

IB/TOPS/MACS

CLASS 17 HANDOUT



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, a forehead there. 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.

This 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 bugged ships. Holos of the 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 was 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."

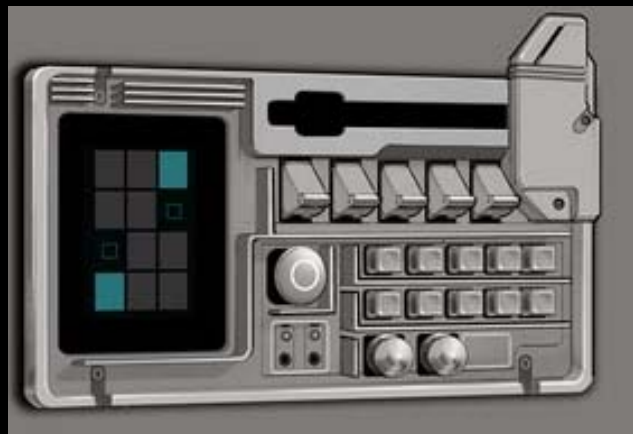
"And not half as fun," said another.

"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.

