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."

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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 he 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? The sergeant 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."

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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--
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."


"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 he 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 he sure he was all right. He could hear Father laughing at the video. It was all so clear, and it would never he 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.

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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 bugger ships. Holos 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.
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. 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 he 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. Shem was small, ambitious, and easily needled. 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 latigh 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 fora 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.