives had really made the assassination attempt.

"Why would India want to provoke Thai entry into the war?"

"They know Thailand will come in eventually whether Burma asks them or not. So they felt they had to deprive Thailand of its best Battle School graduate."

"Is one child so dangerous?"

"Maybe you should ask the Formics. If you can find any."

And on and on, everyone trying to appear smart-or at least smarter than the Indian and Thai governments, which was the game the media always played. What mattered to Bean was how this would affect Peter. Was there any mention of the possibility that Achilles was running the show in India? Not a breath. Anything yet about Pakistani troop movements near Iran? The "Bangkok bombing" had driven that slow-moving story off the air. Nobody was giving this any global implications. As long as the I.F. was there to keep the nukes from flying, it was still just politics as usual in south Asia.

Except it wasn't. Everybody was so busy trying to look wise and unsurprised that nobody was standing up and screaming that this whole set of events was completely different from anything that had gone before. The most populous nation in the world has dared to turn its back on a two-hundred-year-old enemy and invade the small, weak country to its east. Now India was attacking Thailand. What did that mean? What was India's goal? What possible benefit could there be?

Why weren't they talking about these things?

"Well," said Suriyawong, "I don't think I'm going to go to sleep very soon."

"Everything all cleaned up?"

"More like everybody who worked closely with the Chakri has been sent home and put under house arrest while the investigation continues."

"That means the entire high command."

"Not really," said Suriyawong. "The best field commanders are out in the field. Commanding. One of them will be brought in as acting Chakri."

"They should give it to you."

"They should, but they won't. Aren't you just a little hungry?"

"It's late."

"This is Bangkok."

"Well, not really," said Bean. "This is a military base."

"When is your friend's flight due in?"

"Morning. Just after dawn."

"Ouch. She's going to be out of sorts. You going to meet her at the airport?"

"I didn't think about it."

"Let's go get dinner," said Suriyawong. "Officers do it all the time. We can take a couple of strike force soldiers with us to make sure we don't get hassled for being children."

"Achilles isn't going to give up on killing me."

"Us. He aimed at us this time."

"He might have a backup."

"Bean, I'm hungry. Are you hungry?" Suriyawong turned to the members of the team that had been with him. "Any of you hungry?"

"Not really," said one of them. "We ate at the regular time."

"Sleepy," said another.

"Anybody awake enough to go into the city with us?"

Immediately all of them stepped forward.

"Don't ask perfect soldiers whether they want to protect their CO," said Bean.

"Designate a couple to go with us and let the others sleep," said Suriyawong.

"Yes sir," said Bean. He turned to the men. "Honest assessment. Which of you will be least impaired by failing to get enough sleep tonight?"

"Will we be allowed sleep tomorrow?" asked one.

"Yes," said Bean. "So it's a matter of how much it affects you to get off your rhythm."

"I'll be fine." Four others felt the same way. So Bean chose the two nearest. "Two of you keep watch for two more hours, then go back to the normal watch rotation."

Outside the building, with their two bodyguards walking five meters behind them, Bean and Suriyawong finally had a chance to talk candidly. First, though, Suriyawong had to know. "You really keep a regular watch rotation even here at the base?"

"Was I wrong?" asked Bean.

"Obviously not, but ... you really are paranoid."

"I know I have an enemy who wants me dead. An enemy who happens to be hopping from one powerful position to another."

"More powerful each time," said Suriyawong. "In Russia, he didn't have the power to start a war."

"He might not in India, either," said Bean.

"There's a war," said Suriyawong. "You're saying it isn't his?"

"It's his," said Bean. "But he's probably still having to persuade adults to go along with him."

"Win a few, and they hand you your own army," said Suriyawong.

"Win a few more, and they hand you the country," said Bean. "As Napoleon and Washington showed."

"How many do you have to win to get the world?"

Bean let the question hang.

"Why did he go after us?" asked Suriyawong. "I think you're right, that this operation at least was entirely Achilles'. It's not the kind of thing the Indian government goes for. India is a democracy. Folding children doesn't play well. No way he got approval."

"It might not even be India," said Bean. "We don't really know anything."

"Except that it's Achilles," said Suriyawong. "Think about the stuff that doesn't make sense. A second-rate, obvious campaign strategy that we're probably going to be able to take apart. A nasty bit of business like this that can only soil India's reputation in the rest of the world."

"Obviously he's not acting in India's best interest," said Bean. "But they think he is, if he's really the one who brought off this deal with Pakistan. He's acting for himself. And I can see what he gains by kidnapping Ender's jeesh and by trying to kill you."

"Fewer rivals?"

"No," said Bean. "He makes Battle School grads look like the most important weapons in the war."

"But he's not a Battle School grad."

"He was in Battle School, and he's that age. He doesn't want to have to wait till he grows up to be king of the world. He wants everyone to believe that a child should lead them. If you're worth killing, if Ender's jeesh is worth stealing . . ." It also helps Peter Wiggin, Bean realized. He didn't go to Battle School, but if children are plausible world leaders, his own track record as Locke raises him above any other contenders. Military ability is one thing. Ending the League War was a much stronger qualification. It trumped "psychopathic Battle School expulsee" hands down.

"Do you think that's all?" asked Suriyawong.

"What's all?" asked Bean. He had lost the thread. "Oh, you mean is that enough to explain why Achilles would want you dead?" Bean thought about it. "I don't know. Maybe. But it doesn't tell us why he's setting up India for a much bloodier war than it has to fight."

"What about this," said Suriyawong. "Make everybody fear what war will bring, so they want to strengthen the Hegemony to keep the war from spreading."

"That's fine, except nobody's going to nominate Achilles as Hegemon."

"Good point. Are we ruling out the possibility that Achilles is just stupid?"

"Yes, that's not a possibility."

"What about Petra, could she have fooled him into sticking with this obvious but somewhat dumb and wasteful strategy?"

"That is possible, except that Achilles is very sharp at reading people. I don't know if Petra could lie to him. I never saw her lie to anybody. I don't know if she can."

"Never saw her lie to anybody?" asked Suriyawong.

Bean shrugged. "We became very good friends, at the end of the war. She speaks her mind. She may hold something back sometimes, but she tells you she's doing it. No smoke, no mirrors. The door's either open or it's shut."

"Lying takes practice," observed Suriyawong.

"Like the Chakri?"

"You don't get to that position by pure military ability. You have to make yourself look very good to a lot of people. And hide a lot of things you're doing."

"You're not suggesting Thailand's government is corrupt," said Bean.

"I'm suggesting Thailand's government is political. I hope this doesn't surprise you. Because I'd heard that you were bright."

They got a car to take them into town-Suriyawong had always had the authority to requisition a car and a driver, he just never used it till now.

"So where do we eat?" asked Bean. "It's not like I have a restaurant guide with me."

"I grew up in families with better chefs than any restaurant," said Suriyawong.

"So we go to your house?"

"My family lives near Chiang Mai."

"That's going to be a battle zone."

"Which is why I think they're actually in Vientiane, though security rules would keep them from telling me. My father is running a network of dispersed munitions factories." Suriyawong grinned. "I had to make sure I siphoned off some of these defense jobs for my family."

"In other words, he was best man for the task."

"My mother was best for the task, but this is Thailand. Our love affair with Western culture ended a century ago."

They ended up having to ask the soldiers, and they only knew the kind of place they could afford to eat. So they found themselves eating at a tiny all-night diner in a part of town that wasn't the worst, but wasn't the nicest, either. And the whole thing was so cheap it felt practically free.

Suriyawong and the soldiers went down on the food as if it were the best meal they'd ever had.

"Isn't this great?" asked Suriyawong. "When my parents had company, and they were eating all the fancy stuff in the dining room with visitors, we kids would eat in the kitchen, the stuff the servants ate. This stuff. Real food."

No doubt that's why the Americans at Yum-Yum in Greensboro loved what they got there, too. Childhood memories. Food that tasted like safety and love and getting rewarded for good behavior. A treat we're going out. Bean didn't have any such memories, of course. He had no nostalgia for picking up food wrappers and licking the sugar off the plastic and then trying to get at any of it that rubbed off on his nose. What was he nostalgic for? Life in Achilles' "family"? Battle School? Not likely. And his time with his family in Greece had come too late to be part of his early childhood memories. He liked being in Crete, he loved his family, but no, the only good memories of his childhood were in Sister Carlotta's apartment when she took him off the street and fed him and kept

him safe and helped him prepare to take the Battle School tests-his ticket off Earth, to where he'd be safe from Achilles.

It was the only time in his childhood when he felt safe. And even

though he didn't believe it or understand it at the time, he felt loved, too. If he could sit down in some restaurant and eat a meal like the ones Sister Carlotta prepared there in Rotterdam, he'd probably feel the way those Americans felt about Yum-Yum, or these Thais felt about this place.

"Our friend Borommakot doesn't really like the food," said Suriyawong. He spoke in Thai, because Bean had picked up the language quite readily, and the soldiers weren't as comfortable in Common.

"He may not like it," said one soldier, "but it's making him grow."

"Soon he'll be as tall as you," said the other.

"How tall do Greeks get?" asked the first.

Bean froze.

So did Suriyawong.

The two soldiers looked at them with some alarm. "What, did you see something?"

"How did you know he was Greek?" asked Suriyawong.

The soldiers glanced at each other and then suppressed their smiles.

"I guess they're not stupid," said Bean.

"We saw all the vids on the Bugger War, we saw your face, you think you're not famous? Don't you know?"

"But you never said anything," said Bean.

"That would have been rude."

Bean wondered how many people made him in Araraquara and Greensboro, but were too polite to say anything.

It was three in the morning when they got to the airport. The plane was due in about six. Bean was too keyed up to sleep. He assigned himself to keep watch, and let the soldiers and Suriyawong doze.

So it was Bean who noticed when a flurry of activity began around the podium about forty-five minutes before the flight was supposed to arrive. He got up and went to ask what was going on.

"Please wait, we'll make an announcement," said the ticket agent. "Where are your parents? Are they here?"

Bean sighed. So much for fame. Suriyawong, at least, should have been recognized. Then again, everyone here had been on duty all night and probably hadn't heard any of the news about the assassination attempt, so they wouldn't have seen Suriyawong's face flashed in the vids again and again. He went back to waken one of the soldiers so he could find out, adult to adult, what was going on.

His uniform probably got him information that a civilian wouldn't have been told. He came back looking grim. "The plane went down," he said.

Bean felt his heart plummet. Achilles? Had he found a way to get to Sister Carlotta?

It couldn't be. How could he know? He couldn't be monitoring every airplane flight in the world.

The message Bean had sent via the computer in the barracks. The Chakri might have seen it. If he hadn't been arrested by then. He might have had time to relay the information to Achilles, or whatever intermediary they used. How else could Achilles have known that Carlotta would be coming?

"It's not him this time," said Suriyawong, when Bean told him what he was thinking. "There are plenty of reasons a plane can drop out of radar."

"She didn't say it disappeared," said the soldier. "She said it went down."

Suriyawong looked genuinely stricken. "Borommakot, I'm sorry." Then Suriyawong went to a telephone and contacted the Prime Minister's office. Being Thailand's pride and joy, who had just survived an assassination attempt, had its benefits. In a very few minutes they were escorted into the meeting room at the airport where officials from the government and the military were conferring, linked to aviation authorities and investigating agencies worldwide.

The plane had gone down over southern China. It was an Air Shanghai flight, and China was treating it as an internal matter, refusing to allow outside investigators to come to the crash site. But air traffic satellites had the story—there was an explosion, a big one, and the plane was in small fragments before any part of it reached the ground. No chance of survivors.

Only one faint hope remained. Maybe she hadn't made a connection somewhere. Maybe she wasn't on board.

But she was.

I could have stopped her, thought Bean. When I agreed to trust the Prime Minister without waiting for Carlotta to arrive, I could have sent word at once to have her go home. But instead he waited around and watched the vids and then went out for a night on the town. Because he wanted to see her. Because he had been frightened and he needed to have her with him.

Because he was too selfish even to think of the danger he was exposing her to. She flew under her own name-she had never done that when they were together. Was that his fault?

Yes. Because he had summoned her with such urgency that she didn't have time to do things covertly. She just had the Vatican arrange her flights, and that was it. The end of her life.

The end of her ministry, that's how she'd think about it. The jobs left undone. The work that someone else would have to do.

All he'd done, ever since she met him, was steal time from her, keep her from the things that really mattered in her life. Having to do her work on the run, in hiding, for his sake. Whenever he needed her, she dropped everything. What had he ever done to deserve it? What had he ever given her in return? And now he had interrupted her work permanently. She would be so annoyed. But even now, if he could talk to her, he knew what she'd say.

It was always my choice, she'd say. You're part of the work God gave me. Life ends, and I'm not afraid to return to God. I'm only afraid for you, because you keep yourself such a stranger to him.

If only he could believe that she was still alive somehow. That she was there with Poke, maybe, taking her in now the way she took Bean in so many years ago. And the two of them laughing and reminiscing about clumsy old Bean, who just had a way of getting people killed.

Someone touched his arm. "Bean," whispered Suriyawong. "Bean, let's get you out of here."

Bean focused and realized that there were tears running down his cheeks. "I'm staying," he said.

"No," said Suriyawong. "Nothing's going to happen here. I mean let's go to the official residence. That's where the diplomatic greyyaz is flying."

Bean wiped his eyes on his sleeves, feeling like a little kid as he did it. What a thing to be seen doing in front of his men. But that was just too bad-it would be a far worse sign of weakness to try to conceal it or pathetically ask them not to tell. He did what he did, they saw what they saw, so be it. If Sister Carlotta wasn't worth some tears from someone who owed her as much as Bean did, then what were tears for, and when should they be shed?

There was a police escort waiting for them. Suriyawong thanked their bodyguards and ordered them back to the barracks. "No need to get up till you feel like it," he said.

They saluted Suriyawong. Then they turned to Bean and saluted him. Sharply. In best military fashion. No pity. Just honor. He returned their salute the same way-no gratitude, just respect.

The morning in the official residence was infuriating and boring by turns. China was being intransigent. Even though most of the passengers were Thai businessmen and tourists, it was a Chinese plane over Chinese airspace, and because there were indications that it might have been a ground-to-air missile attack rather than a planted bomb, it was being kept under tight military security.

Definitely Achilles, Bean and Suriyawong agreed. But they had talked enough about Achilles that Bean agreed to let Suriyawong brief the Thai military and state department leaders who needed to have all the information that might make sense of this.

Why would India want to blow up a passenger plane flying over China? Could it really have been solely to kill a nun who was coming to visit a Greek boy in Bangkok? That was simply too far-fetched to believe. Yet, bit by bit, and with the help of the Minister of Colonization, who could take them through details about Achilles' psychopathology that hadn't even been in Locke's reporting on him, they began to understand that yes, indeed, this might well have been a kind of defiant message from Achilles to Bean, telling him that he might have gotten away this time, but Achilles could still kill whomever he wanted.

While Suriyawong was briefing them, however, Bean was taken upstairs to the private residence, where the Prime Minister's wife very kindly led him to a guest bedroom and asked him if he had a friend or family member she should send for, or if he wanted a minister or priest of some religion or other. He thanked her and said that all he really needed was some time alone.

She closed the door behind her, and Bean cried silently until he was exhausted, and then, curled up on a mat on the floor, he went to sleep.

When he awoke it was still bright daylight beyond the louvered shutters. His eyes were still sore from crying. He was still exhausted. He must have woken up because his bladder was full. And he was thirsty. That was life. Pump it in, pump it out. Sleep and wake, sleep and wake. Oh, and a little reproduction here and there. But he was too young, and Sister Carlotta had opted out of that side of life. So for them the cycle had been pretty much the same. Find some meaning in life. But what? Bean was famous. His name would live in history books forever. Probably just as part of a list in the chapter on Ender Wiggin, but that was fine, that was more than most people got. When he was dead he wouldn't care.

Carlotta wouldn't be in any history books. Not even a footnote. Well, no, that wasn't true. Achilles was going to be famous, and she was the one who found him. More than a footnote after all. Her name would be remembered, but always because it was linked with the koncho who killed her because she had seen how helpless he was and saved him from the life of the street.

Achilles killed her, but of course, he had my help.

Bean forced himself to think of something else. He could already feel that burning in his eyelids that meant tears were about to flow. That was done. He needed to keep his wits about him. Very important to keep thinking.

There was a courtesy computer in the room, with standard netlinks and some of Thailand's leading connection software. Soon Bean was signed on in one of his less-used identities. Graff would know things that the Thai government wasn't getting. So would Peter. And they would write to him.

Sure enough, there were messages from both of them encrypted on one of his dropsites. He pulled them both off.

They were the same. An email forwarded from Sister Carlotta herself.

Both of them said the same thing. The message had arrived at nine in the morning, Thailand time. They were supposed to wait twelve hours in case Sister Carlotta herself contacted them to retract the message. But when they learned with independent confirmation that there was no chance she was alive, they decided not to wait. Whatever the message was, Sister Carlotta had set it up so that if she didn't take an active step to block it, every day, it would automatically go to Graff and to Peter to send on to him.

Which meant that every day of her life, she had thought of him, had done something to keep him from seeing this, and yet had also made sure that he would see whatever it was that this message contained.

Her farewell. He didn't want to read it. He had cried himself out. There was nothing left.

And yet she wanted him to read it. And after all she had done for him, he could surely do this for her.

The file was double-encrypted. Once he had opened it with his own decoding, it remained encoded by her. He had no idea what the password would be, and therefore it had to be something that she would expect him to think of.

And because he would only be trying to find the key after she was dead, the choice was obvious. He entered the name Poke and the decryption proceeded at once.

It was, as he expected, a letter to him.

Dear Julian, Dear Bean, Dear Friend,

Maybe Achilles killed me, maybe he didn't. You know how I feel about vengeance. Punishment belongs to God, and besides, anger makes people stupid, even people as bright as you. Achilles must be stopped because of what he is, not because of anything he did to me. My manner of death is meaningless to me. Only my manner of life mattered, and that is for my Redeemer to judge.

But you already know these things, and that is not why I wrote this letter. There is information about you that you have a right to know. It's not pleasant information, and I was going to wait to tell you until you already had some inkling. I was not about to let my death keep you in ignorance, however. That would be giving either Achilles or the random chances of life-whichever caused my sudden death too much power over you.

You know that you were born as part of an illegal scientific experiment using embryos stolen from your parents. You have preternatural memories of your own astonishing escape from the slaughter of your siblings when the experiment was terminated. What you did at that age tells anyone who knows the story that you are extraordinarily intelligent. What you have not known, until now, is why you are so intelligent, and what it implies about your future.

The person who stole your frozen embryo was a scientist, of sorts. He was working on the genetic enhancement of human intelligence. He based his experiment on the theoretical work of a Russian scientist named Anton. Though Anton was under an order of intervention and could not tell me directly, he courageously found a way to circumvent the programming and tell me of the genetic change that was made in you. (Though Anton was under the impression that the change could only be made in an unfertilized egg, this was really only a technical problem, not a theoretical one.)

There is a double key in the human genome. One of the keys deals with human intelligence. If turned one way, it places a block on the ability of the brain to function at peak capacity. In you, Anton's key has been turned. Your brain was not frozen in its growth. It did not stop making new neurons at an early age. Your brain continues to grow and make new connections. Instead of having a limited capacity, with patterns formed during early development, your brain adds new capacities and new patterns as they are needed. You are mentally like a one-year-old, but with experience. The mental feats that infants routinely perform, which are far greater than anything that adults manage, will always remain within your reach. For your entire life, for instance, you will be able to master new languages like a native speaker. You will be able to make and maintain connections with your own memory that are unlike those of anyone else. You are, in other words, uncharted or perhaps self-charted-territory.

But there is a price for that unfettering of your brain. You have probably already guessed it. If your brain keeps growing, what happens to your head? How does all that brain matter stay inside?

Your head continues to grow, of course. Your skull has never fully closed. I have had your skull measurements tracked, naturally. The growth is slow, and much of the growth of your brain has involved the creation of more but smaller neurons. Also, there has been some thinning of your skull, so you may or may not have noticed the growth in the circumferences of your head-but it is real.

You see, the other side of Anton's key involves human growth. If we did not stop growing, we would die very young. Yet to live long requires that we give up more and more of our intelligence, because our brains must lock down and stop growing earlier in our life cycle. Most human beings fluctuate within a fairly narrow range. You are not even on the charts.

Bean, Julian, my child, you will die very young. Your body will continue to grow, not the way puberty would do it, with one growth spurt and then an adult height. As one scientist put it, you will never reach adult height, because there is no adult height. There is only height at time of death. You will steadily grow taller and larger until your heart gives out or your spine collapses. I tell you this bluntly, because there is no way to soften this blow.

No one knows what course your growth will take. At first I took great encouragement from the fact that you seemed to be growing more slowly than originally estimated. I was told that by the age of puberty, you would have caught up with other children your age-but you did not. You remained far behind them. So I hoped that perhaps he was wrong, that you might live to age forty or fifty, or even thirty. But in the year you were with your family, and in the time we have been together, you have been measured and your growth rate is accelerating. All indications are that it will continue to accelerate. If you live to be twenty, you will have defied all rational expectations. If you die before

the age of fifteen, it will be only a mild surprise. I shed tears as I write these words, because if ever there was a child who could serve humanity by having a long adult life, it is you. No, I will be honest, my tears are because I think of you as being, in so many ways, my own son, and the only thing that makes me glad about the fact that you are learning of your future through this letter is that it means I have died before you. The worst fear of every loving parent, you see, is that they will have to bury a child. We nuns and priests are spared that grief. Except when we take it upon ourselves, as I so foolishly and gladly have done with you.

I have full documentation of all the findings of the team that has been studying you. They will continue to study you, if you allow them. The netlink is at the end of this letter. They can be trusted, because they are decent people, and because they also know that if the existence of their project becomes known, they will be in grave danger, for research into the genetic enhancement of human intelligence remains against the law. It is entirely your choice whether you cooperate. They already have valuable data. You may live your life without reference to them, or you may continue to provide them with information. I am not terribly interested in the science of it. I worked with them because I needed to know what would happen to you.

Forgive me for keeping this information from you. I know that you think you would have preferred to know it all along. I can only say, in my defense, that it is good for human beings to have a period of innocence and hope in their lives. I was afraid that if you knew this too soon, it would rob you of that hope. And yet to deprive you of this knowledge robbed you of the freedom to decide how to spend the years you have. I was going to tell you soon.

There are those who have said that because of this small genetic difference, you are not human. That because Anton's key requires two changes in the genome, not one, it could never have happened randomly, and therefore you represent a new species, created in the laboratory. But I tell you, you and Nikolai are twins, not separate species, and I, who have known you as well as any other person, have never seen anything from you but the best and purest of humanity. I know you will not accept my religious terminology, but you know what it means to me. You have a soul, my child. The Savior died for you as for every other human being ever born. Your life is of infinite worth to a loving God. And to me, my son.

You will find your own purpose for the time you have left to live. Do not be reckless with your life, just because it will not be long. But do not guard it overzealously, either. Death is not a tragedy to the one who dies. To have wasted the life before that death, that is the tragedy. Already you have used your years better than most. You will yet find many new purposes, and you will accomplish them. And if anyone in heaven heeds the voice of this old nun, you will be well watched over by angels and prayed for by many saints.

With love, Carlotta

Bean erased the letter. He could pull it from his dropsite and decode it again, if he needed to refer back to it. But it was burned into his memory. And not just as text on a desk display. He had heard it in Carlotta's voice, even as his eyes moved across the words that the desk put up before him.

He turned off the desk. He walked to the window and opened it. He looked out over the garden of the official residence. In the distance he could see airplanes making their approach to the airport, as others, having just taken off, rose up into the sky. He tried to picture Sister Carlotta's soul rising up like one of those airplanes. But the picture kept changing to an Air Shanghai flight coming in to land, and Sister Carlotta walking off the plane and looking him up and down and saying, "You need to buy new pants."

He went back inside and lay down on his mat, but not to sleep. He did not close his eyes. He stared at the ceiling and thought about death and life and love and loss. And as he did, he thought he could feel his bones grow.

DECISIONS

TREACHERY

To: Demosthenes%Tecumseh@freemercia.org
From: Unready%cincinnatus@anon.set
Re: Air Shanghai

The pinheads running this show have decided not to share satellite info on Air Shanghai with anyone outside the military, claiming that it involves vital interests of the United States. The only other countries with satellites capable of seeing what ours can see are China, Japan, and Brazil, and of these only China has a satellite in position to see it. So the Chinese know. And when I'm done with this letter, you'll know, and you'll know how to use the information. I don't like seeing big countries beat up on little ones, except when the big country is mine. So sue me.

The Air Shanghai flight was brought down by a ground-to-air missile, which was fired from INSIDE THAILAND. However, computer time-lapse tracking of movements in that area of Thailand show that the only serious candidate for how the ground-to-air missile got to its launch site is a utility truck whose movements originated in, get this, China.

Details: The truck (little white Vietnamese-made "Hog-type vehicle) originated at a warehouse in Gejiu (which has already been tagged as a munitions clearinghouse) and crossed the Vietnamese border between Jinping, China, and Sinh Ho, Vietnam. It then crossed the Laotian border via the Ded Tay Chang pass. It traversed the widest part of Laos and entered Thailand near Tha Li, but at this point moved off the main roads. It passed near enough to the point from which the missile was launched for it to have been offloaded and transported manually to the site. And get this: All this movement happened MORE THAN A MONTH AGO.

I don't know about you, but to me and everybody else here, that looks like China wants a "provocation" to go to war against Thailand. Bangkok-bound Air Shanghai jet, carrying mostly Thai passengers, is shot down, over China, by a g-to-a launched from Thailand. China can make it look as though the Thai Army was trying to create a fake provocation against them, when in fact the reverse is the case. Very complicated, but the Chinese know they can show satellite proof that the missile was launched from inside Thai-land. They can also prove that it had to have radar assistance from sophisticated military tracking systems-which will imply, in the Chinese version,

that the Thai military was behind it, though WE know it means the Chinese military was in control. And when the Chinese ask for independent corroboration, you can count on it: our beloved government, since it loves business better than honor, will back up the Chinese story, never mentioning the movements of that little truck. Thus America will stay in the good graces of its trading partner. And Thailand gets chiseled.

Do your thing, Demosthenes. Get this out into the public domain before our government can play toady. Just try to find a way to do it that doesn't point at me. This isn't just job-losing territory. I could go to jail.

When Suriyawong came to see if Bean wanted any dinner-a nine o'clock repast for the officers on duty, not an official meal with the P.M.-Bean almost followed him right down. He needed to eat, and now was as good a time as any. But he realized that he had not read any of his email after getting Sister Carlotta's last letter, so he told Suriyawong to start without him but save him a place.

He checked the dropsite that Peter had used to forward Carlotta's message, and found a more recent letter from Peter. This one included the text of a letter from one of Demosthenes' contacts inside the U.S. satellite intelligence service, and combined with Peter's own analysis of the situation, it made everything clear to Bean. He fired off a quick response, taking Peter's suspicions a step further, and then headed down to dinner.

Suriyawong and the adult officers-several of them field generals who had been summoned to Bangkok because of the crisis in the high command-were laughing. They fell silent when Bean entered the room. Ordinarily, he might have tried to put them at ease. Just because he was grieving did not change the fact that in the midst of crises, humor was needed to break the tension. But at this moment their silence was useful, and he used it.

"I just received information from one of my best sources of intelligence," Bean said. "You in this room are those who most need to hear it. But if the Prime Minister could also join us, it would save time."

One of the generals started to protest that a foreign child did not summon the Prime Minister of Thailand, but Suriyawong stood and bowed deeply to him. The man stopped talking. "Forgive me, sir," said Suriyawong, "but this foreign boy is Julian Delphiki, whose analysis of the final battle with the Formics led directly to Ender's victory."

Of course the general knew that already, but Suriyawong, by allowing him to pretend that he had not know, gave him a way to backpedal without losing face.

"I see," said the general. "Then perhaps the Prime Minister will not be offended at this summons."

Bean helped Suriyawong smooth things over as best he could. "Forgive me for having spoken with such rudeness. You were right to rebuke me. I can only hope you will excuse me for being forgetful of proper manners. The woman who raised me was on the Air Shanghai flight."

Again, the general certainly knew this; again, it allowed him to bow and murmur his commiseration. Proper respect had been shown to everyone. Now things could proceed.

The Prime Minister left his dinner with various high officials of the Chinese government, and stood against the wall, listening, as Bean relayed what he had learned from Peter about the source of the missile that brought down the jet.

"I have been in consultation off and on all day with the foreign minister of China," said the Prime Minister. "He has said nothing about the missile being launched from inside Thailand."

"When the Chinese government is ready to act on this provocation," said Bean, "they will pretend to have just discovered it."

The Prime Minister looked pained. "Could it not have been Indian operatives trying to make it seem that it was a Chinese venture?"

"It could have been anyone," said Bean. "But it was Chinese."

The prickly general spoke up. "How do you know this, if the satellite does not confirm it?"

"It would make little sense for it to be Indian," said Bean. "The only countries that could possibly detect the truck would be China and the U.S., which is well known to be in China's pocket. But China would know that they had not fired the missile, and they would know that Thailand had not fired it, so what would be the point?"

"It makes no sense for China to do it, either," said the Prime Minister.

"Sir," said Bean, "nothing makes sense in any of the things that have happened in the last few days. India has made a nonaggression pact with Pakistan and both nations have moved their troops away from their shared border. Pakistan is moving against Iran. India has invaded Burma, not because Burma is a prize, but because it stands between India and Thailand, which is. But India's attack makes no sense-right, Suriyawong?"

Suriyawong instantly understood that Bean was asking him to share in this, so that it would not all come from a European. "As Bean and I told the Chakri yesterday, the Indian attack on Burma is not just stupidly designed, it was deliberately stupidly designed. India has commanders wise enough and well-enough trained to know that sending masses of soldiers across the border, with the huge supply problem they represent, creates an easy target for our strategy of harassment. It also leaves them fully committed. And yet they have launched precisely such an attack."

"So much the better for us," said the prickly general.

"Sir," said Suriyawong, "it is important for you to understand that they have the services of Petra Arkanian, and both Bean and I know that Petra would never sign off on the strategy they're using. So that is obviously not their strategy."

"What does this have to do with the Air Shanghai flight?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Everything," said Bean. "And with the attempt on Suriyawong's and my life last night. The Chakri's little game was meant to provoke Thailand into an immediate entry into the war with India. And even though the ploy did not work, and the Chakri was exposed, we are still maintaining the fiction that it was an Indian provocation. Your meet-ings with the Chinese foreign minister are part of your effort to involve the Chinese in the war against India-no, don't tell me that you can't confirm or deny it, it's obvious that's what such meetings would have to be about. And I'll bet the Chinese are telling you that they are mass-ing troops on the Burmese border in order to attack the Indians sud-denly, when they are most exposed."

The Prime Minister, who had indeed been opening his mouth to speak, held his silence.

"Yes, of course they are telling you this. But the Indians also know that the Chinese are massing on the Burmese border, and yet they proceed with their attack on Burma, and their forces are almost fully committed, making no provision for defense against a Chinese attack from the north. Why? Are we going to pretend that the Indians are that stupid?"

It was Suriyawong who answered as it dawned on him. "The Indi-ans also have a nonaggression pact with China. They think the Chi-nese troops are massing at the border in order to attack us. They and the Indians have divided up southeast Asia."

"So this missile that the Chinese launched from Thailand to shoot down their own airliner over their own territory," said the Prime Min-ister, "that will be their excuse to break off negotiations and attack us by surprise?"

"No one is surprised by Chinese treachery," said one of the generals.

"But that's not the whole picture," said Bean. "Because we have not yet accounted for Achilles."

"He's in India," said Suriyawong. "He planned the attempt to kill us last night."

"And we know he planned that attempt," said Bean, "because I was there. He wanted you dead as a provocation, but he gave approval for it to happen last night because we would both be killed in the same explosion. And we know that he is behind the downing of the Air Shanghai jet, because even though the missile was in place for a month, ready to be fired, this was not yet the right moment to create the provocation. The Chinese foreign minister is still in Bangkok. Thailand has not yet had several days to commit its troops to battle, depleting our supplies and sending most of our forces on missions far to the northwest. Chinese troops have not yet fully deployed to the north of us. That missile should not have been fired for several days, at least. But it was fired this morning because Achilles knew Sister Carlotta was on that airplane, and he could not pass up the opportunity to kill her."

"But you said the missile was a Chinese operation," said the Prime Minister. "Achilles is in India."

"Achilles is in India, but is Achilles working for India?"

"Are you saying he's working for China?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Achilles is working for Achilles," said Suriyawong. "But yes, now the picture is clear."

"Not to me," said the prickly general.

Suriyawong eagerly explained. "Achilles has been setting India up from the beginning. While Achilles is still in Russia, he doubt-less used the Russian intelligence service to make contacts inside China. He promised he could hand them all of south and southeast Asia in a single blow. Then he goes to India and sets up a war in which India's army is fully committed in Burma. Until now, China has never been able to move against India, because the Indian Army was concentrated in the west and northwest, so that as Chinese troops came over the passes of the Himalayas, they were easily fought off by Indian troops. Now, though, the entire Indian Army is exposed, far from the heartland of India. If the Chinese can achieve a surprise attack and destroy that army, India will be defenseless. They will have no choice but to surrender. We're just a sideshow to them. They will attack us in order to lull the Indians into complacency."

"So they don't intend to invade Thailand?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Of course they do," said Bean. "They intend to rule from the Indus to the Mekong. But the Indian army is the main objective. Once that is destroyed, there is nothing in their way."

"And all this," said the prickly general, "we deduce from the fact that a certain Catholic nun was on the airplane?"

"We deduce this," said Bean, "from the fact that Achilles is controlling events in China, Thailand, and India. Achilles knew Sister Carlotta was on that plane because the Chakri intercepted my message to the Prime Minister. Achilles is running this show. He's betraying everybody to everybody else. And in the end, he stands at the top of a new empire that contains more than half the population of the world. China, India, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam. Everyone will have to accommodate this new superpower."

"But Achilles does not run China," said the Prime Minister. "As far as we know, he has never been in China."

"The Chinese no doubt think they're using him," said Bean. "But I know Achilles, and my guess is that within a year, the Chinese leaders will find themselves either dead or taking their orders from him."

"Perhaps," said the Prime Minister, "I should go warn the Chinese foreign minister of the great danger he is in."

The prickly general stood up. "This is what comes of allowing children to play at world affairs. They think that real life is like a computer game, a few mouse clicks and nations rise and fall."

"This is precisely how nations rise and fall," said Bean. "France in 1804. Napoleon remaking the map of Europe in the early 1800s, creating kingdoms so his brothers would have someplace to rule. The victors in World War 1, cutting up kingdoms and drawing insane lines on the map that would lead to war again and again. The Japanese conquest of most of the western Pacific in December of 1941. The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989. Events can be sudden indeed."

"But those were great forces at work," said the general.

"Napoleon's whims were not a great force. Nor was Alexander, toppling empires wherever he went. There was nothing inevitable about Greeks reaching the Indus."

"I don't need history lessons from you."

Bean was about to retort that yes, apparently he did-but Suriyawong shook his head. Bean got the message.

Suriyawong was right. The Prime Minister was not convinced, and the only generals who were speaking up were the ones who were downright hostile to Bean's and Suriyawong's ideas. If Bean continued to push, he would merely find himself marginalized in the coming war. And he needed to be in the thick of things, if he was to be able to use the strike force he had so laboriously created.

"Sir," said Bean to the general, "I did not mean to teach you anything. You have nothing to learn from me. I have merely offered you the information I received, and the conclusions I drew from it. If these conclusions are incorrect, I apologize for wasting your time. And if we proceed with the war against India, I ask only for the chance to serve Thailand honorably, in order to repay your kindness to me."

Before the general could say anything-and it was plain he was going to make a haughty reply-the Prime Minister intervened. "Thank you for giving us your best-Thailand survives in this difficult place because our people and our friends offer everything they have in the service of our small but beautiful land. Of course we will want to use you in the coming war. I believe you have a small strike force of highly trained and versatile Thai soldiers. I will see to it that your force is assigned to a commander who will find good use for that force, and for you."

It was a deft announcement to the generals at that table that Bean and Suriyawong were under his protection. Any general who attempted to quash their participation would simply find that they were assigned to another command. Bean could not have hoped for more.

"And now," said the Prime Minister, "while I am happy to have spent this quarter hour in your company, gentlemen, I have the foreign minister of China no doubt wondering why I am so rude as to stay away for all this time."

The Prime Minister bowed and left.

At once the prickly general and the others who were most skeptical returned to the joking conversation that Bean's arrival had interrupted, as if nothing had happened.

But General Phet Noi, who was field commander of all Thai forces in the Malay Peninsula, beckoned to Suriyawong and Bean. Suriyawong picked up his plate and moved to a place beside Phet Noi, while Bean paused only to fill his own plate from the pots on serving table before joining them.

"So you have a strike force," said Phet Noi.

"Air, sea, and land," said Bean.

"The main. Indian offensive," said Phet Noi, "is in the north. My army will be watching for Indian landings on the coast, but our role will be vigilance, not combat. Still, I think that if your strike force launched its missions from the south, you would be less likely to become tangled up in raids originating in the much more important northern commands."

Phet Noi obviously knew that his own command was the one least important to the conduct of the war-but he was as determined to get involved as Bean and Suriyawong were. They could help each other. For the rest of the meal, Bean and Suriyawong conversed earnestly with Phet Noi, discussing where in the Malay panhandle of Thailand the strike force might best be stationed. Finally, they were the last three at table.

"Sir," said Bean, "now that we're alone, the three of us, there is something I must tell you."

"Yes?"

"I will serve you loyally, and I will obey your orders. But if the opportunity comes, I will use my strike force to accomplish an objective that is not, strictly speaking, important to Thailand."

"And that is?"

"My friend Petra Arkanian is the hostage-no, I believe she is the virtual slave-of Achilles. Every day she lives in constant danger. When I have the information necessary to make success likely, I will use my strike force to bring her out of Hyderabad."

Phet Noi thought about this, his face showing nothing. "You know that Achilles may be holding on to her precisely because she is the bait that will lure you into a trap."

"That is possible," said Bean, "but I don't believe that it's what Achilles is doing. He believes he is able to kill anyone, anywhere. He doesn't need to set traps for me. To lie in wait is a sign of weakness. I believe he's holding on to Petra for his own reasons."

"You know him," said Phet Noi, "and I do not." He reflected for a moment. "As I listened to what you said about Achilles and his plans and treacheries, I believed that events might unfold exactly as you said. What I could not see was how Thailand could possibly turn this into victory. Even with advance warning, we can't prevail against China in the field of battle. China's supply lines into Thailand would be short. Almost a quarter of the population of Thailand is Chinese in origin, and

while most of them are loyal Thai citizens, a large fraction of them still regard China as their homeland. China would not lack for saboteurs and collaborators within our country, while India has no such connection. How can we prevail?"

"There is only one way," said Bean. "Surrender at once."

"What?" said Suriyawong.

"Prime Minister Paribatra should go to the Chinese foreign minister, declare that Thailand wishes to be an ally of China. We will put most of our military temporarily under Chinese command to be used against the Indian aggressors as needed, and will supply not only our own armies, but the Chinese armies as well, to the limit of our abilities. Chinese merchants will have unrestricted access to Thai markets and manufacturing."

"But that would be shameful," said Suriyawong.

"It was shameful," said Bean, "when Thailand allied itself with Japan during World War 11, but Thailand survived and Japanese troops did not occupy Thailand. It was shameful when Thailand bowed to the Europeans and surrendered Laos and Cambodia to France, but the heart of Thailand remained free. If Thailand doesn't preemptively ally itself to China and give China a free hand, then China will rule here anyway, but Thailand itself will utterly lose its freedom and its national existence, for many years at least, and perhaps forever."

"Am I listening to an oracle?" asked Phet Noi.

"You are listening to the fears of your own heart," said Bean. "Sometimes you have to feed the tiger so it won't devour you."

"Thailand will never do this," said Phet Noi.

"Then I suggest you make arrangements for your escape and life in exile," said Bean, "because when the Chinese take over, the ruling class is destroyed."

They all knew Bean was talking about the conquest of Taiwan. All government officials and their families, all professors, all journalists, all writers, all politicians and their families were taken from Taiwan to reeducation camps in the western desert, where they were set to work performing manual labor, they and their children, for the rest of their lives. None of them ever returned to Taiwan. None of their children ever received approval for education beyond the age of fourteen. The method had been so effective in pacifying Taiwan that there was no chance they would not use the same method in their conquests now.

"Would I be a traitor, to plan for defeat by creating my own escape route?" Phet Noi wondered aloud.

"Or would you be a patriot, keeping at least one Thai general and his family out of the hands of the conquering enemy?" asked Bean.

"Is our defeat certain, then?" asked Suriyawong.

"You can read a map," said Bean. "But miracles happen."

Bean left them to their silent thoughts and returned to his room, to report to Peter on the likely Thai response.

ON A BRIDGE

TO: Chamrajnagar@sacredriver@ifcom.gov From: Wiggin@resistance@haiti.gov

Re: For the sake of India, please do not set foot on Earth

Esteemed Polemarch Chamrajnagar,

For reasons that will be made clear by the attached essay, which I will soon publish, I fully expect that you will return to Earth just in time to be caught up in India's complete subjugation by China.

If your return to India had any chance of preserving her independence, you would bear any risk and return, regardless of any advice. And if your establishing a government in exile could accomplish anything for your native land, who would try to persuade you to do otherwise?

But India's strategic position is so exposed, and China's relentlessness in conquest is so well known, that you must know both courses of action are futile.

Your resignation as Polemarch does not take effect until you reach Earth. If you do not board the shuttle, but instead return to IFCOM, you remain Polemarch. You are the only possible Polemarch who could secure the International Fleet. A new commander could not distinguish between Chinese who are loyal to the Fleet and those whose first allegiance is to their now-dominant homeland. The I.F. must not fall under the sway of Achilles. You, as Polemarch, could reassign suspect Chinese to innocuous postings, preventing any Chinese grab for control. If you return to Earth, and Achilles has influence over your successor as Polemarch, the I.F. will become a tool of conquest.

If you remain as Polemarch, you will be accused, as an Indian, of planning to pursue vengeance against China. Therefore, to prove your impartiality and avoid suspicion, you will have to remain utterly aloof from all Earthside wars and struggles. You can trust me and my allies to maintain the resistance to Achilles regardless of the apparent odds, if for no other reason than this: His ultimate triumph means our immediate death.

Stay in space and, by doing so, allow the possibility of humanity escaping the domination of a madman. In return, I vow to do all in my power to free India from Chinese rule and return it to self-rule.

Sincerely, Peter Wiggin

The soldiers around her knew perfectly well who Virloomi was. They also knew the reward that had been offered for her capture--or her dead body. The charge was treason and espionage. But from the start, as she passed through the checkpoint at the entrance of the base at Hyderabad, the common soldiers had believed in her and befriended her.

"You will hear me accused of spying or worse," she said, "but it isn't true. A treacherous foreign monster rules in Hyderabad, and he wants me dead for personal reasons. Help me."

Without a word, the soldiers walked her away from where the cameras might spot her, and waited. When an empty supply truck came up, they stopped it and while some of them talked to the driver, the others helped her get in. The truck drove through, and she was out.

Ever since, she had turned to the footsoldiers for help. Officers might or might not let compassion or righteousness interfere with obedience or ambition--the common soldiers had no such qualms. She was transported in the midst of a crush of soldiers on a crowded train, offered so much food smuggled out of mess halls that she could not eat it all, and given bunk space while weary men slept on the floor. No one laid a hand on her except to help her, and none betrayed her.

She moved across India to the east, toward the war zone, for she knew that her only hope, and the only hope for Petra Arkanian, was for her to find, or be found by, Bean.

Virloomi knew where Bean would be: making trouble for Achilles wherever and however he could. Since the Indian Army had chosen the dangerous and foolish strategy of committing all its manpower to battle, she knew that the effective counterstrategy would be harassment and disruption of supply lines. And Bean would come to whatever point on the supply line was most crucial and yet most difficult to

So, as she neared the front, Virloomi went over in her mind the map she had memorized. To move large amounts of supplies and munitions quickly from India to the troops sweeping through the great plain where the Irrawaddy flowed, there were two general routes. The northern route was easier, but far more exposed to raids. The southern route was harder, but more protected. Bean would be working on disrupting the southern route.

Where? There were two roads over the mountains from Imphal in India to Kalemio in Burma. They both passed through narrow canyons and crossed deep gorges. Where would it be hardest to rebuild a blown bridge or a collapsed highway? On both routes, there were candidate locations. But the hardest to rebuild was on the western route, a long stretch of road carved out of rock along the edge of a steep defile, leading to a bridge over a deep gorge. Bean would not just blow up this bridge, Virloomi thought, because it would not be that hard to span. He would also collapse the road in several places, so the engineers wouldn't be able to get to the place where the bridge must be anchored without first blasting and shaping a new road.

So that is where Virloomi went, and waited.

Water she found flowing cleanly through the side ravines. She was given food by passing soldiers, and soon learned that they were looking for her. Word had spread that the Woman-in-hiding needed

food. And still no officer knew to look for her, and still no assassin from Achilles came to kill her. Poor as the soldiers were, apparently the reward did not tempt them. She was proud of her people even as she mourned for them, to have such a man as Achilles rule over them.

She heard of daring raids at easier spots on the eastern road, and traffic on the western road grew heavier, the roads trembling day and night as India burned up her fuel reserves supplying an army far larger than the war required. She asked the soldiers if they had heard of Thai raiders led by a child, and they laughed bitterly. "Two children," they said. "One white, one brown. They come in their helicopters, they destroy, they leave. Whomever they touch, they kill. Whatever they see, they destroy."

Now she began to worry. What if the one that came to take this bridge was not Bean, but the other one? No doubt another Battle School grad-Suriyawong came to mind-but would Bean have told him about her letter? Would he have any idea that she held within her head the plan of the base at Hyderabad? That she knew where Petra was?

Yet she had no choice. She would have to show herself, and hope.

So the days passed, waiting for the sound of the helicopters coming, bringing the strike force that would destroy this road.

Suriyawong had never been a commander in Battle School. They closed down the program before he rose to that position. But he had dreamed of command, studied it, planned it, and now, working with Bean in command of this or that configuration of their strike force, he finally understood the terror and exhilaration of having men listen to you, obey you, throw themselves into action and risk death because they trust you. Each time, because these men were so well-trained and resourceful and their tactics so effective, he brought back his whole complement. Injuries, but no deaths. Aborted missions, sometimes but no deaths.

"It's the aborted missions," said Bean, "that earn you their trust. When you see that it's more dangerous than we anticipated, that it requires attrition to get the objective, then show the men you value their lives more than the objective of the moment. Later, when you have no choice but to commit them to grave risk, they'll know it's because this time it's worth dying. They know you won't spend them like a child, on candy and trash."

Bean was right, which hardly surprised Suriyawong. Bean was not just the smartest, he had also watched Ender close at hand, had been Ender's secret weapon in Dragon Army, had been his backup commander on Eros. Of course he knew what leadership was.

What surprised Suriyawong was Bean's generosity. Bean had created this strike force, and trained these men, had earned their trust. Throughout that time, Suriyawong had been of little help, and had shown outright hostility at times. Yet Bean included Suriyawong, entrusted him with command, encouraged the men to help Suriyawong learn what they could do. Through it all, Bean had never treated Suriyawong as a subordinate or inferior, but rather had deferred to him as his superior officer.

In return, Suriyawong never commanded Bean to do anything. Rather they reached a consensus on most things, and when they could not agree, Suriyawong deferred to Bean's decision and supported him in it.

Bean has no ambition, Suriyawong realized. He has no wish to be better than anyone else, or to rule over anyone, or to have more honor.

Then, on the missions where they worked together, Suriyawong saw something else: Bean had no fear of death.

Bullets could be flying, explosives could be near detonation, and Bean would move without fear and with only token concealment. It was as if he dared the enemy to shoot him, dared their own explosives to defy him and go off before he was ready.

Was this courage? Or did he wish for death? Had Sister Carlotta's death taken away some of his will to live? To hear him talk, Suriyawong would not have supposed it. Bean was too grimly determined to rescue Petra for Suriyawong to believe that he wanted to die. He had something urgent to live for. And yet he showed no fear of battle.

It was as if he knew the day that he would die, and this was not that day.

He certainly hadn't stopped caring about anything. Indeed, the quiet, icy, controlled, arrogant Bean that Suriyawong had known before had become, since the day Carlotta died, impatient and agitated. The calm he showed in battle, in front of the men, was certainly not there when he was alone with Suriyawong and Phet Noi. And the favorite object of his curses was not Achilles-he almost never spoke of Achilles-but Peter Wiggin.

"He's had everything for a month! And he does these little things-persuading Chamrajnagar not to return to Earth yet, persuading Ghaffar Wahabi not to invade Iran-and he tells me about them, but the big thing, publishing Achilles' whole treacherous strategy, he won't do that-and he tells me not to do it myself! Why not? If the Indian government could be forced to see how Achilles plans to betray them, they might be able to pull enough of their army out of Burma to make a stand against the Chinese. Russia might be able to intervene. The Japanese fleet might threaten Chinese trade. At the very least, the Chinese themselves might see Achilles for what he is, and jettison him even as they follow his plan! And all he says is, It's not the right moment, it's too soon, not yet, you have to trust me, I'm with you on this, right to the end."

He was scarcely kinder in his execrations of the Thai generals running the war---or ruining it, as he said. Suriyawong had to agree with him-the whole plan depended on keeping Thai forces dispersed, but now that the Thai Air Force had control of the air over Burma, they had concentrated their armies and airbases in forward positions. "I told them what the danger was," said Bean, "and they still gather their forces into one convenient place."

Phet Noi listened patiently; Suriyawong, too, gave up trying to argue with him. Bean was right. People were behaving foolishly, and not out of ignorance. Though of course they would say, later, "But we didn't know Bean was right."

To which Bean already had his answer: "You didn't know I was wrong! So you should have been prudent!"

The only thing different in Bean's diatribes was that he went hoarse for a week, and when his voice came back, it was lower. For a kid who had always been so tiny, even for his age, puberty-if that's what this was--certainly had struck him young. Or maybe he had just stretched out his vocal cords with all his ranting.

But now, on a mission, Bean was silent, the calm of battle already on him. Suriyawong and Bean boarded their choppers last, making sure all their men were aboard; one last salute to each other, and then they ducked inside and the door closed and the choppers rose into the air. They jetted along near the surface of the Indian Ocean, the chopper blades folded and enclosed until they got near Cheduba Island, today's staging area. Then the choppers dispersed, rose into the air, cut the jets, and opened their blades for vertical landing.

Now they would leave behind their reserves-the men and choppers that could bring out anyone stranded by a mechanical problem or unforeseen complication. Bean and Suriyawong never rode together-one chopper failure should not behead the mission. And each of them had redundant equipment, so that either could complete the whole mission. More than once, the redundancy had saved lives and missions-Phet Noi made sure they were always equipped because, as he said, "You give the materiel to the commanders who know how to use it."

Bean and Suriyawong were too busy to chat in the staging area, but they did come together for a few moments, as they watched the reserve team camouflage their choppers and scrim their solar collectors. "You know what I wish?" said Bean.

"You mean besides wanting to be an astronaut when you grow up?" said Suriyawong.

"That we could scrub this mission and take off for Hyderabad."

"And get ourselves killed without ever seeing a sign of Petra, who has probably already been moved to someplace in the Himalayas."

"That's the genius of my plan," said Bean. "I take a herd of cattle hostage and threaten to shoot a cow a day till they bring her back."

"Too risky. The cows always make a break for it." But SuriyaWong knew that to Bean, the inability to do anything for Petra was a constant ache. "We'll do it. Peter's looking for someone who'll give him current information about Hyderabad."

"Like he's working on publishing Achilles' plans." The favorite diatribe. Only because they were on mission, Bean remained calm, ironic rather than furious.

"All done," said Suriyawong.

"See you in the mountains."

It was a dangerous mission. The enemy couldn't watch every kilometer of highway, but they had learned to converge quickly when the Thai choppers were spotted, and their strike force was having to finish their missions with less and less time to spare. And this spot was likely to be defended. That was why Bean's contingent-four of the five companies-would be deployed to clear away any defenders and protect Suriyawong's group while they laid the charges and blew up the road and the bridge.

All was going according to plan-indeed, better than expected, because the enemy seemed not to know they were there-when one of the men pointed out, "There's a woman on the bridge."

"A civilian?"

"You need to see," said the soldier.

Suriyawong left the spot where the explosives were being placed and climbed back up to the bridge. Sure enough, a young Indian woman was standing there, her arms stretched out toward either side of the ravine.

"Has anyone mentioned to her that the bridge is going to explode, and we don't actually care if anyone's on it?"

"Sir," said the soldier, "she's asking for Bean."

"By name?"

He nodded.

Suriyawong looked at the woman again. A very young woman. Her clothing was filthy, tattered. Had it once been a military uniform? It certainly wasn't the way local women dressed.

She looked at him. "Suriyawong," she called.

Behind him, he could hear several soldiers exhale or gasp in surprise or wonder. How did this Indian woman know? It worried Suriyawong a little. The soldiers were reliable in almost everything, but if they once got godstuff into their heads, it could complicate everything.

"I'm Suriyawong," he said.

"You were in Dragon Army," she said. "And you work with Bean."

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I want to talk with you privately, here on the bridge."

"Sir, don't go," said the soldier. "Nobody's shooting, but we've spotted a half-dozen Indian soldiers. You're dead if you go out there."

What would Bean do?

Suriyawong stepped out onto the bridge, boldly but not in any hurry. He waited for the gunshot, wondering if he would feel the pain of impact before he heard the sound. Would the nerves of his ears report to his brain faster than the nerves of whatever body part the bullet tore into? Or would the sniper hit him in the head, mooting the point?

No bullet. He came near her, and stopped when she said, "This is as close as you should come, or they'll worry and shoot you."

"You control those soldiers?" asked Suriyawong

"Don't you know me yet?" she said. "I'm Virloomi. I was ahead of you in Battle School."

He knew the name. He would never have recognized her face. "You left before I got there."

"Not many girls in Battle School. I thought the legend would live on."

"I heard of you."

"I'm a legend here, too. My people aren't firing because they think I know what I'm doing out here. And I thought you recognized me, because your soldiers on both sides of this ravine have refrained from shooting any of the Indian soldiers, even though I know they've spotted them."

"Maybe Bean recognized you," said Suriyawong. "In fact, I've heard your name more recently. You're the one who wrote back to him, aren't you? You were in Hyderabad."

"I know where Petra is."

"Unless they've moved her."

"Do you have any better sources? I tried to think of any way I could to get a message to Bean without getting caught. Finally I realized there was no computer solution. I had to bring the message in my head."

"So come with us."

"Not that simple," she said. "If they think I'm a captive, you'll never get out of here. Handheld g-to-a."

"Ouch," said Suriyawong. "Ambush. They knew we were coming?"

"No," said Virlomi. "They knew I was here. I didn't say anything, but they all knew that the Woman-in-hiding was at this bridge, so they figured that the gods were protecting this place."

"And the gods needed g-to-a missiles?"

"No, I'm the one they're protecting. The gods have the bridge, the men have me. So here's the deal. You pull your explosives off the bridge. Abort the mission. They see that I have the power to make the enemy go away without harming anything. And then they watch me call one of your departing choppers down to me, and I get on of my own free will. That's the only way you're getting out of here. Not really anything I designed, but I don't see any other way out."

"I always hate aborting missions," said Suriyawong. But before she could argue, he laughed and said, "No, don't worry, it's fine. It's a good plan. If Bean were down here on this bridge, he'd agree in a heartbeat."

Suriyawong walked back to his men. "No, it's not a god or a holy woman. She's Virlomi, a Battle School grad, and she has intelligence that's more valuable than this bridge. We're aborting the mission."

The soldier took this in, and Suriyawong could see him trying to factor the magical element in with the orders.

"Soldier," said Suriyawong, "I have not been bewitched. This woman knows the groundplan of the Indian Army high command base in Hyderabad."

"Why would an Indian give that to us?" the soldier asked.

"Because the bunduck who's running the Indian side of the war has a prisoner there who's vital to the war."

Now it was making sense to the soldier. The magic element receded. He pulled his satrad off his belt and punched in the abort code. All the other satrads immediately vibrated in the preset pattern.

At once the explosives teams began dismantling. If they were to evacuate without dismantling, a second code, for urgency, would be sent. Suriyawong did not want any part of their materiel to fall into Indian hands. And he thought a more leisurely pace might be better.

"Soldier, I need to seem to be hypnotized by this woman," he said. "I am not hypnotized, but I'm faking it so the Indian soldiers all around us will think she's controlling me. Got that?"

"Yes sir."

"So while I walk back toward her, you call Bean and tell him that I need all the choppers but mine to evacuate, so the Indians can see they're gone. Then say 'Petra.' Got that? Tell him nothing else, no matter what he asks. We may be monitored, if not here, then in Hyderabad." Or Beijing, but he didn't want to complicate things by saying that.

"Yes sir."

Suriyawong turned his back on the soldier, walked three paces closer to Virlomi, and then prostrated himself before her.

Behind him, he could hear the soldier saying exactly what he had been told to say.

And after a very little while, choppers began to rise into the air from both sides of the ravine. Bean's troops were on the way out.

Suriyawong got up and returned to his men. His company had come in two choppers. "All of you get in the chopper with the explosives," he said. "Only the pilot and co-pilot stay in the other chopper."

The men obeyed immediately, and within three minutes Suriyawong was alone at his end of the bridge. He turned and bowed once again to Virlomi, then walked calmly to his chopper and climbed aboard.

"Rise slowly," he told the pilot, "and then pass slowly near the woman in the middle of the bridge, doorside toward her. At no point is any weapon to be trained on her. Nothing remotely threatening."

Suriyawong watched through the window. Virlomi was not signaling.

"Rise higher, as if we were leaving," said Suriyawong.

The pilot obeyed.

Finally, Virlomi began waving her arms, beckoning with both of them, slowly, as if she were reeling them back in with each movement of her arms.

"Slow down and then begin to descend toward her. I want no chance of error. The last thing we need is some downdraft to get her caught in the blades."

The pilot laughed grimly and brought the chopper like a dancer down onto the bridge, far enough away that Virlomi wasn't actually under the blades, but close enough that it would be only a few steps for her to come aboard.

Suriyawong ran to the door and opened it.

Virlomi did not just walk to the chopper. She danced to it, making ritual-like circling movements with each step.

On impulse, he got out of the chopper and prostrated himself again. When she got near enough, he said-loud enough to be heard over the chopper blades-"Walk on me!"

She did, planting her bare feet on his shoulders and walking down his back. Suriyawong didn't know how they could have communicated more clearly to the Indian soldiers that not only had Virlomi saved their bridge, she had also taken control of this chopper.

She was inside.

He got up, turned slowly, and sauntered onto the chopper.

The sauntering ended the moment he was inside. He rammed the door lever up into place and shouted, "I want jets as fast as you can!"

The chopper rose dizzily. "Strap down," Suriyawong ordered Virlomi. Then, seeing she wasn't familiar with the inside of this craft, he pushed her into place and put the ends of her harness into her hands. She got it at once and finished the job while he hurled himself into his place and got his straps in place just as the chopper cut the blades and plummeted for a moment before the jets kicked in. Then they rocketed down the ravine and out of range of the handheld g-to-a missiles.

"You just made my day," said Suriyawong.

"Took you long enough," said Virlomi. "I thought this bridge was one of the first places you'd hit."

"We figured that's what people would think, so we kept not coming here."

"Greeyaz," she said. "I should have remembered to think completely ass-backward in order to predict what Battle School brats would do."

Bean had known the moment he saw her on the bridge that she had to be Virlomi, the Indian Battle Schooler who had answered his Briseis posting. He could only trust that Suriyawong would realize what was happening before he found the need to shoot somebody. And Surly had not let him down.

When they got back to the staging area, Bean barely greeted Virlomi before he started giving orders. "I want the whole staging area dismantled. Everybody's coming with us." While the company commanders saw to that, Bean ordered one of the chopper communications team to set up a net connection for him.

"That's satellite," the soldier said. "We'll be located right away."

"We'll be gone before anyone can react," said Bean.

Only then did he start explaining to Suriyawong and Virlomi. "We're fully equipped, right?"

"But not fully fueled."

"I'll take care of that," he said. "We're going to Hyderabad right now."

"But I haven't even drawn up the plans."

"Time for that in the air," he said. "This time we ride together, Suriyawong. Can't be helped-we both have to know the whole plan."

"We've waited this long," said Suriyawong. "What's the hurry now?"

"Two things," said Bean. "How long do you think it'll be before word reaches Achilles that our strike force picked up an Indian woman who was waiting for us on a bridge? Second thing-I'm going to force Peter Wiggin's hand. All hell is going to break loose, and we're riding the wave."

"What's the objective?" asked Virlomi. "To save Petra? To kill Achilles?"

"To bring out every Battle School kid who'll come with us."

"They'll never leave India," she said. "I may decide to stay myself."

"Wrong on both counts," said Bean. "I give India less than a week before Chinese troops have control of New Delhi and Hyderabad and any other city they want."

"Chinese?" asked Virlomi. "But there's some kind of--"

"Nonaggression pact?" said Bean. "Arranged by Achilles?"

"He's been working for China all along," said Suriyawong. "The Indian Army is exposed, undersupplied, exhausted, demoralized."

"But ... if China comes in on the side of the Thai, isn't that what you want?"

Suriyawong gave a sharp, bitter laugh. "China comes in on the side of China. We tried to warn our own people, but they're sure they have a deal with Beijing."

Virlomi understood at once. Battle School-trained, she knew how to think the way Bean and Suriyawong did. "So that's why Achilles didn't use Petra's plan."

Bean and Suriyawong laughed and gave short little bows to each other.

"You knew about Petra's plan?"

"We assumed there'd be a better plan than the one India's using."

"So you have a plan to stop China?" said Virlomi.

"Not a chance," said Bean. "China might have been stopped a month ago, but nobody listened." He thought of Peter and barely stanching the fury. "Achilles himself may still be stopped, or at least weakened. But our goal is to keep the Indian Battle School team from falling into Chinese hands."

Our Thai friends already have escape routes planned. So when we get to Hyderabad, we not only need to find Petra, we need to offer escape to anyone who'll come. Will they listen to you?"

"We'll see, won't we?" said Virlomi.

"The connection's ready," said a soldier. "I didn't actually link yet, because that's when the clock starts ticking."

"Do it," said Bean. "I've got some things to say to Peter Wiggin."

I'm coming, Petra. I'm getting you out.

As for Achilles, if he happens to come within my reach, there'll be no mercy this time, no relying on someone else to keep him out of circulation. I'll kill him without discussion. And my men will have orders to do the same.

encrypt key decrypt key
To: Locke%erasmus@polnet.gov
From: Borommakot@chakri.thai.gov/scom
Re: Now, or I will

I'm in a battlefield situation and I need two things from you, now.

First, I need permission from the Sri Lankan government to land at the base at Kilinochchi to refuel, ETA less than an hour. This is a nonmilitary rescue mission to retrieve Battle School graduates in imminent danger of capture, torture, enslavement, or at the very least imprisonment.

Second, to justify this and all other actions I'm about to take; to persuade those Battle Schoolers to come with me; and to create confusion in Hyderabad, I need you to publish now. Repeat, NOW. Or I will publish my own article, here attached, which specifically names you as a coconspirator with the Chinese, as proven by your failure to publish what you know in a timely manner. Even though I don't have Locke's worldwide reach, I have a nice little email list of my own, and my article will get attention. Yours, however, would have far faster results, and I would prefer it to come from you.

Pardon my threat. I can't afford to play any more of your "wait for the right time" games. I'm getting Petra out.

encrypt key decrypt key
TO: Borommakot@chakri.thai.gov/scom
From: Locke%erasmus@polnet.gov
Re: Done

Confirmed: Sri Lanka grants landing permission/refueling privileges at Kilinochchi for aircraft on humanitarian mission. Thai markings?

Confirmed: my essay released as of now, worldwide push distribution. This includes urgent fyi push into the systems at Hyderabad and Bangkok.

Your threat was sweetly loyal to your friend, but not necessary. This was the time I was waiting for. Apparently you didn't realize that the moment I published, Achilles would have to move his operations, and would probably take Petra with him. How would you have found her, if I had published a month ago?

encrypt key decrypt key
To: Locke%erasmus@polnet.gov
From: Borommakot@chakri.thai.gov/scom
Re: Done

Confirm: Thai markings

As to your excuse: Kuso. If that had been your reason for delay, you would have told me a month ago. I know the real reason, even if you don't, and it makes me sick.

For two weeks after Virlomi disappeared, Achilles had not once come into the planning room- which no one minded, especially after the reward was issued for Virlomi's return. No one dared speak of it openly, but all were glad she had escaped Achilles' vengeance. They were all aware, of course, of the heightened security around them for their "protection." But it didn't change their lives much. It wasn't as if any of them had ever had time to go frolicking in downtown Hyderabad, or fraternizing with officers twice or three times their age on the base.

Petra was skeptical of the reward offer, though. She knew Achilles well enough to know that he was perfectly capable of offering a reward for the capture of someone he had already killed. What safer cover could he have? Still, if that were the case it would imply that he did not have carte blanche from Mal Chapekar- if he had to hide things from the Indian government, it meant Achilles was not yet running everything.

When he did return, there was no sign of a bruise on his face. Either Petra's kick had not left a mark, or it took two weeks for it to heal completely. Her own bruises were not yet gone, but no one could see them, since they were under her shirt. She wondered if he had any testicular pain. She wondered if he had had to see a urologist. She did not allow any trace of her gloating to appear on her face.

Achilles was full of talk about how well the war was going and what a good job they were doing in Planning. The army was well supplied and despite the harassment of the cowardly Thai military, the campaign was moving forward on schedule. The revised schedule, of course.

Which was such greenez. He was talking to the planners. They knew perfectly well that the army was bogged down, that they were still fighting the Burmese in the Irrawaddy plain because the Thai Army's harassment tactics made it impossible to mount the crushing offensive that would have driven the Burmese into the mountains and allowed the Indian Army to proceed into Thailand. Schedule? There was no schedule now.

What Achilles was telling them was: This is the party line. Make sure no memo or email from this room gives anyone even the slightest hint that events are not going according to plan.

It did not change the fact that everyone in Planning could smell defeat. Supplying a huge army on the move was taxing enough to India's limited resources. Supplying it when half the supplies were likely to disappear due to enemy action was chewing through India's resources faster than they could hope to replenish them.

At current rates of manufacture and consumption, the army would run out of munitions in seven weeks. But that would hardly matter unless some miracle happened, they would run out of nonrenewable fuel in four.

Everyone knew that if Petra's plan had been followed, India would have been able to continue such an offensive indefinitely, and attrition would already have destroyed Burmese resistance. The war would already be on Thai soil, and the Indian Army would not be limping along with a relentless deadline looming up behind them.

They did not talk in the planning room, but at meals they carefully, obliquely, discussed things. Was it too late to revert to the other strategy? Not really-but it would require a strategic withdrawal of the bulk of India's army, which would be impossible to conceal from the people and the media. Politically, it would be a disaster. But then, running out of bullets or fuel would be even more disastrous.

"We have to draw up plans for withdrawal anyway," said Sayagi. "Unless some miracle happens in the field-some brilliance in a field commander that has hitherto been invisible, some political collapse in Burma or Thailand-we're going to need a plan to extricate our people."

"I don't think we'll get permission to spend time on that," someone answered.

Petra rarely said anything at meals, despite her new custom of sitting at table with one or another group from Planning. This time, though, she spoke up. "Do it in your heads," she said.

They paused for a moment, and then Sayagi nodded. "Good plan. No confrontation."

From then on, part of mealtime consisted of cryptic reports from each member of the team on the status of every portion of the withdrawal plan.

Another time that Petra spoke had nothing to do with military planning, per se. Someone had jokingly said that this would be a good time for Bose to return. Petra knew the story of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Netaji of the Japanese-backed anti-British-rule Indian National Army during World War II. When he died in a plane crash on the way to Japan at the end of the war, the legend among the Indian people was that he was not really dead, but lived on, planning to return someday to lead the people to freedom. In the centuries since then, invoking the return of Bose was both a joke and a serious comment-that the current leadership was as illegitimate as the British Raj had been.

From the mention of Bose, the conversation turned to a discussion of Gandhi. Someone started talking about "peaceful resistance"-never implying that anyone in Planning might contemplate such a thing, of course-and someone else said, "No, that's passive resistance."

That was when Petra spoke up. "This is India, and you know the word. It's satyagraha, and it doesn't mean peaceful or passive resistance at all."

"Not everyone here speaks Hindi," said a Tamil planner.

"But everyone here should know Gandhi," said Petra.

Sayagi agreed with her. "Satyagraha is something else. The willingness to endure great personal suffering in order to do what's right."

"What's the difference, really?"

"Sometimes," said Petra, "what's right is not peaceful or passive. What matters is that you do not hide from the consequences. You bear what must be borne."

"That sounds more like courage than anything else," said the Tamil.

"Courage to do right," said Sayagi. "Courage even when you can't win."

"What happened to 'discretion is the better part of valor'?"

"A quotation from a cowardly character in Shakespeare," someone else pointed out.

"Not contradictory anyway," said Sayagi. "Completely different circumstances. If there's a chance of victory later through withdrawal now, you keep your forces intact. But personally, as an individual, if you know that the price of doing right is terrible loss or suffering or even death, satyagraha means that you are all the more determined to do right, for fear that fear might make you unrighteous."

"Oh, paradoxes within paradoxes."

But Petra turned it from superficial philosophy to something else entirely. "I am trying," she said, "to achieve satyagraha."

And in the silence that followed, she knew that some, at least, understood. She was alive right now because she had not achieved satyagraha, because she had not always done the right thing, but had done only what was necessary to survive. And she was preparing to change that. To do the right thing regardless of whether she lived through it or not. And for whatever reason-respect for her, uncomfortableness with the intensity of it, or serious contemplation-they remained silent until the meal ended and they spoke again of quotidian things.

Now the war had been going for a month, and Achilles was giving them daily pep talks about how victory was imminent even as they wrestled privately with the growing problems of extricating the army. There had been some victories, and at two points the Indian Army was now in Thai territory-but that only lengthened the supply lines and put the army into mountainous country again, where their large numbers could not be brought to bear against the enemy, yet still had to be supplied. And these offensives had chewed through fuel and munitions. In a few days, they would have to choose between fueling tanks and fueling supply trucks. They were about to become a very hungry all-infantry army.

As soon as Achilles left, Sayagi stood up. "It is time to write down our plan for withdrawal and submit it. We must declare victory and withdraw."

There was no dissent. Even though the vids and the nets were full of stories of the great Indian victories, the advance into Thailand, these plans had to be written down, the orders drawn up, while there was still time and fuel enough to carry them out.

So they spent that morning writing each component of the plan. Sayagi, as their de facto leader, assembled them into a single, fairly coherent set of documents. In the meantime, Petra browsed the net and worked on the project she had been assigned by Achilles, taking no part in what they were doing. They didn't need her for this, and it was her desk that was most closely monitored by Achilles. As long as she was being obedient, Achilles might not notice that the others were not.

When they were almost done, she spoke up, even though she knew that Achilles would be notified quickly of what she said-that he might even be listening through that hearing aid in his ear. "Before you email it," she said, "post it."

At first they probably thought she meant the internal posting, where they could all read it. But then they saw that, using her fingernail on a piece of rough tan toilet paper, she had scratched a net address and was now holding it out.

It was Peter Wiggin's "Locke" forum.

They looked at her like she was crazy. To post military plans in a public place?

But then Sayagi began to nod. "They intercept all our emails," he said. "This is the only way it will get to Chapekar himself."

"To make military secrets public," someone said. He did not need to finish. They knew the penalty.

"Satyagraha," said Sayagi. He took the toilet paper with the address and sat down to go to that netsite. "I am the one doing this, and no one else," he said. "The rest of you warned me not to. There is no reason for more than one person to risk the consequences." Moments later, the data was flowing to Peter Wiggin's forum.

Only then did he send it as email to the general command-which would be routed through Achilles' computer.

"Sayagi," someone said. "Did you see what else is posted here? On this netsite?"

Petra also moved to the Locke forum and discovered that the lead essay on Locke's site was headed, "Chinese treachery and the fall of India." The subhead said, "Will China, too, fall victim to a psychopath's twisted plans?"

Even as they were reading Locke's essay detailing how China had made promises to both Thailand and India, and would attack now that both armies were fully exposed and, in India's case, overextended, they received emails that contained the same essay, pushed into the system on an urgent basis. That meant it had already been cleared at the top-Chapekar knew what Locke was alleging.

Therefore, their emailed plans for immediate withdrawal of Indian troops from Burma had reached Chapekar at exactly the time when he knew they would be necessary.

"Toguro," breathed Sayagi. "We look like geniuses."

"We are geniuses," someone grumbled, and everyone laughed.

"Does anyone think," asked the Tamil, "we'll hear another pep talk from our Belgian friend about how well the war is going?"

Almost as an answer, they heard gunfire outside.

Petra felt a thrill of hope run through her: Achilles tried to make a run for it, and he was shot.

But then a more practical idea replaced her hope: Achilles foresaw this possibility, and has his own forces already in place to cover his escape.

And finally, despair: When he comes for me, will it be to kill me, or take me with him?

More gunfire.

"Maybe," said Sayagi, "we ought to disperse."

He was walking toward the door when it opened and Achilles came in, followed by six Sikhs carrying automatic weapons. "Have a seat, Sayagi," said Achilles. "I'm afraid we have a hostage situation here. Someone made some libelous assertions about me on the nets, and when I declined to be detained during the inquiry, shooting began. Fortunately, I have some friends, and while we're waiting for them to provide me with transportation to a neutral location, you are my guarantors of safety."

Immediately, the two Battle School grads who were Sikhs stood up and said, to Achilles' soldiers, "Are we under threat of death from you?"

"As long as you serve the oppressor," one of them answered.

"He is the oppressor!" one of the Sikh Battle Schoolers said, pointing to Achilles.

"Do you think the Chinese will be any kinder to our people than New Delhi has?" said the other.

"Remember how the Chinese treated Tibet and Taiwan! That is our future, because of him!"

The Sikh soldiers were obviously wavering.

Achilles drew a pistol from his back and shot the soldiers dead, one after another. The last two had time to try to rush at him, but every shot he fired struck home.

The pistol shots still rang in the room when Sayagi said, "Why didn't they shoot you?"

"I had them unload their weapons before entering the room," Achilles said. "I told them we didn't want any accidents. But don't think you can overpower me because I'm alone with a half-empty clip. This room has long been wired with explosives, and they go off when my heart stops beating or when I activate the controller implanted under the skin of my chest."

A pocket phone beeped and, without lowering his gun, Achilles answered it. "No, I'm afraid one of my soldiers went out of control, and in order to keep the children safe, I had to shoot some of my own men. The situation is unchanged. I am monitoring the perimeter. Keep back, and these children will be safe."

Petra wanted to laugh. Most of the Battle Schoolers here were older than Achilles himself.

Achilles clicked off the phone and pocketed it. "I'm afraid I told them that I had you as my hostages before it was actually true."

"Caught you with your pants down, ne?" said Sayagi. "You had no way of knowing you'd need hostages, or that we'd all be here. There are no explosives in this room."

Achilles turned to him and calmly shot him in the head. Sayagi crumpled and fell. Several of the others cried out. Achilles calmly changed clips.

No one charged him while he was reloading.

Not even, thought Petra, me.

There's nothing like casual murder to turn the onlookers into vegetables.

"Satyagraha," said Petra.

Achilles whirled on her. "What was that? What language?"

"Hindi," she said. "It means, 'One bears what one must.'"

"No more Hindi," said Achilles. "From anyone. Or any other language but Common. And if you talk, it had better be to me, and it had better not be something stupid and defiant like the words that got Sayagi killed. If all goes well, my relief should be here in only a few hours. And then Petra and I will go away and leave you to your new government. A Chinese government."

Many of them looked at Petra then. She smiled at Achilles. "So your tent door is still open?"

He smiled back. Warmly. Lovingly. Like a kiss.

But she knew that he was taking her away solely in order to relish the time in which she would have false hopes, before he pushed her from a helicopter or strangled her on the tarmac or, if he grew too impatient, simply shot her as she prepared to follow him out of this room. His time with her was over. His triumph was near-the architect of China's conquest of India, returning to China as a hero. Already plotting how he would take control of the Chinese government and then set out to conquer the other half of the world's population.

For now, though, she was alive, and so were the other Battle Schoolers, except Sayagi. The reason Sayagi died, of course, was not what he said to Achilles. He died because he was the one who posted the withdrawal plans on Locke's forum. Being plans for a retreat under unpredictable fire, they were still usable even with Chinese troops pouring down into Burma, even with Chinese planes bombing the retreating soldiers. The Indian commanders would be able to make a stand. The Chinese would have to fight hard before they won.

But they would win. The Indian defense could last no more than a few days, no matter how bravely they fought. That was when the trucks would stop rolling and food and munitions would run out. The war was already lost. There was only a little time for the Indian elite to attempt to flee before the Chinese swept in, unresisted, with their behead-the-society method of controlling an occupied country.

While these events unfolded, the Battle School graduates who would have kept India out of this dangerous situation in the first place, and whose planning was the only thing keeping the Chinese temporarily at bay, sat in a large room with seven corpses, one gun, and the young man who had betrayed them all.

More than three hours later, gunfire began again, in the distance. The booming sound of anti-aircraft guns.

Achilles was on the phone in an instant. "Don't fire at the incoming aircraft," he said, "or these geniuses start dying."

He clicked off before they could say anything in reply.

The shooting stopped.

They heard the rotors-choppers landing on the roof.

What a stupid place for them to land, thought Petra. Just because the roof is marked as a heliport doesn't mean they have to obey the signs. Up there, the Indian soldiers surrounding this place will have an easy target, and they'll see everything that happens. They'll know when Achilles is on the roof. They'll know which chopper to shoot down first, because he's in it. If this is the best plan the

Chinese can come up with, Achilles is going to have a harder time using China as a base to take over the world than he thinks.

More choppers. Now that the roof was full, a few of them were landing on the grounds.

The door burst open, and a dozen Chinese soldiers fanned out through the room. A Chinese officer followed them in and saluted Achilles. "We came at once, sir."

"Good work," said Achilles. "Let's get them all up on the roof."

"You said you'd let us go!" said one of the Battle Schoolers.

"One way or another," said Achilles, "you're all going to end up in China anyway. Now get up and form into a line against that wall."

More choppers. And then the whoosh, whump of an explosion.

"Those stupid eemos," said the Tamil, "they're going to get us all killed."

"Such a shame," said Achilles, pointing his pistol at the Tamil's head.

The Chinese officer was already talking into his satrad. "Wait," he said. "It's not the Indians. They've got Thai markings."

Bean, thought Petra. You've come at last. Either that or death. Because if Bean wasn't running this Thai raid, the Thai could have no other objective than to kill everything that moved in Hyderabad.

Another whoosh-whump. Another. "They've taken out everything on the roof," the Chinese officer said. "The building's on fire, we've got to get out."

"Whose stupid idea was it to land up there anyway?" asked Achilles.

"It was the closest point to evacuate them from!" answered the officer angrily. "There aren't enough choppers left to take all these."

"They're coming," said Achilles, "even if we have to leave soldiers behind."

"We'll get them in a few days anyway. I don't leave my men behind!"

Not a bad commander, even if he's a little dim about tactics, thought Petra.

"They won't let us take off unless we've got their Indian geniuses with us."

"The Thai won't let us take off at all!"

"Of course they will," said Achilles. "They're here to kill me and rescue her" He pointed at Petra.

So Achilles knew it was Bean that was coming.

Petra showed nothing on her face.

If Achilles decided to leave without the hostages, there was a good chance he would kill them all. Deprive the enemy of a resource. And, more important, take away their hope.

"Achilles," she said, walking toward him. "Let's leave these others and get out. We'll be taking off from the ground. They won't know who's in what chopper. As long as we go now."

As she approached him, he swung his pistol to point at her chest.

She did not even pause, merely walked toward him, past him, to the door. She opened it. "Now, Achilles. You don't have to die in flames today, but that's where you're headed, the longer you wait."

"She's right," said the Chinese officer.

Achilles grinned and looked from Petra to the officer and back again. We've shamed you in front of the others, thought Petra. We've shown that we knew what to do, and you didn't. Now you have to kill us both. This officer doesn't know he's dead, but I do. Then again, I was dead anyway. So now let's get out of here without killing anybody else.

"Nothing in this room matters but you," said Petra. She grinned back at him. "Soak a noky, boy."

Achilles turned back to point the gun, first at one Battle Schooler, then another. They recoiled or flinched, but he did not fire. He dropped his gun hand to his side and walked from the room, grabbing Petra by the arm as he passed her. "Come on, Pet," he said. "The future is calling."

Bean is coming, thought Petra, and Achilles is not going to let me get even a meter away from him. He knows Bean is here for me, so I'm the one person he'll make sure Bean never rescues.

Maybe we'll all kill each other today.

She thought back to the airplane ride that brought her and Achilles to India. The two of them standing at the open door. Maybe there would be another chance today-to die, taking Achilles with her. She wondered if Bean would understand that it was more important for Achilles to die than for her to live. More important, would he know that she understood that? It was the right thing to do, and now that she really knew Achilles, the kind of man he was, she would gladly pay that price and call it cheap.

RESCUE

To:Wahabi%inshallah@Pakistan.gov From:Chapekar%hope@India.gov Re:For the Indian people

My Dear Friend Ghaffar,

I honor you because when I came to you with an offer of peace between our two families within the Indian people, you accepted and kept your word in every particular.

I honor you because you have lived a life that places the good of your people above your own ambition.

I honor you because in you rests the hope for my people's future.

I make this letter public even as I send it to you, not knowing what your response will be, for my people must know now, while I can still speak to them all, what I am asking of you and giving to you.

As the treacherous Chinese violate their promises and threaten to destroy our army, which has been weakened by the treachery of the one called Achilles, whom we treated as a guest and a friend, it is clear to me that without a miracle, the vast expanse of the nation of India will be defenseless against the invaders pouring into our country from the north. Soon the ruthless conqueror will work his will from Bengal to Punjab. Of all the Indian people, only those in Pakistan, led by you, will be free.

I ask you now to take upon yourself all the hopes of the Indian people. Our struggle over the next few days will give you time, I hope, to bring your armies back to our border, where you will be prepared to stand against the Chinese enemy.

I now give you permission to cross that border at any point where it is necessary, so you can establish stronger defensive positions. I order all Indian soldiers remaining at the Pakistani border to offer no resistance whatsoever to Pakistani forces entering our country, and to cooperate by providing full maps of all our defenses, and all codes and codebooks. All our materiel at the border is to be turned over to Pakistan as well.

I ask you that any citizens of India who come under the rule of the Pakistani government be treated as generously as you would wish us, were our situations reversed, to treat your people. Whatever past offenses have been committed between our families, let us forgive each other and commit no new offenses, but treat each other as brothers and sisters who have been faithful to different faces of the same God, and who must now stand shoulder to shoulder to defend India against the invader whose only god is power and whose worship is cruelty.

Many members of the Indian government, military, and educational system will flee to Pakistan. I beg you to open your borders to them, for if they remain in India, only death or captivity will be in their future. All other Indians have no reason to fear individual persecution from the Chinese, and I beg you not to flee to Pakistan, but rather to remain inside India, where, God willing, you will soon be liberated.

I myself will remain in India, to bear whatever burden is placed upon my people by the conqueror. I would rather be Mandela than de Gaulle. There is to be no government-in-exile. Pakistan is the government of the Indian people now. I say this with the full authority of Congress.

May God bless all honorable people, and keep them free.

Your brother and friend, Tikal Chapekar

Jetting over the dry southern reaches of India felt to Bean like a strange dream, where the landscape never changed. Or no, it was a vidgame, with a computer making up scenery on the fly, recycling the same algorithms to create the same type of scenery in general, but never quite the same in detail.

Like human beings. DNA that differed by only the tiniest amounts from person to person, and yet those differences giving rise to saints and monsters, fools and geniuses, builders and wreckers, lovers and takers. More people live in this one country, India, than lived in the whole world only three or four centuries ago. More people live here today than lived in the entire history of the world up to the time of Christ. All the history of the Bible and the Iliad and Herodotus and Gilgamesh and everything that had been pieced together by archaeologists and anthropologists, all of those human relationships, all those achievements, could all have been played out by the people we're flying over right now, with people left over to live through new stories that no one would ever hear.

In these few days, China would conquer enough people to make five thousand years of human history, and they would treat them like grass, to be mown till all were the same level, with anything that rose above that level discarded to be mere compost.

And what am I doing? Riding along on a machine that would have given that old prophet Ezekiel a heart attack before he could even write about seeing a shark in the sky. Sister Carlotta used to joke that Battle School was the wheel in the sky that Ezekiel saw in his vision. So here I am, like a figure out of some ancient vision, and what am I doing? That's right, out of the billions of people I might have saved, I'm choosing the one I happen to know and like the best, and risking the lives of a couple of hundred good soldiers in order to do it. And if we get out of this alive, what will I do then? Spend the few years of life remaining to me, helping Peter Wiggin defeat Achilles so he can do exactly what Achilles is already so close to doing-unite humanity under the rule of one sick, ambitious marubo?

Sister Carlotta liked to quote from another biblical git-vanity, vanity, all is vanity. There is nothing new under the sun. A time to scatter rocks and a time to gather rocks together.

Well, as long as God didn't tell anybody what the rocks were for, I might as well leave the rocks and go get my friend, if I can.

As they approached Hyderabad, they picked up a lot of radio chatter. Tactical stuff from satrads, not just the net traffic you'd expect because of the Chinese surprise attack in Burma that had been triggered by Peter's essay. As they got closer, the onboard computers were able to distinguish the radio signatures of Chinese troops as well as Indian.

"Looks like Achilles' retrieval crew got here ahead of us," said Suriyawong.

"But no shooting," said Bean. "Which means they've already got to the planning room and they're holding the Battle Schoolers as hostages."

"You got it," said Suriyawong. "Three choppers on the roof."

"There'll be more on the ground, but let's complicate their lives and take out those three."

Virlomi had misgivings. "What if they think it's the Indian Army attacking and they kill the hostages?"

"Achilles is not so stupid he won't make sure who's doing the shooting before he starts using up his ticket home."

It was like target practice, and three missiles took out three choppers, just like that.

"Now get us onto blades and show the Thai markings," said Suriyawong.

It was, as usual, a sickening climb and drop before the blades took over. But Bean was used to the sense of clawing nausea and was able to notice, out the windows, that the Indian troops were cheering and waving.

"Oh, suddenly now we're the good guys," said Bean.

"I think we're just the not-quite-so-evil guys," said Suriyawong.

"I think you're taking irresponsible risks with the lives of my friends," said Virlomi.

Bean sobered at once. "Virlomi, I know Achilles, and the only way to keep him from killing your friends, just for spite, is to keep him worried and off balance. To give him no time to display his malice."

"I meant that if one of those missiles had gone astray," she said, "it could have hit the room they're in and killed them all."

"Oh, is that all you're worried about?" Bean said. "Virlomi, I trained these men. There are situations in which they might miss, but this was not one of them."

Virlomi nodded. "I understand. The confidence of the field commander. It's been a long time since I had a toon of my own."

A few choppers stayed aloft, watching the perimeter; most set down in front of the building where the planning room was located. Suriyawong had already briefed the company commanders he was taking into the building by satrad as they flew. Now he jumped from the chopper as soon as the door opened and, with Virlomi running behind him, he got his group moving, executing the plan.

At once, Bean's chopper lifted back up and, with another chopper, hopped the building to come down on the other side. This was where they found the two remaining Chinese helicopters, blades spinning. Bean had his pilot set down so the chopper's weapons were pointed at the sides of the two

Chinese machines. Then he and the thirty men with him went out both doors as Chinese troops across the open space between them did the same.

Bean's other chopper remained airborne, waiting to see whether its missiles or the troops inside would be needed first.

The Chinese had Bean's troops outnumbered, but that wasn't really the issue. Nobody was shooting, because the Chinese wanted to get away alive, and there was no hope of that if shooting broke out, because the airborne chopper would simply destroy both the remaining Chinese machines and then it wouldn't matter what happened on the ground, they'd never get home and their mission would be a failure.

So the two little armies formed up just like regiments in the Napoleonic wars, neat little lines. Bean wanted to shout something like "fix bayonets" or "load"-but nobody was using muskets and besides, what interested him would be coming out the door of the building....

And there he was, rushing straight for the nearest chopper, gripping Petra by the arm and half-dragging her along. Achilles held a pistol down at his side. Bean wanted to have one of his sharpshooters hit him out, but he knew that then the Chinese would open fire and take Petra would certainly be killed. So he called out to Achilles.

Achilles ignored him. Bean knew what he was thinking-get inside the chopper while everybody's holding their fire, and then Bean would be helpless, unable to do anything to Achilles without also harming Petra.

So Bean spoke into his satrad and the hovering chopper did what the gunner was trained to do-fired a missile that blew up just beyond the nearer Chinese chopper. The machine itself blocked the blast so Petra and Achilles weren't hurt-but the chopper was rocked over onto its side and then, as the blades chewed to bits against the ground, it flipped over and over and smashed up against a barracks. A few soldiers slithered out, trying to drag out others with broken limbs or other injuries before the machine went up in flames.

Achilles and Petra now stood in the middle of the open space. The only remaining Chinese chopper was too far for him to run to. He did the only thing he could do, under the circumstances. He held Petra in front of him with a gun pointed to her head. It wasn't a move they taught you in Battle School. It was straight from the vids.

In the meantime, the Chinese officer in charge-a colonel, if Bean remembered correctly how to translate the rank insignia, which was a very high rank for a small-scale operation like this one-strode out with his men. Bean did not have to instruct him to stay far away from Achilles and Petra. The colonel would know that any move to get between Achilles and Bean's men would lead to shooting, since there was only a stalemate as long as Bean had the ability to kill Achilles the moment he harmed Petra.

Without looking at the soldiers near him, Bean said, "Who has a trunk pistol?"

One was slapped into his open hand. Someone murmured, "Keep your hand on a real gun, too."

And someone else said, "I hope the Indian Army doesn't realize that Achilles doesn't have any Indian kids with him. They couldn't care less about an Armenian." Bean appreciated it when his men thought through the whole situation. No time for praise now, though.

He stepped away from his men and walked toward Achilles and Petra. As he did, he saw Suriyawong and Virlomi come out the door through which the Chinese colonel had just come. Suriyawong called out, "All secure. Loading. Achilles murdered only one of ours."

"One of 'ours'?" said Achilles. "When did Sayagi become one of yours? You mean that I can kill anybody else and you don't care, but touch a Battle School brat and I'm a murderer?"

"You're never taking off in that chopper with Petra," said Bean.

"I know I'm never taking off without her," said Achilles. "If I don't have her with me, you'll blow that chopper into bits so small they'd have to use a comb to gather them up."

"Then I guess I'll just have one of my sharpshooters kill you."

Petra smiled.

She was telling him yes, do it.

"Colonel Yuan-xi will then regard his mission as a failure, and he will kill as many of you as he can. Petra first."

Bean saw that the colonel had gotten his men on board the chopper-those who had come with him from the building and those who had deployed from the choppers when Bean first landed. Only he, Achilles, and Petra remained outside.

"Colonel," said Bean, "the only way this doesn't end in blood is if we can trust each other's word. I promise you that as long as Petra is alive, uninjured, and with me, you can take off safely with no interference from me or my strike force. Whether you have Achilles with you is of no importance to me."

Petra's smile vanished, replaced with a face that was an obvious mask of anger. She did not want Achilles to get away.

But she still hoped to live-that was why she was saying nothing, so Achilles wouldn't know that she was demanding his death, even at the cost of her own.

What she was ignoring was the fact that the Chinese commander had to meet the minimum conditions for mission success-he had to have Achilles with him when he left. If he didn't, a lot of people here would die, and for what? Achilles' worst deeds were already done. From here on, no one would ever trust his word on anything. Whatever power he got now would be by force and fear,

not by deception. Which meant that he would be making enemies every day, driving people into the arms of his opponents.

He might still win more battles and more wars and he might even seem to triumph completely, but, like Caligula, he would make assassins out of the people closest to him. And when he died, men just as evil but perhaps not as crazy would take his place. Killing him now would not make that much difference to the world.

Keeping Petra alive, however, would make all the difference in the world to Bean. He had made the mistakes that killed Poke and Sister Carlotta. But he was going to make no mistakes today. Petra would live because Bean couldn't bear any other outcome. She didn't even get a vote on the matter.

The colonel was weighing the situation.

Achilles was not. "I'm moving to the chopper now. My fingers are pretty tight on this trigger. Don't make me flinch, Bean."

Bean knew what Achilles was thinking: Can I kill Bean at the last moment and still get away, or should I leave that pleasure for another time?

And that was an advantage for Bean, because his thinking was not clouded by thoughts of personal vengeance.

Except, he realized, that it was. Because he, too, was trying to think of some way to save Petra and still kill Achilles.

The colonel walked up closer behind Achilles before calling out his answer to Bean. "Achilles is the architect of a great Chinese victory, and he must come to Beijing to be received in honor. My orders say nothing about the Armenian."

"They'll never let us take off without her, you fool," said Achilles.

"Sir, I give you my word, my parole. Even though Achilles has already murdered a woman and a girl who did nothing but good for him, and deserves to die for his crimes, I will let him go and let you go."

"Then our missions do not conflict," said the colonel. "I agree to your terms, provided you also agree to care for any of my men who remain behind according to the rules of war."

"I agree," said Bean.

"I'm in charge of our mission," said Achilles, "and I don't agree."

"You are not in charge of our mission, sir," said the colonel.

Bean knew exactly what Achilles would do. He would take the gun away from Petra's hand long enough to shoot the colonel. Achilles would expect this move to surprise people, but Bean was not surprised at all. His hand with the trunk gun was already rising before Achilles even started to turn to the colonel.

But Bean was not the only one who knew what to expect from Achilles. The colonel had deliberately moved close enough to Achilles that as he swung the gun around, the colonel slapped the weapon out of Achilles' hand. At the same moment, with his other hand the colonel slapped Achilles' arm close to the elbow, and even though there seemed to be almost no force behind the blow, Achilles' arm bent sickeningly backward. Achilles cried out in pain and dropped to his knees, letting go of Petra. She immediately launched herself to the side, out of the way, and at that moment Bean fired the trunk gun. He was able to adjust the aim at the last split second, and the tiny pellet struck Achilles' shirt with such force that even though the casing collapsed against the cloth, the tranquilizer blew right through the fabric and penetrated Achilles' skin. He collapsed immediately.

"It's only a tranquilizer," said Bean. "He'll be awake in six hours or so, with a headache."

The colonel stood there, not bending yet to even notice Achilles, his eyes still fixed on Bean. "Now there is no hostage. Your enemy is on the ground. How good is your word, sir, when the circumstance in which it was given goes away?"

"Men of honor," said Bean, "are brothers no matter what uniform they wear. You may put him aboard, and take off. I recommend that you fly in formation with us until we are south of the defenses around Hyderabad. Then you may fly your own course, and we'll fly ours."

"That is a wise plan," said the colonel.

He knelt and started to pick up Achilles' limp body. It was tricky work, and so Bean, small as he was, stepped forward to help by taking Achilles' legs.

Petra was on her feet by then, and when Bean glanced at her he could see that she was eyeing Achilles' pistol, which lay on the ground near her. Bean could almost read her mind. To kill Achilles with his own gun had to be tempting-and Petra had not given her word.

But before she could even move toward the pistol, Bean had his trunk gun pointed at her. "You could also wake up in six hours with a headache," he said.

"No need," she said. "I know that I'm also bound by your word." And, without stooping for the gun, she came and helped Bean carry his end of Achilles' body.

They rolled Achilles through the wide door of the chopper. Soldiers inside the machine took him and carried him back, presumably to a place where he could be secured during flight maneuvers. The chopper was grossly overcrowded, but only with men-there were no supplies or heavy munitions, so it would fly as well as normal. It would simply be uncomfortable for the passengers.

"You don't want to ride home on that chopper," said Bean. "I invite you to ride with us."

"But you're not going where I'm going," said the colonel.

"I know this boy you have just taken aboard," said Bean. "Even if he doesn't remember what you did when he wakes up, someone will tell him someday, and once he knows, you'll be marked. He never forgets. He will certainly kill you."

"Then I will have died obeying my orders and fulfilling my mission," said the colonel.

"Full asylum," said Bean, "and a life spent helping liberate China and all other nations from the kind of evil he represents."

"I know that you mean to be kind," said the colonel, "but it hurts my soul to be offered such rewards for betraying my country."

"Your country is led by men without honor," said Bean. "And yet they are sustained in power by the honor of men like you. Who, then, betrays his country? No, we have no time for arguments. I only plant the idea so it will fester in your soul." Bean smiled.

The colonel smiled back. "Then you are a devil, sir, as we Chinese always knew you Europeans to be."

Bean saluted him. He returned the salute and got on board.

The chopper door closed.

Bean and Petra ran out of the downdraft as the Chinese machine rose up into the air. There it hovered as Bean ordered everyone into the one chopper that remained on the ground. Less than two minutes later, his chopper, too, rose up, and the Thai and Chinese machines flew together over the building, where they were joined by the other helijets of Bean's strike force as they rose up from the ground or converged from their watching points at the perimeter.

They flew together toward the south, slowly, on blades. No Indian weapon was fired at them. For the Indian officers no doubt knew that their best young military minds were being taken to far more safety than they could possibly have in Hyderabad, or anywhere in India, once the Chinese came in force.

Then Bean gave the order, and all his choppers rose up, cut the blades, and dropped as the jets came on and the blades folded back for the quick ride back to Sri Lanka.

Inside the chopper, Petra sat glumly in her straps. Virlomi was beside her, but they did not speak to each other.

"Petra," said Bean.

She did not look up.

"Virloomi found us, we did not find her. Because of her, we were able to come for you."

Petra still did not look up, but she reached out a hand and laid it on Virloomi's hands, which were clasped in her lap. "You were brave and good," said Petra. "Thank you for having compassion for me."

Then she looked up to meet Bean's gaze. "But I don't thank you, Bean. I was ready to kill him. I would have done it. I would have found a way."

"He's going to kill himself in the end," said Bean. "He's going to overreach himself, like Robespierre, like Stalin. Others will see his pattern and when they realize he's finally about to put them to the guillotine, they'll decide they've had enough and he will, most certainly, die."

"But how many will he kill along the way? And now your hands are stained with all their blood, because you loaded him onto that chopper alive. Mine, too."

"You're wrong," said Bean. "He is the only one responsible for his killings. And you're wrong about what would have happened if we had let him take you along. You would not have lived through that ride."

"You don't know that."

"I know Achilles. When that chopper rose to about twenty stories up, you would have been pushed out the door. And do you know why?"

"So you could watch," she said.

"No, he would have waited till I was gone," said Bean. "He's not stupid. He regards his own survival as far more important than your death."

"Then why would he kill me now? Why are you so sure?"

"Because he had his arm around you like a lover," said Bean. "Standing there with the gun to your head, he held you with affection. I think he meant to kiss you before he took you on board. He'd want me to see that."

"She would never let him kiss her," said Virloomi with disgust.

But Petra met Bean's gaze, and the tears in her eyes were a truer answer than Virloomi's brave words. She had already let Achilles kiss her. Just like Poke.

"He marked you," said Bean. "He loved you. You had power over him. After he didn't need you anymore as the hostage to keep me from killing him, you could not go on living."

Suriyawong shuddered. "What made him that way?"

"Nothing made him that way," said Bean. "No matter what terrible things happened in his life, no matter what dreadful hungers rose up from his soul, he chose to act on those desires, he chose to do the things he did. He's responsible for his own actions, and no one else. Not even those who saved his life."

"Like you and me today," said Petra.

"Sister Carlotta saved his life today," said Bean. "The last thing she asked me was to leave vengeance up to God."

"Do you believe in God?" asked Suriyawong, surprised.

"More and more," said Bean. "And less and less."

Virlomi took Petra's hands between hers and said, "Enough of blame and enough of Achilles. You're free of him. You can have whole minutes and hours and days in which you don't have to think of what he'll do to you if he hears what you say, and how you have to act when he might be watching. The only way he can hurt you now is if you keep watching him in your own heart."

"Listen to her, Petra," said Suriyawong. "She's a goddess, you know."

Virlomi laughed. "I save bridges and summon choppers."

"And you blessed me," said Suriyawong.

"I never did," said Virlomi.

"When you walked on my back," said Suriyawong. "My whole body is now the path of a goddess."

"Only the back part," said Virlomi. "You'll have to find someone else to bless the front."

While they bantered, half-drunk with success and liberty and the overwhelming tragedy they were leaving behind them, Bean watched Petra, saw the tears drop from her eyes onto her lap, longed to be able to reach out and touch them away from her eyes. But what good would that do? Those tears had risen up from deep wells of pain, and his mere touch would do nothing to dry them at their source. It would take time to do that, and time was the one thing that he did not have. If Petra knew happiness in her life-happiness, that precious thing that Mrs. Wiggin talked about-it would come when she shared her life with someone else. Bean had saved her, had freed her, not so he could have her or be part of her life, but so that he did not have to bear the guilt of her death as he bore the deaths of Poke and Carlotta. It was a selfish thing he did, in a way. But in another way, there would be nothing for himself at all from this day's work.

Except that when his death came, sooner rather than later, he might well look back on this day's work with more pride than anything else in his life. Because today he won. In the midst of all this

terrible defeat, he had found a victory. He had cheated Achilles out of one of his favorite murders. He had saved the life of his dearest friend, even though she wasn't quite grateful yet. His army had done what he needed it to do, and not one life had been lost out of the two hundred men he had first been given. Always before he had been part of someone else's victory. But today, today he won.

To: Chamrajnagar%jawaharlal@ifcom.gov
From: PeterWiggin%freeworld@hegemon.gov
Re: Confirmation

Dear Polemarch Chamrajnagar,

Thank you for allowing me to reconfirm your appointment as Polemarch as my first official act. We both know that I was giving you only what you already had, while you, by accepting that reconfirmation as if it actually meant something, restored to the office of Hegemon some of the luster that has been torn from it by the events of recent months. There are many who feel that it is an empty gesture to appoint a Hegemon who leads only about a third of the human race and has no particular influence over the third that officially supports him. Many nations are racing to find some accommodation with the Chinese and their allies, and I live under the constant threat of having my office abolished as one of the first gestures they can make to win the favor of the new superpower. I am, in short, a Hegemon without hegemony.

And it is all the more remarkable that you would make this generous gesture toward the very individual that you once regarded as the worst of all possible Hegemons. The weaknesses in my character that you saw then have not magically vanished. It is only by comparison with Achilles, and only in a world where your homeland groans under the Chinese lash, that I begin to look like an attractive alternative or a source of hope instead of despair. But regardless of my weaknesses, I also have strengths, and I make you a promise:

Even though you are bound by your oath of office never to use the International Fleet to influence the course of events on Earth, except to intercept nuclear weapons or punish those who use them, I know that you are still a man of Earth, a man of India, and you care deeply what happens to all people, and particularly to your people. Therefore I promise you that I will devote the rest of my life to reshaping this world into one that you would be glad of, for your people, and for all people. And I hope that I succeed well enough, before one or the other of us dies, that you will be glad of the support you gave to me today.

Sincerely,
Peter Wiggin, Hegemon

Over a million Indians made it out of India before the Chinese sealed the borders. Out of a population of a billion and a half, that was far too few. At least ten times that million were transported over the next year, from India to the cold lands of Manchuria and the high deserts of Sinkiang. Among the transported ones was Tikal Chapekar. The Chinese gave no report to outsiders about the fate of him or any of the other "former oppressors of the Indian people." The same, on a far smaller scale, happened to the governing elites of Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

As if this vast redrawing of the world's map were not enough, Russia announced that it had joined China as its ally, and that it considered the nations of eastern Europe that were not loyal members of the New Warsaw Pact to be provinces in rebellion. Without firing a shot, Russia was able, simply by promising not to be as dreadful an overlord as China, to rewrite the Warsaw Pact until it was more or less the constitution of an empire that included all of Europe east of Germany, Austria, and Italy in the south, and east of Sweden and Norway in the north.

The weary nations of western Europe were quick to "welcome" the "discipline" that Russia would bring to Europe, and Russia was immediately given full membership in the European Community. Because Russia now controlled the votes of more than half the members of that community, it would require a constant tug of war to keep some semblance of independence, and rather than play that game, Great Britain, Ireland, Iceland, and Portugal left the European Community. But even they took great pains to assure the Russian bear that this was purely over economic issues and they really welcomed this renewed Russian interest in the West.

America, which had long since become the tail to China's dog in matters of trade, made a few grumpy noises about human rights and then went back to business as usual, using satellite cartography to redraw the map of the world to fit the new reality and then sell the atlases that resulted. In sub-Saharan Africa, where India had once been their greatest single trading partner and cultural influence, the loss of India was much more devastating, and they loyally denounced the Chinese conquest even as they scrambled to find new markets for their goods. Latin America was even louder in their condemnation of all the aggressors, but lacking serious military forces, their bluster could do no harm. In the Pacific, Japan, with its dominant fleet, could afford to stand firm; the other island nations that faced China across various not-so-wide bodies of water had no such luxury.

Indeed, the only force that stood firm against China and Russia while facing them across heavily defended borders were the Muslim nations. Iran generously forgot how threateningly Pakistani troops had loomed along their borders in the month before India's fall, and Arabs joined with Turks in Muslim solidarity against any Russian encroachment across the Caucasus or into the vast steppes of central Asia. No one seriously thought that Muslim military might could stand for long against a serious attack from China, and Russia was only scarcely less dangerous, but the Muslims laid aside their grievances, trusted in Allah, and kept their borders bristling with the warning that this nettle would be hard to grasp.

This was the world as it was the day that Peter "Locke" Wiggin was named as the new Hegemon. China let it be known that choosing any Hegemon at all was an affront, but Russia was a bit more tolerant, especially because many governments that cast their vote for Wiggin did so with the public declaration that the office was more ceremonial than practical, a gesture toward world unity and peace, and not at all an attempt to roll back the conquests that had brought "peace" to an unstable world.

But privately, many leaders of the very same governments assured Peter that they expected him to do all he could to bring about diplomatic "transformations" in the occupied countries. Peter listened

to them politely and said reassuring things, but he felt nothing but scorn for them—for without military might, he had no way of negotiating with anyone about anything.

His first official act was to reconfirm the appointment of Polemarch Chamrajnagar—an action which China officially protested as illegal because the office of Hegemon no longer existed, and while they would do nothing to interfere with Chamrajnagar's continued leadership of the Fleet, they would no longer contribute financially either to the Hegemony or the Fleet. Peter then confirmed Graff as Hegemony Minister of Colonization—and, again, because his work was offworld, China could do nothing more than cut off its contribution of funds.

But the lack of money forced Peter's next decision. He moved the Hegemony capital out of the former Netherlands and returned the Low Countries to self-government, which immediately put a stop to unrestricted immigration into those nations. He closed down most Hegemony services worldwide except for medical and agricultural research and assistance programs. He moved the main Hegemony offices to Brazil, which had several important assets:

First, it was a large enough and powerful enough country that the enemies of the Hegemony would not be quick to provoke it by assassinating the Hegemon within its borders.

Second, it was in the southern hemisphere, with strong economic ties to Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific, so that being there kept Peter within the mainstream of international commerce and politics.

And third, Brazil invited Peter Wiggin to come there. No one else did.

Peter had no delusions about what the office of Hegemon had become. He did not expect anyone to come to him. He went to them.

Which is why he left Haiti and crossed the Pacific to Manila, where Bean and his Thai army and the Indians they rescued had found temporary refuge. Peter knew that Bean was still angry at him, so he was relieved that Bean not only agreed to see him, but treated him with open respect when he arrived. His two hundred soldiers were crisply turned out to greet him, and when Bean introduced him to Petra, Suriyawong, and Virlomi and the other Indian Battle Schoolers, he phrased everything as if he were presenting his friends to a man of higher rank.

In front of all of them, Bean then made a little speech. "To His Excellency the Hegemon, I offer the service of this band of soldiers—veterans of war, former opponents, and now, because of treachery, exiles from their homeland and brothers- and sisters-at-arms. This was not my decision, nor the decision of the majority. Each individual here was given the choice, and chose to make this offer of our service. We are few, but nations have found our service valuable before. We hope that we now can serve a cause that is higher than any nation, and whose end will be the establishment of a new and honorable order in the world."

Peter was surprised only by the formality of the offer, and the fact that it was made without any sort of negotiation beforehand. He also noticed that Bean had arranged to have cameras present. This would be news. So Peter made a brief, soundbite-oriented reply accepting their offer, praising their

achievements, and expressing regret at the suffering of their people. It would play well-twenty seconds on the vids, and in full on the nets.

When the ceremonies were done, there was an inspection of their inventory-all the equipment they had been able to rescue from Thailand. Even their fighter-bomber pilots and patrol boat crews had managed to make their way from southern Thailand to the Philippines, so the Hegemon had an air force and a fleet. Peter nodded and commented gravely as he saw each item in the inventory-the cameras were still running.

Later, though, when they were alone, Peter finally allowed himself a rueful, self-mocking laugh. "If it weren't for you I'd have nothing at all," he said. "But to compare this to the vast fleets and air forces and armies that the Hegemon once commanded. . ."

Bean looked at him coldly. "The office had to be greatly diminished," he said, "before they'd have given it to you."

The honeymoon, apparently, was over. "Yes," Peter said, "that's true, of course."

"And the world had to be in a desperate condition, with the existence of the office of Hegemon in doubt."

"That, too, is true," said Peter. "And for some reason you seem to be angry about this."

"That's because, apart from the not-trivial matter of Achilles' penchant for killing people now and then, I fail to see much difference between you and him. You're both content to let any number of people suffer needlessly in order to advance your personal ambitions."

Peter sighed. "If that's all the difference that you see, I don't understand how you could offer your service to me."

"I see other differences, of course," said Bean. "But they're matters of degree, not of kind. Achilles makes treaties he never intends to keep. You merely write essays that might have saved nations, but you delay publishing them so that those nations will fall, putting the world in a position desperate enough that they would make you Hegemon."

"Your statement is true," said Peter, "only if you believe that earlier publication would have saved India and Thailand."

"Early in the war," said Bean, "India still had the supplies and equipment to resist Chinese attack. Thailand's forces were still fully dispersed and hard to find."

"But if I had published early in the war," said Peter, "India and Thailand would not have seen their peril, and they wouldn't have believed me. After all, the Thai government didn't believe you, and you warned them of everything."

"You're Locke," said Bean.

"Ah yes. Because I had so much credibility and prestige, nations would tremble and believe my words. Aren't you forgetting something? At your insistence, I had declared myself to be a teenage college student. I was still recovering from that, trying to prove in Haiti that I could actually govern. I might have had the prestige left to be taken seriously in India and Thailand-but I might not. And if I published too soon, before China was ready to act, China would simply have denied everything to both sides, the war would have proceeded, and then there would have been no shock value at all to my publication. I wouldn't have been able to trigger the invasion at exactly the moment you needed me to."

"Don't pretend that this was your plan all along."

"It was my plan," said Peter, "to withhold publication until it could be an act of power instead of an act of futility. Yes, I was thinking of my prestige, because right now the only power I have is that prestige and the influence it gives me with the governments of the world. It's a coin that is minted very slowly, and if spent ineffectively, disappears. So yes, I protect that power very carefully, and use it sparingly, so that later, when I need to have it, it will still exist."

Bean was silent.

"You hate what happened in the war," said Peter. "So do I. It's possible-not likely, but possible-that if I had published earlier, India might have been able to mount a real resistance. They might still have been fighting now. Millions of soldiers might have been dying even as we speak. Instead, there was a clean, almost bloodless victory for China. And now the Chinese have to govern a population almost twice the size of their own, with a culture every bit as old and allabsorbing as their own. The snake has swallowed a crocodile, and the question is going to arise again and again-who is digesting whom? Thailand and Vietnam will be just as hard to govern, and even the Burmese have never managed to govern Burma. What I did saved lives. It left the world with a clear moral picture of who did the stabbing in the back, and who was stabbed. And it leaves China victorious and Russia triumphant-but with captive, angry populations to govern who will not stand with them when the final struggle comes. Why do you think China made a quick peace with Pakistan? Because they knew they could not fight a war against the Muslim world with Indian revolt and sabotage a constant threat. And that alliance between China and Russia-what a joke! Within a year they'll be quarreling, and they'll be back to weakening each other across that long Siberian border. To people who think superficially, China and Russia look triumphant. But I never thought you were a superficial thinker."

"I see all that," said Bean.

"But you don't care. You're still angry at me."

Bean said nothing.

"It's hard," said Peter, "to see how all of this seems to work to my advantage, and not blame me for profiteering from the suffering of others. But the real issue is, What am I going to be able to do, and what will I actually do, now that I'm nominally the leader of the world, and actually the administrator of a small tax base, a few international service agencies, and this military force you gave to me today? I did the few things that were in my power to shape events so that when I got this office, it would still be worth having."

"But above all, to get that office."

"Yes, Bean. I'm arrogant. I think I'm the only person who understands what to do and has what it takes to do it. I think the world needs me. In fact, I'm even more arrogant than you. Is that what this comes down to? I should have been humbler? Only you are allowed to assess your own abilities candidly and decide that you're the best man for a particular job?"

"I don't want the job."

"I don't want this job, either," said Peter. "What I want is the job where the Hegemon speaks, and wars stop, where the Hegemon can redraw borders and strike down bad laws and break up international cartels and bring all of humanity a chance for a decent life in peace and whatever freedom their culture will allow. And I'm going to get that job, by creating it step by step. Not only that, I'm going to do it with your help, because you want somebody to do that job, and you know, just as surely as I do, that I'm the only one who can do it."

Bean nodded, saying nothing.

"You know all that, and you're still angry with me."

"I'm angry with Achilles," said Bean. "I'm angry with the stupidity of those who refused to listen to me. But you're here, and they're not."

"It's more than that," said Peter. "If that's all it was, you would have talked yourself out of your wrath long before we had this conversation."

"I know," said Bean. "But you don't want to hear it."

"Because it will hurt my feelings? Let me make a stab at it, then. You're angry because every word from my mouth, every gesture, every expression on my face reminds you of Ender Wiggin. Only I'm not Ender, I'll never be Ender, you think Ender should be doing what I'm doing, and you hate me for being the one who made sure Ender got sent away."

"It's irrational," said Bean. "I know that. I know that by sending him away you saved his life. The people who helped Achilles try to kill me would have worked day and night to kill Ender without any prompting from Achilles at all. They would have feared him far more than they feared you or me. I know that. But you look and talk so much like him. And I keep thinking, if Ender had been here, he wouldn't have botched things the way I did."

"The way I read it, it's the other way around. If you hadn't been there with Ender, he would have botched it at the end. No, don't argue, it doesn't matter. What does matter is, the world's the way it is right now, and we're in a position where, if we move carefully, if we think through and plan everything just right, we can fix this. We can make it better. No regrets. No wishing we could undo the past. We just look to the future and work our zhupas off."

"I'll look to the future," said Bean, "and I'll help you all I can. But I'll regret whatever I want to regret."

"Fair enough," said Peter. "Now that we've agreed on that, I think you should know. I've decided to revive the office of Strategos."

Bean gave one hoot of derision. "You're putting that title on the commander of a force of two hundred soldiers, a couple of planes, a couple of boats, and an overheated company of strategic planners?"

"Hey, if I can be called Hegemon, you can take on a title like that."

"I notice you didn't want any vids of me getting that tide."

"No, I didn't," said Peter. "I don't want people to hear the news while looking at vids of a kid. I want them to learn of your appointment as Strategos while seeing stock footage of the victory over the Formics and hearing voice-overs about your rescue of the Indian Battle Schoolers."

"Well, fine," said Bean. "I accept. Do I get a fancy uniform?"

"No," said Peter. "At the rate you're growing lately, we'd have to pay for new ones too often, and you'd bankrupt us."

A thoughtful expression passed across Bean's face.

"What," said Peter, "did I offend again?"

"No," said Bean. "I was just wondering what your parents said, when you declared yourself to be Locke."

Peter laughed. "Oh, they pretended that they'd known it all along. Parents."

At Bean's suggestion, Peter located the headquarters of the Hegemony in a compound just outside the city of Ribeirao Preto in the state of Sao Paulo. There they would have excellent air connections anywhere in the world, while being surrounded by small towns and agricultural land. They'd be far from any government body. It was a pleasant place to live as they planned and trained to achieve the modest goal of freeing the captive nations while holding the line against any new aggressions.

The Delphiki family came out of hiding and joined Bean in the safety of the Hegemony compound. Greece was part of the Warsaw Pact now, and there was no going home for them. Peter's parents also came, because they understood that they would become targets for anyone wanting to get to Peter. He gave them both jobs in the Hegemony, and if they minded the disruption of their lives, they never gave a sign of it.

The Arkanians left their homeland, too, and came gladly to live in a place where their children would not be stolen from them. Suriyawong's parents had made it out of Thailand, and they moved the family fortune and the family business to Ribeirao Preto. Other Thai and Indian families with ties to Bean's army or the Battle School graduates came as well, and soon there were thriving neighborhoods where

Portuguese was rarely heard.

As for Achilles, month after month they heard nothing about him.

Presumably he got back to Beijing. Presumably, he was worming his way into power one way or another. But they allowed themselves, as the silence about him continued, to hope that perhaps the Chinese, having made use of him, now knew him well enough to keep him away from the reins of power.

On a cloudy winter afternoon in June, Petra walked through the cemetery in the town of Araraquara, only twenty minutes by train from Ribeirao Preto. She took care to make sure she approached Bean from a direction where he could see her coming. Soon she stood beside him, looking at a marker.

"Who is buried here?" she asked.

"No one," said Bean, who showed no surprise at seeing her. "It's a cenotaph."

Petra read the names that were on it.

Poke.

Carlotta.

There was nothing else.

"There's a marker for Sister Carlotta somewhere in Vatican City," said Bean. "But there was no body recovered that could actually be buried anywhere. And Poke was cremated by people who didn't even know who she was. I got the idea for this from Virilomi."

Virilomi had set up a cenotaph for Sayagi in the small Hindu cemetery that already existed in Ribeirao Preto. It was a bit more elaborate-it included the dates of his birth and death, and called him "a man of satyagraha."

"Bean," said Petra, "it's quite insane of you to come here. No bodyguard. This marker standing here so that assassins can set their sights before you show up."

"I know," said Bean.

"At least you could have invited me along."

He turned to her, tears in his eyes. "This is my place of shame," he said. "I worked very hard to make sure your name would not be here."

"Is that what you tell yourself? There's no shame here, Bean. There's only love. And that's why I belong here-with the other lonely girls who gave their hearts to you."

Bean turned to her, put his arms around her, and wept into her shoulder. He had grown, to stand tall enough for that. "They saved my life," he said. "They gave me life."

"That's what good people do," said Petra. "And then they die, every one of them. It's a damned shame."

He gave one short laugh-whether at her small levity or at himself, for weeping, she did not know. "Nothing lasts long, does it," said Bean.

"They're still alive in you."

"Who am I alive in?" said Bean. "And don't say you."

"I will if I want. You saved my life."

"They never had children, either one of them," said Bean. "No one ever held either Poke or Carlotta the way a man does with a woman, or had a baby with them. They never got to see their children grow up and have children of their own."

"By Sister Carlotta's choice," said Petra.

"Not Poke's."

"They both had you."

"That's the futility of it," said Bean. "The only child they had was me."

"So ... you owe it to them to carry on, to marry, to have more children who'll remember them both for your sake."

Bean stared off into space. "I have a better idea. Let me tell you about them. And you tell your children. Will you do that? If you could promise me that, then I think that I could bear all this, because they wouldn't just disappear from memory when I die."

"Of course I'll do that, Bean, but you're talking as if your life were already over, and it's just beginning. Look at you, you're getting along, you'll have a man's height before long, you'll-"

He touched her lips, gently, to silence her. "I'll have no wife, Petra. No babies."

"Why not? If you tell me you've decided to become a priest I'll kidnap you myself and get you out of this Catholic country."

"I'm not human, Petra," Bean replied. "And my species dies with me."

She laughed at his joke.

But as she looked into his eyes, she saw that it wasn't a joke at all. Whatever he meant by that, he really thought that it was true. Not human. But how could he think that? Of all the people Petra knew, who was more human than Bean?

"Let's go back home," Bean finally said, "before somebody comes along and shoots us just for loitering."

"Home," said Petra.

Bean only halfway understood. "Sorry it's not Armenia."

"No, I don't think Armenia is home either," she said. "And Battle School sure wasn't, nor Eros. This is home, though. I mean, Ribeirao Preto. But here, too. Because ... my family's here, of course, but. . ."

And then she realized what she was trying to say.

"It's because you're here. Because you're the one who went through it all with me. You're the one who knows what I'm talking about. What I'm remembering. Ender. That terrible day with Bonzo. And the day I fell asleep in the middle of a battle on Eros. You think you have shame." She laughed. "But it's OK to remember even that with you. Because you knew about that, and you still came to get me out."

"Took me long enough," said Bean.

They walked out of the cemetery toward the train station, holding hands because neither of them wanted to feel separate right now.

"I have an idea," said Petra.

"What?"

"If you ever change your mind-you know, about marrying and having babies-hang on to my address. Look me up."

Bean was silent for a long moment. "Ali," he finally said, "I get it. I rescued the princess, so now I can marry her if I want."

"That's the deal."

"Yeah, well, I notice you didn't mention it until after you heard my vow of celibacy."

"I suppose that was perverse of me."

"Besides, it's a cheat. Aren't I supposed to get half the kingdom, too?"

"I've got a better idea," she answered. "You can have it all."

AFTERWORD

Just as Speaker for the Dead was a different kind of novel from Ender's Game, so also is Shadow of the Hegemon a different kind of book from Ender's Shadow. No longer are we in the close confines of Battle School or the asteroid Eros, fighting a war against insectoid aliens. Now, with Hegemon, we are on Earth, playing what amounts to a huge game of Risk-only you have to play politics and diplomacy as well in order to get power, hold onto it, and give yourself a place to land if you lose it.

Indeed, the game that this novel most resembles is the computer classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which is itself based on a Chinese historical novel, thus affirming the ties between history, fiction, and gaming. While history responds to irresistible forces and conditions (pace the extraordinarily illuminating book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which should be required reading by everyone who writes history or historical fiction, just so they understand the ground rules), in the specifics, history happens as it happens for highly personal reasons. The reasons European civilization prevailed over indigenous civilizations of the Americas consist of the implacable laws of history; but the reason why it was Cortez and Pizarro who prevailed over the Aztec and Inca empires by winning particular battles on particular days, instead of being cut down and destroyed as they might have been, had everything to do with their own character and the character and recent history of the emperors opposing them. And it happens that it is the novelist, not the historian, who has the freer hand at imagining what causes individual human beings to do the things they do.

Which is hardly a surprise. Human motivation cannot be documented, at least not with any kind of finality. After all, we rarely understand our own motivations, and so, even when we write down what we honestly believe to be our reasons for making the choices we make, our explanation is likely to be wrong or partly wrong or at least incomplete. So even when a historian or biographer has a wealth of information at hand, in the end he still has to make that uncomfortable leap into the abyss of ignorance before he can declare why a person did the things he did. The French Revolution inexorably led to anarchy and then tyranny for comprehensible reasons, following predictable paths. But nothing could have predicted Napoleon himself, or even that a single dictator of such gifts would emerge.

Novelists who write about Great Leaders, however, too often fall into the opposite trap. Able to imagine personal motivations, the people who write novels rarely have the grounding in historical fact or the grasp of historical forces to set their plausible characters into an equally plausible society. Most such attempts are laughably wrong, even when written by people who have actually been involved in the society of movers and shakers, for even those caught up in the maelstrom of politics are rarely able to see through the trees well enough to comprehend the forest. (Besides, most political or military novels by political or military leaders tend to be self-serving and self-justifying, which makes them almost as unreliable as books written by the ignorant.) How likely is it that someone who took part in the Clinton administration's immoral decision to launch unprovoked attacks on Afghanistan and the Sudan in the late summer of 1998 would be able to write a novel in which the political exigencies that led to these criminal acts are accurately recounted? Anyone in a position to know or guess the real interplay of human desires among the major players will also be so culpable that it will be impossible for him to tell the truth, even if he is honest enough to attempt it, simply because the people involved were so busy lying to themselves and to each other throughout the process that everyone involved is bound to be snow-blind.

In *Shadow of the Hegemon*, I have the advantage of writing a history that hasn't happened, because it is in the future. Not thirty million years in the future, as with my *Homecoming* books, or even three thousand years in the future, as with the trilogy of *Speaker for the Dead*, *Xenocide*, and *Children of the Mind*, but rather only a couple of centuries in the future, after nearly a century of international stasis caused by the Formic War. In the future history posited by *Hegemon*, nations and peoples of today are still recognizable, though the relative balance among them has changed. And I have both the perilous freedom and the solemn obligation to attempt to tell my characters'

highly personal stories as they move (or are moved) amid the highest circles of power in the governing and military classes of the world.

If there is anything that can be called my "life study," it is precisely this subject area: great leaders and great forces shaping the interplay of nations and peoples throughout history. As a child, I would put myself to sleep at night imagining a map of the world as it existed in the late fifties, just as the great colonial empires were beginning to grant independence, one by one, to the colonies that had once made up those great swathes of British pink and French blue across Africa and southern Asia. I imagined all those colonies as free countries, and, choosing one of them or some other relatively small nation, I would imagine alliance, unifications, invasions, conquests, until all the world was united under one magnanimous, democratic government. Cincinnatus and George Washington, not Caesar or Napoleon, were my models. I read Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, but I also read Mon-non scripture (most notably the Book of Mormon stories of the generals Gideon, Moroni, Helaman, and Gidgiddoni, and Doctrine and Covenants section 121) and the Old and New Testaments, all the while trying to imagine how one might govern well when law gives way to exigency, and the circumstances under which war becomes righteous.

I don't pretend that the imaginings and studies of my life have brought me to great answers, and you will find no such answers in *Shadow of the Hegemon*. But I do believe I understand something of the workings of the world of government, politics, and war, both at their best and at their worst. I have sought the borderline between strength and ruthlessness, between ruthlessness and cruelty, and at the other extreme, between goodness and weakness, between weakness and betrayal. I have pondered how it is that some societies are able to get young men to kill and die with fervor trumping fear, and yet others seem to lose their will to survive or at least their will to do the things that make survival possible. And *Shadow of the Hegemon* and the two remaining books in this long tale of Bean, Petra, and Peter are my best attempt to use what I have learned in a tale in which great forces, large populations, and individuals of heroic if not always virtuous character combine to give shape to an imaginary, but I hope believable, history.

I am crippled in this effort by the factor that real life is rarely plausible—we believe that people would or could do these things only because we have documentation. Fiction, lacking that documentation, dares not be half so implausible. On the other hand, we can do what history never can—we can assign motive to human behavior, which cannot be refuted by any witness or evidence. So, despite doing my utmost to be truthful about how history happens, in the end I must depend on the novelist's tools. Do you care about this person, or that one? Do you believe such a person would do the things I say they do, for the reasons I assign?

History, when told as epic, often has the thrilling grandeur of Dvorak or Smetana, Borodin or Mussorgsky, but historical fiction must also find the intimacies and dissonances of the delicate little piano pieces of Satie and Debussy. For it is in the millions of small melodies that the truth of history is always found, for history only matters because of the effects we see or imagine in the lives of the ordinary people who are caught up in, or give shape to, the great events. Tchaikowsky can carry me away, but I tire quickly of the large effect, which feels so hollow and false on the second hearing. Of Satie I never tire, for his music is endlessly surprising and yet perfectly satisfying. If I can bring off this novel in Tchaikowsky's terms, that is well and good; but if I can

also give you moments of Satie, I am far happier, for that is the harder and, ultimately, more rewarding task.

Besides my lifelong study of history in general, two books particularly influenced me during the writing of *Shadow of the Hegemon*. When I saw *Anna and the King*, I became impatient with my own ignorance of real Thai history, and so found David K. Wyatt's *Thailand: A Short History* (Yale, 1982, 1984). Wyatt writes clearly and convincingly, making the history of the Thai people both intelligible and fascinating. It is hard to imagine a nation that has been more lucky in the quality of its leaders as Thailand and its predecessor kingdoms, which managed to survive invasions from every direction and European and Japanese ambitions in Southeast Asia, all the while maintaining its own national character and remaining, more than many kingdoms and oligarchies, responsive to the needs of the Thai people. (I followed Wyatt's lead in calling the pre-Siamese language and the people who spoke it, in lands from Laos to upper Burma and southern China, "Tai," reserving "Thai" for the modern language and kingdom that bear that name.)

My own country once had leaders comparable to Siam's Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, and public servants as gifted and selfless as many of Chulalongkorn's brothers and nephews, but unlike Thailand, America is now a nation in decline, and my people have little will to be well led. America's past and its resources make it a major player for the nonce, but nations of small resources but strong will can change the course of world history, as the Huns, the Mongols, and the Arabs have shown, sometimes to devastating effect, and as the people of the Ganges have shown far more pacifically.

Which brings me to the second book, Lawrence James's *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (Little, Brown, 1997). Modern Indian history reads like one long tragedy of good, or at least bold, intentions leading to disaster, and in *Shadow of the Hegemon* I consciously echoed some of the themes I found in James's book.

As always, I relied on others to help me with this book by reading the first draft of each chapter to give me some idea whether I had wrought what I intended. My wife, Kristine; my son Geoffrey; and Kathy H. Kidd and Erin and Phillip Absher were my most immediate readers, and I thank them for helping prevent many a moment of inclarity or ineffectiveness.

The person most influential in giving this book the shape it has, however, is the aforementioned Phillip Absher, for when he read the first version of a chapter in which Petra was rescued from Russian captivity and united with Bean, he commented that I had built up her kidnapping so much that it was rather disappointing how easily the problem turned out to be resolved. I had not realized how high I had raised expectations, but I could see that he was right—that her easy release was not only a breaking of an implied promise with the reader, but also implausible under the circumstances. So instead of her kidnapping being an early event in a very involved story, I realized that it could and should provide the overarching structure of the entire novel, thus splitting what was to be one novel into two. As the story of Han Qing-jao took over *Xenocide* and caused it to become two books, so also the story of Petra took over this, Bean's second book, and caused there to be a third, *Shadow of Death* (which I may extend to the longer phrase from the Twenty-third Psalm, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*; it would never do to become tied to a title too early). The book originally planned to be third will now be the fourth, *Shadow of the Giant*. All because

Phillip felt a bit disappointed and, just as importantly, said so, causing me to think again about the structure I had unconsciously created in subversion of my conscious plans.

I rarely write two novels at once, but I did this time, going back and forth between *Shadow of the Hegemon* and *Sarah*, my historical novel about the wife of Abraham (*Shadow Mountain*, 2000). The novels sustained each other in odd ways, each of them dealing with history during times of chaos and transformation-like the one the world is embarking upon at the time of this writing. In both stories, personal loyalties, ambitions, and passions sometimes shape the course of the history and sometimes surf upon history's wave, trying merely to stay just ahead of the breaking crest. May all who read these books find their own ways to do the same. It is in the turmoil of chaos that we discover what, if anything, we are.

As always, I have relied upon Kathleen Bellamy and Scott Allen to help keep communications open between me and my readers, and many who visited and took part in my online commun (<http://www.hatrack.com>, <http://www.frescopix.com>, and <http://www.nauvoo.com>) helped me, often in ways they did not realize.

Many writers produce their art from a maelstrom of domestic chaos and tragedy. I am fortunate enough to write from within an island of peace and love, created by my wife, Kristine, my children, Geoffrey, Emily, Charlie Ben, and Zina, and good and dear friends and family who surround us and enrich our lives with their good will, kind help, and happy company. Perhaps I would write better were my life more miserable, but I have no interest in performing the experiment.

In particular, though, I write this book for my second son, Charlie Ben, who wordlessly has given great gifts to all who know him. Within the small community of his family, of school friends at Gateway Education Center, and of church friends in the Greensboro Summit Ward, Charlie Ben has given and received much friendship and love without uttering a word, as he patiently endures his pain and limitations, gladly receives the kindness of others, and generously shares his love and joy with all who care to receive it. Twisted by cerebral palsy, his body movements may look strange and disturbing to strangers, but to those willing to look more closely, a young man of beauty, humor, kindness, and joy can be found. May we all learn to see past such outward signs, and show our true selves through all barriers, however opaque they seem. And Charlie, who will never hold this book in his own hands or read it with his own eyes, will nevertheless hear it read to him by loving friends and family members. So to you, Charlie, I say: I am proud of all you do with your life, and glad to be your father; though you deserved a better one, you have been generous enough to love the one you have.