

THE QUIET WAR

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For Russell Schechter,
and for Georgina, *naturellement*

The Herr Doctor does not know about peoples.

William Golding, *Free Fall*

PART ONE

THE QUICKENING

Every day the boys woke when the lights came on at 0600. They showered and dressed, made their beds and policed the dormitory, endured inspection by one of their lectors. Breakfast was a dollop of maize gruel and a thimble of green tea. They ate quickly, each boy facing one of his brothers across the long table, no sound but the scrape of plastic spoons on plastic bowls. There were fourteen of them, tall and pale and slender as skinned saplings. Blue-eyed. Their naked scalps shone in the cold light as they bent over their scant repast. At two thousand six hundred days old they were fully grown but with traces of adolescent awkwardness yet remaining. They wore grey paper shirts and trousers, plastic sandals. Red numbers were printed on their shirts, front and back. The numbers were not sequential because more than half their original complement had been culled during the early stages of the programme.

After breakfast, the boys stood to attention in front of the big screen, flanked by their lectors and the avatars of their instructors. A flag filled the screen edge to edge and top to bottom, a real flag videoed somewhere on Earth, gently rippling as if caught in a draught. Its green light washed over their faces and set sparks in their eyes as they stood straightbacked in two rows, right hands starfished on their chests as they recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

The same rituals every morning. The same video. The same flag rippling in exactly the same way. The same scrap of blue visible for half a second in the upper left-hand corner, the blue sky of Earth.

One of the boys, Dave #8, looked for that little flash of blue every day. Sometimes he wondered if his brothers looked for it as well, wondered if they too felt a yearning tug for the world they had been created to defend yet could never visit. He never talked about it, not even to his best friend, Dave #27. Things like that, feelings that made you think you might be different from your brothers, you kept to yourself. Difference was a weakness, and every kind of weakness must be suppressed. Even so, at the beginning of every day Dave #8 anticipated the fugitive glimpse of that scrap of Earth's sky, and every time he saw it he felt a flutter of longing in his heart.

Their lectors and instructors recited the Pledge of Allegiance, too.

Fathers Aldos, Clarke, Ramez and Solomon in their white, rope-girdled habits; the instructors' faces floating in the visors of the man-sized, man-shaped plastic shells of their avatars. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it was instructors for ecosystem management, engineering, and sociology; the rest of the week it was theory of war, psychology, economics, and Hindi, Japanese, Mandarin, and Russian—the boys were already fluent in English, the lingua franca of the enemy, but some enemy communities still used the languages of the homelands of their ancestors, and so the boys had to learn those, too.

The instructors taught theoretical classes in the morning and the lectors taught practical classes in the afternoon and evening. Maintenance and repair of pressure suits, construction and deployment of demons and data miners, vehicle and flight simulators, immersion scenarios that acquainted the boys with every aspect of everyday life in the cities of the enemy. They practised martial arts, bomb making, and sabotage, and trained with staffs, swords, knives, and every other kind of blunt and bladed weapon. The practise versions were weighted so that they would find the real thing easier to handle. They learned to strip down, repair, and use firearms in all kinds of conditions. In the dark; in a centrifuge that buffeted them in every direction; in extremes of heat and cold and combinations of rain, snow, and high winds in the weather chamber. Sealed in their pressure suits. Underwater.

Every tenth day they were led in single file down a long umbilical passage to the cargo bay of a shuttle that took them into orbit. Floating weightless in the padded, windowless tube, where each move had to spring from the body's centre of mass and every blow caused an equal and opposite reaction, they had to learn hand-to-hand combat and use of weapons all over again.

The lectors punished every mistake. Father Solomon, who supervised the classes in martial arts, was quickest with the shock stick. Dave #8 and his brothers exhausted themselves in bruising bouts of boxing, capoeira and karate to win his approval, but most of them suffered at least one shock in each and every session.

Sometimes the practical classes were visited by an avatar that wore a woman's face. The lectors treated her with a deference they showed no one else and were quick to answer her questions. Usually she said nothing at all, watching the boys work for a few minutes or an hour before her face vanished from the avatar's visor and it marched out of the gymnasium and returned to its rack. The woman's name was Sri Hong-Owen. The boys had long ago concluded that she must be their mother.

It didn't matter that she looked nothing like them. After all, they'd been cut to resemble the enemy, treated with the same gene therapies, given the same metabolic tweaks, the same so-called enhancements. But the enemy had been human before they had perverted themselves, so the boys must have started out as human beings, too. And because they were clones, which was why they had numbers and why they were all called Dave (a casual joke by one of the instructors which the boys had incorporated into their private mythology), they must all have the same mother . . .

Although they had no proof that the woman was their mother, they had faith that she was. And faith was stronger than any mere proof because it came from God rather than the minds of men. She did not visit them often. Once every fifty days or so. The boys felt blessed by her presence, and worked harder and were more cheerful for days afterward. Otherwise their routine was unvaried, dedicated to the serious business of learning how to kill and destroy. Learning how to make war.

In the evenings, after Mass, supper, and the struggle sessions in which the boys took turns to confess their sins and suffer the criticism of their brothers, it was politics. Videos crammed with motion and bright colours and swelling music told stories of courage and sacrifice from the history of Greater Brazil, showed how the enemy had betrayed humanity by sheltering on the Moon during the Overturn, how they had refused to return to Earth and help in its reconstruction but had instead run away to Mars and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, how a group of Martians had later tried to attack Earth by nudging one of the Trojan asteroids, whose elliptical orbits around the sun crossed the orbit of Earth, into a collision course. The plot had failed, and a suicide mission of righteous heroes had exploded hydrogen bombs over the Martian settlements at Ares Valles and Hellas Planitia, and deflected the trajectory of a comet falling sunward. The comet had been broken up by more hydrogen bombs and its fragments had stitched a string of huge craters around Mars's equator and wiped every trace of human life from the face of the red planet. But the enemy were plotting still in their nests and lairs on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn; were actively engaged in elaborating the greatest crime in the history of mankind by the anti-evolutionary engineering of their genomes.

The boys always knew which type of video would be shown because of the meal before it. Their favourite foods, sweet and swimming with fats, before history and heroes; gruel and plain boiled vegetables before crimes against humanity.

In snatched moments, they discussed the heroes they most admired and the battles they would have most liked to have fought in, and speculated about where they might go and what they might do after they had finished their training. Although war had not yet been declared, it was obvious that they were being trained to fight the enemy. Dave #27, who took extra instruction from Father Aldos on aspects of faith and the nature of Gaia, believed that if they were especially heroic they would be remade into ordinary human beings. Dave #8 wasn't so sure. Lately he'd been troubled by a simple paradox: if he and his brothers had been created by technology that was evil, how then could they ever do good? He brooded on this for a long time, and at last confided his thoughts to Dave #27, who told him that every kind of goodness can spring from evil, just as the most beautiful flowers may be rooted in filth. Wasn't that the story of the human race? Everyone was Fallen. Everyone who had ever lived was tainted by original sin. Yet anyone could achieve Heaven if they atoned for their sins by cultivating their faith, praising God, and tending His creation. Even the enemy had the potential to be redeemed, but they refused God because they wanted to be little gods themselves, ruling little heavens of their own making. Heavens that were heaven in name only, and were doomed to become hells to spite their creators' mortal hubris because they lacked the grace that flowed only from God.

"We are sinful in origin and aspect, but not in deed," Dave #27 said. "We do not use our talents to rebel against God, but to serve Him. We might even be a little closer to angels than other men, because we are wholly dedicated to serving the Trinity. Because we are holy warriors who will gladly and eagerly lay down their lives for God, Gaia, and Greater Brazil."

Dave #8, alarmed by the shine in Dave #27's eyes, warned his brother that he was committing the mortal sin of pride. "Our lives may be dedicated to the defence of God and Gaia and Greater Brazil, but that doesn't mean we're in any way like the heroes of the great stories."

"What are we, then?"

"Soldiers," Dave #8 said. "No more, no less."

He did not want to be special. It helped that he did not excel or outshine his brothers in any aspect of training or instruction, that he lacked Dave #27's love of discourse and argument, Dave #11's limber athleticism, Dave #19's skill in electronic warfare. He wanted to believe that lack of any kind of singular talent was a virtue, for differing in any way from the ordinary might foster pride that would lead him astray and make him fail in his duty.

One day Father Solomon caught him trying to examine his reflection.

This was in the gymnasium. There were cases of weapons down one long wall—short spears and javelins, stabbing swords and long swords, fencing foils and bouquets of knives, staffs, maces, bludgeons, truncheons, halberds, and pikes, longbows and crossbows and their arrows and quarrels, as well as the grinding stones and bottles of mineral oil and diamond-dust polish and files used to keep edges sharp and metal clean. There were projectile and energy weapons, too. Machine pistols, target pistols, and sniper rifles; glasers whose beam could cook a man from the inside out; tasers that fired clouds of charged tags; pulse rifles that fired plasma needles hot as the surface of the sun. Ranged along the far wall of the cavernous room were racks of armour, pressure suits, and scuba suits with integral airpaks. That was where Dave #8 sat cross-legged with his brothers, the components of the pressure suits they had dismantled during a routine maintenance exercise laid out in front of them.

Dave #8 was holding the chest plate of his pressure suit at arm's length, turning it this way and that. Its polished black curve gave back only distorted fragments, but there were no mirrors anywhere in the warren of chambers the boys called home and this was the best he could do. He was trying to see if there was something different in his face. If there was, then he would know that his suspicion that he thought differently was true.

He did not notice Father Solomon creeping up behind him on rubber-soled sandals, thumbing back the snap that fastened his shock stick to his belt.

When Dave #8 came round, with an all-over cramp and blood in his mouth, Father Solomon was standing over him and lecturing the other boys about vanity. Dave #8 knew that he was in trouble so deep that the exercise Father Solomon gave them after his lecture, assembling their pressure suits in a howling snow-storm in the weather chamber, would not be enough to atone for it.

In the struggle session that evening, each of his brothers stood up in turn and denounced him ringingly, as he had denounced them in other sessions after they had committed sins of omission or commission. He could not explain that he had been trying to catch sight of hidden faults in the reflection of his face. It was forbidden to attempt to excuse or explain any sins, and he was conditioned to believe that every punishment was just. He was being punished because he deserved it.

The theme of Father Clarke's sermon at Mass took as its text Ecclesiastes, chapter one, verse two. Vanity of vanities, said the preacher; vanity of vanities and everything is vanity. It was a favourite of the lectors, but that evening Dave #8 knew that it was directed straight at him, a righteous X-ray laser shrivelling his soul.

Burning with misery and shame and self-loathing, he sat through a video that documented in gruesome detail the brute lawlessness and cannibalism that had swept over the great North American cities during the Overturn. He was certain that he had failed especially badly. That he was a candidate for disappearance. For although the last disappearance had occurred when the boys had been very much younger, over one and a half thousand days ago, it had been drilled into them that their survival was forever provisional and they must struggle to attain perfection every hour of every day.

The disappearances had always happened at night. The boys would wake to find one of their number gone, his bed stripped bare, his footlocker open and empty. No explanation had ever been given; none was needed. Their brother had disappeared because he had failed, and failure was not tolerated.

In bed after the lights had been switched off, Dave #8 struggled to stay awake, but his conditioning soon won out over his fear. He slept. And in the morning was surprised to discover himself still in his narrow bed, with the bustle of his brothers rising and dressing all around him. It was as if he had been reborn. Nothing had changed, yet everything was charged with significance.

Full of joy, he stood with his brothers in front of the rippling flag on the big screen and with his right hand over his heart recited the familiar words with renewed ardour.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of Greater Brazil and to the undertaking for which it stands, one Earth under Gaia, indivisible, restored, replenished, and purged of all human sin.

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Cash Baker was just twenty-six, with eight years' service in the Greater Brazilian Air Defence Force, when he was selected for the J-2 single-ship test programme. From inauspiciously ordinary origins in a hardscrabble city in the badlands of East Texas he'd risen through the ranks with astonishing speed. Luckily, he'd received as good an education as anyone in his neck of the woods could reasonably expect, and one of his teachers had spotted his preternatural mathematical ability and given him extra tutoring and steered him toward the Air Defence Force. He scraped into the top per-