

Un-Birthday Boy

By James White

"Normality" involves comparison to a standard - but how do you judge the standard? - every morning he tried very hard not to waken into his unhappy world, but the wall beeper would only get louder until he turned it off to let his mother know that he was awake and would be out for breakfast as soon as he had washed and dressed. The voices of the three other children came through the adjoining wall, louder and more excited than usual because today was Danal's birthday and there would be a party and presents. He especially hated waking up on a birthday because those days were the unhappiest of all for him since he had never had one.

He was the only member of the family with his own room, he thought as he cleaned himself all over with the special sponge that was supposed to help take away the smell that they all said came from his body, then he deliberately looked out of the window while he dressed. Not so long ago he had needed his mother or one of the other children to help him with his fastenings, but now he was able to dress and look outside at the same time. Even his father, while visiting his room to do nasty things to him, had said that he was showing a change for the better and that it was about time. But there was never any change in the view from his window, just the same haze of stars moving past like banks of bright speckled fog and the sun-shadows moving slowly along the metal framework that held their house to the rim of the spacestation.

All at once the other room became quiet and empty. He waited for as long as he could then followed the others into breakfast before his mother could come in to ask him if he was feeling sick again.

It was the fourteenth birthday party that he had attended, five for each of the two older children and four for the youngest one who was his favorite, although there might have been others that he had been too young to remember. They always began at breakfast time so that his father could join in and distribute the presents before dressing for work. Because it took so long to get into and out of a spacesuit and to check every thing, the children would not see him again until it was nearly bedtime. His father spent the last hour of the day playing with the children in their rooms, but some of the things he did to him when they were alone together were not nice so that he would have been pleased not to have a lather at all.

"Since this is another birthday," said his father, smiling at everyone in turn, "we have again been given permission to let you spend today playing in the Center. Your mother will stay with you until I finish for the day and we come back for another party. This time the area of wall netting has been extended and the metal projections padded so that there is no risk of you injuring yourselves. But don't get overexcited or jump off too fast because a collision at speed with the net supports or each other will hurt and would certainly spoil the rest of the birthday for you. And if someone was to be seriously injured you might not be allowed to play in the Center again. So be very careful, all of you."

Why, he thought, does he always look at me when he says things like that?

"And now," his father went on, "the presents..."

Danal, the birthday boy, was given his present first. It was a large box wrapped in used computer paper, and while he was opening it his younger brother Cawn and sister Wana were given smaller presents so that they would not feel bad because it wasn't their birthday. It wasn't his birthday, either, it was never ever his birthday, so he was given a present as well. It turned out to be a well-worn, animal soft toy, a castoff that had been given to Wana when she had been only two.

He said "Thank you," like the others, and put it down beside his bowl even though he wanted to pull its legs off and throw it at them. When he saw the nice things that the others were getting he tried not to speak, but the angry words came out any way.

"Why don't I get presents like that?" he said, waving his arms and almost

knocking over the food bowl as he tried to point at all of them at once. "This thing is for, for babies. Why don't you give me toys and games that light up and make noises and do things? You don't want me here. You don't love me, not like the way you do the others. I heard them talking about it. You, you don't even give me nice things to eat!"

This time it was little Wana who pointed. She was the youngest and smallest of the children and she always talked to him as if he wasn't stupid. With her tiny hand almost touching his face she said, "Why are your eyes all wet?"

"Of course we love you like the others," said his mother. "It is just that-"

"-It isn't easy to have toys sent 'way out here," his father joined in.

"There are weight restrictions on nonessential supplies for personal use, and we have to take good care of them. If you promise to be very careful and not lose your temper if the game is too difficult, Danal or Cawn will let you play with one of their old ones until you're able to-"

"No!" said Danal in a very loud voice. "I let him play with a game last year, remember? It was a flight simulator, an old one but still working, and he smashed it into bits before bedtime. He has hands like clumsy feet and he talks funny and he's got a big head with no brains in it. I won't do it, I won't."

"Me, too," said Cawn in a quieter voice. "He always breaks things. He's rough and he's not like us and we don't like him. Why don't you just send him away?"

"Stop talking like that, right now," said his father, "and listen to me. He can't help what he does and maybe he will learn not to break things one of these years. Maybe it was the accident when he was a baby, or being so long in that survival pod with not enough food in the dispenser that made him slow-witted. He was nearly dead when we found him. You have to make allowances for him not being..."

An argument started between his mother and father and the two boys; the same argument that happened at every birthday party for as long as he could remember. It made him feel very bad. He was wiping his eyes with his fingers when Wana leaned sideways in her chair towards him.

"I like you," she whispered. "I don't want you to go away. I think you're nice and fat and cuddly, and you've got a big, funny head."

All at once he felt a warm, sad, glad feeling that made his eyes get wet again, but he could not find the words to tell her about it. The argument was still going on between Danal, Cawn, and his parents, but it stopped when his father stood up.

"Enjoy your presents," he said. "It's time I left for work."

"Coward," said his mother, rising to go to the door with him. The boys stopped arguing and went back to exploring their presents and deliberately ignoring him. He was staring down at the old soft doll when he felt Wana's fingers poking into his arm.

When he looked at her he saw that she was watching the two older boys and pushing her bowl sideways towards him. It was still half-filled with big, flat, pieces of yellow and red fruit floating in thick juice and his mouth watered just looking at it.

"Thank you. Wana," he said, reaching for the bowl. "Would you like some of mine?"

She looked down at the gray, lumpy contents of his bowl and said, "Yuk."

"Me, too," he said.

He had succeeded in making one of the pieces of soft, slippery fruit stay on the spoon and was lifting it carefully to his mouth when his mother came back and started scolding everybody except him.

"Don't let him eat that!" she said.

"How many times have I told you not to give him any of your food? He has an allergy to fruit and practically everything else in this place. Don't ask-an allergy means that certain things make him sick or brings him out in itchy spots. Wana, don't ever give him your breakfast again. And you boys are old enough to know better. Why didn't you stop her? Go into the living room and play with your toys. Leave the door open so I can hear what you're doing..."

From the living room he could still hear her talking to herself as she cleared the breakfast things. The two boys were playing with the new game Danal had been given for his birthday and they did not look at him. Wana had brought out the old teaching game that all of the others had used when they were younger, a flat box that showed moving pictures on top while a voice inside explained what was happening in very simple words.

"Thank you, Wana, anyway," he said. But she was ignoring him, too, because she did not like being scolded and was blaming him for what had happened. But he knew that she would not stay mad at him for long so he said, "What is that thing?"

After a long silence she said, "It's a bird."

"But what's it doing?" he said.

"There isn't anything holding it up. Is it in a Center, in free fall?"

"Can't you hear the words?" said Wana crossly. "It's flying, holding itself up by pushing down against the air with its wings, those broad arms with the fuzzy edges."

He could hear words better, he had learned over the years, than could any other member of the family. It was more difficult if they were whispered behind doors or a dividing wall, but he was still able to hear every word they said. He had not told them about his ability because he was afraid it would make the boys like him even less if he was better at anything than they were. Wana was different. She was nice and she liked him, most of the time.

"I can hear but I don't understand all the words. What is an angle of incidence and a coefficient of—"

"I don't understand those words, either," she broke in. "It's just a bird, flying up in the air and away from the ground."

She still seemed to be angry with him and that made him feel bad. Maybe he should try to make her laugh.

Very carefully he climbed up to stand balanced on the chair, which was soft and unsteady under his feet, and began to flap his arms up and down faster and faster. Wana looked up at him, smiling, until one of his feet slipped over the edge of the cushion and he fell onto the floor.

"I tried very hard," he said, "but I didn't fly into the air."

"We're playing a difficult game here that needs a lot of concentration," said Danal. He gave a nasty laugh and went on, "And you didn't rise in the air because your hands aren't wide enough. Sit down and stop fooling around."

"Did you hurt yourself?" said Wana, being friends again. "You can play this game with me if you like. I'll show you what keys to press to change the pictures."

He wanted to play the game, and push the tiny, close-together buttons that would change the pictures or make parts of them bigger or cause them to stop moving. But if he was clumsy, and he was always clumsy, he might break off one of the tiny control keys and ruin the game and she would not like him again. He rubbed the wetness from his eyes and said, "No, I'll just watch you, and behave myself."

"Oh, that's good," said Wana, and laughed.

Unlike the other two, she was too young and nice to hide the relief she was feeling or say things that meant something else.

She changed the pictures to show other kinds of birds and fish and animals, and some of them looked like their parents with no clothes on, but they always came back to the first big, beautiful bird with the slow-moving arms. They were watching it yet again when their mother came in.

"Everyone is being very quiet," she said, "Has somebody broken some thing or done something naughty that you don't want to tell me about? Or are you all enjoying your games too much to want to go up to the Center?"

Everybody said "No" so quickly that he could not tell who said it first.

His mother smiled and said, "Then let's go. Everyone, zip up your coveralls and make sure your shoes won't come off. I'll carry the picnic. Danal and Cawn, lead the way Wana next and you..." she bent down to check his feet,

"...had better stay close to me."

"They're all right," he said. "I can tie the laces myself now."

"Good boy," she said, patting him on the head. "Now hold onto my hand and come along."

They left the house and followed the others along the corridor outside, and began climbing the ramps and ladders leading up to the Center. The higher they climbed the easier it became, but slower because his feet would barely stay on the ground and he had to hold onto his mother's hand or the netting that was stretched tightly along the walls to keep from floating away. The others were moving far ahead of them, shouting with excitement as they pulled themselves faster along the netting, but his mother held him back and told him to be patient.

By the time they emerged into the Center, Danal and Cawn were already drifting into the big, empty middle and Wana was making a slow, careful jump to follow them.

Apart from the small pictures of big places shown on learning games, this was the biggest empty place he had ever seen. It would have taken about fifty adults with their arms held out sideways and holding onto each other's hands to stretch from any one side of the hollow space to the side opposite. The last time he had been here his father had told him very slowly that it was the station's cargo bay, that the extending arms of the handling equipment were folded flat against the inner walls and all the sharp edges protected by raised safety nets, padding or sheets of packing when not in use, and that the circular red and yellow door he could see behind the netting was opened only when there was a ship in dock discharging stores or people. His father had stopped trying to explain when it became clear that he had not understood what was being said. But he remembered the words, and now he was older and knew what most of them meant.

Neither had he any trouble understanding the meaning of his mother's words even when he was pretending not to hear some of them.

"Be careful," she was saying, "and stay close to the netting. Pull yourself along it with your hands, but slowly so you won't drift away. If you get into trouble, shout and I'll come for you. Don't jump too hard because you're very strong and if you hit something when you are moving too fast, you will be hurt. Another reason why I don't want you to jump into the middle with the others is that if you started spinning there would be nothing to hold onto to stop yourself and you would be dizzy and frightened..."

She was still warning him to be careful as he began pulling himself along the net and stopping every few minutes to let his legs swing back wards and up to point toward the middle where the others were floating and turning slow somersaults.

Sometimes he stopped himself with just one hand although it was harder to hold steady that way. His mother had stopped worrying out loud about him so he decided to try something new.

If he was forbidden to jump up to the middle like the others, maybe he could try jumping from the padded side of a cabinet to another one near by and stay close to the netting on the way over, like his mother had told him to do. The first few times he tried it the netting kept sloping up to meet him before he reached the other cabinet, until he remembered that the Center was a hollow sphere with curving sides and he should aim higher. He looked all around and discovered that his mother was almost hidden from sight by a projecting cabinet, and anyway, all of her attention was on the others who were shouting at her to watch them. He watched, too.

They were drawing up their legs and folding their arms tightly around their knees, and for some reason this made them spin faster. When he tried to do the same behind the shelter of the cabinet, he could not roll himself up as tightly as they could but it worked anyway. It was great fun even though it made him dizzy. He went back to trying to jump between cabinets.

He must still have been dizzy from the spinning, because as soon as he jumped he knew that he had pushed too hard with his feet and that his aim had been

bad. He was going to pass right over the thing instead of landing low down on its side. He was high enough for his mother to see him, but she was still watching the others.

He grabbed at the padded upper edge of the cabinet as it floated past below him, but could not hold onto it, and all that happened was that he started himself turning end over end again. The netting was farther below him than it had been during the earlier jumps he had tried, and he was traveling farther across it before it began curving up to meet him. But then he saw that instead of landing on the netting he was going to come down on a flat, white box that was projecting above it.

He hit the top and one side with his feet, the impact making the box explode slowly into flat, white fragments. He saw then that it was made from thick layers of light, stiff plastic, bigger sheets of the same stuff that was used as packing for the other children's games. The sheets had been held together with strips of white tape to cover a panel that had a vision screen and colored buttons on it.

Most of the plastic sheets were being held together by the tape but a few of them had been knocked loose and were drifting away.

His mother chose that moment to look in his direction again.

"I told you to play close to me," she called, "What are you doing?"

"N-Nothing," he said loudly "Wana," she went on. "Be a good girl and jump over there and see what he's doing, then bring him back here.

It's time for the picnic."

The loosened sheets of white plastic were drifting away from the vision screen. He would have to replace them before Wana arrived because she might ask questions about them loudly enough for their mother to overhear and begin scolding him. He grabbed the edge of the nearest sheet in both hands and brought it down quickly toward the screen, but some thing funny happened. The plastic sheet seemed to be pushing against something invisible that could only be the air. The pressure rolled him back ward slowly until he bounced into the netting and had to grab it with one hand to keep from floating away.

Laughing, and with all thought of tidying up the area leaving his mind, he tried it again.

This time he slid one foot under the net and pressed the sole of the other one down on top of it so that a thick strand was held between them to keep him from drifting away, then he began flapping his sheet up and down. He discovered that whenever he moved the sheet downward in front of him he was pushed back wards and he could feel his lower foot pulling against the netting, and when he lifted it upward his upper foot was pressed gently against the netting instead of trying to leave it. Feeling con fused, he looked at his brothers playing above him and the memory of Danal's words to him when he had been flapping his arms up and down like the big bird came back to him.

You can't fly, he had said, because your hands aren't wide enough.

But if he tried it with a sheet of plastic in each hand he felt sure that they would be plenty wide enough.

"What are you doing?" said Wana, who had arrived unnoticed behind him.

"Shush, don't let mother hear you," he said without looking around at her.

"I'm trying to fly like a bird, but it isn't working right."

"Birds are supposed to fly straight," she said in a very loud whisper, "not go up and down like that. Can I play, too?"

"Yes," he said. "The bits of plastic are over there. But what am I doing wrong?"

When he tried to fly straight and level, pushing down with the plastic wings the way the big bird in the education game had done, it made his head and shoulders come up while his legs stayed where they were; and when he lifted the wings, that made him nose-dive into the netting. He tried to fly straight upward by putting his wings together above his head and sweeping them outward and down to the sides of his knees. That caused him to rise quickly but when he swept his wings up again he moved back against the net again.

Then by accident, but mostly because he was losing patience with the whole stupid business, he twisted his wrists sideways during the up sweep and found that he kept on moving upward. He tried other things, and found that when he stretched the wings out flat from his sides without flapping them, he slowed almost to a stop. Holding only one wing steady when he was moving made him turn slowly in that direction.

"Wana, look!" he said, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. "When you push down against the air you go up, and if you turn the sheets side ways so they slide through the air edge-on, you don't move back at all and you're ready for another push down..."

"Like this?" said Wana, who had been watching him closely. She laughed and called, "Danal, Cawn.

Look, I'm flying like a bird. Wheeee!"

The two big sheets of plastic were making her tiny body look even smaller, and the quick, excited movements of her shorter arms were pushing her along faster than he was able to go. In her eagerness she was sometimes for getting to turn the sheets completely edge-on during the up-sweeps so that she was wobbling all over the place, but already she was nearly halfway up to where the boys were playing.

"Yes," he said. "But don't move your arms so fast. You look like the pictures of the little fat birds. Try to fly like the big, slow one.

"Like this," he added, flying after her.

His mother began scolding him as soon as she saw them moving away from the netting, but by that time Danal and Cawn were shouting questions at Wana and himself so loudly that he was able to pretend not to hear her. The boys wanted to know where they had found the plastic sheets and how they were able to fly like that? Wana reached them first, but flew helplessly past and fluttered all over the place as she tried to slow down and go back to them. He watched her for a moment, trying to understand the things she was doing wrong, then he used his wings to raise his head and chest so that his legs swung around until he was moving backward. When he started flying in the new direction it surprised him how easy it was to slow to a stop close to where the boys were hanging motionless and watching him without speaking.

"That, that was neat..." Danal began. But the few minutes of silence had allowed their mother's voice to be heard and they had no excuse for ignoring her.

"Mom, there's no problem," Danal went on. "He won't hurt himself, or us. Honestly, he's doing just fine. Cawn, grab my other hand and bend your knees until your feet are flat against mine, then let go and push hard. We have to get back to the net and get some wings of our own..."

"Wait," he said, hoping that he wasn't going to do something stupid again. "It would take a longer time for both of you to get down to the net and crawl over to the plastic sheets. Maybe, maybe if you held onto my legs I could fly you down faster."

"Right," said Danal without hesitation. "Cawn, grab his other leg."

He felt his body begin a slow, twisting spin as their hard fingers tightened in a double grip around his ankles and he was afraid that he would not be able to control himself. But when he started flying again, sweeping the wings from high above his head and sideways to his knees, the weight of the boys dragging behind seemed to stabilize him. By spilling the air from one wing or the other, he was able to turn until he was heading toward the area of netting containing the plastic sheets.

"That's very good," said Danal.

"No it isn't," said Cawn. "We're not moving."

"We're moving, but slowly," said Danal. In the show-offy words he used when he was trying to sound grown-up like their father, he went on, "He has the inertia of three bodies instead of one to overcome. Watch the way he twists his wrists before the up-sweep, and remember how he does it. We're moving faster now..."

They let go of his legs just before he reached the netting, and within a few minutes they had wings, too. At first they were very clumsy, flying into the netting or projecting cabinets while they laughed and shouted at each other. But very soon they were flying close to the netting without touching it, and playing follow-my-leader around and over the padded equipment. Their mother had stopped calling to them to come back for their picnic, but that was because they were making too much noise to hear her and having too much fun to want to stop for anything as boring as food.

He thought that she might be angry and would scold them when they got home, but when he looked across at her she was smiling.

"Let's try to do something difficult," said Danal, using his adult's voice again, "like flying close together in line abreast formation right across the Center. Theoretically, in the weight less condition, the wings should enable us to control movement in three dimensions, right? So line up on the net, let go at the same time, and fly" On the first attempt their line was anything but straight, mostly because Wana got excited and flew too far ahead of everyone else. The second and third attempts were better although their line was still a bit crooked. During the fourth attempt when they were holding a tight, neat formation and moving toward the middle, Cawn kicked his right wing, breaking the sheet of plastic in two.

With only a wing and a half to fly on, he kept turning sideways even when he tried to move the half wing twice as fast as the good one.

Cawn turned away quickly and flew down to the net, returning a few minutes later with another sheet of plastic held between his knees.

"I'm sorry," he said, handing him the new wing. "It was an accident."

It was the first time that Cawn had said anything to him that had not had words like "Big" or "Stupid" in it somewhere.

"Right," said Danal, flying closer and looking straight at him. "I've been thinking. Flying in formation isn't very hard to do. We should do something with our wings that is fun but more difficult, don't you think?"

Before he could reply, Wana shouted, "Oh, yes," and Cawn said "Like what?"

The game they devised wasn't all his idea because Danal and Cawn and even Wana suggested changes that made it more complicated and much more fun. They played it right in the middle of the Center, flying around and over and under each other as close as they could without touching - like a slow, ungainly swarm of giant insects. Their mother had stopped telling them to be careful and was just watching and smiling up at them.

They had all become very good at the game, there were no more collisions or broken wings, and even though it was exciting and hard work he was having fun, much more fun than he could have believed possible. That was because the others were not treating him like he was stupid any more. But it was a quiet game because they were all concentrating so hard on what they were doing that there was no time to waste on shouting or even laughing.

Their busy silence was broken by the voice of his father who had joined his mother on the net.

"Weightless flying," he said quietly "Whose bright idea was that?"

"When I tell you," his mother replied, "you won't believe me."

"You mean ... him?"

"Yes," she said, "the un-birthday boy" His father was silent for so long that he felt sure that he was going to be scolded, but instead said, "They're very good at it, especially him. But let's face it, even with the best will in the world we never were qualified to handle this kind of situation. He is not a normal child."

"No," said his mother

"Do you think this sudden aptitude for weightless maneuvering," his father went on very quietly, "means that he's beginning to mature mentally as well as physically, or is that just wishful thinking on my part? It's a pity we won't get the chance to find out."

"Why not?" said his mother sharply.

"What are you talking about?"

"Keep your voice down," he whispered, "I don't want him to hear us, at least not until we decide how and what to tell him. We notified the childcare authorities when we found him, remember, but in the circumstances I wasn't sure if they would be able to do anything about him. They have. He'll be leaving us very soon.

"Children," he went on, raising his voice, "I'm sorry for cutting short your fun, but you'll have to come home right away. There is a ship expected soon, an unscheduled visitor, and the Center must be readied for its arrival. But don't worry, I'll make sure there are more plastic wings available the next time you play here. Quickly, please."

The others were protesting loudly, but he kept quiet because he was remembering the things his father had been saying about him that he was not supposed to overhear, and wondering what they meant. Suddenly the nice, warm feeling of belonging that s he had felt since the flying game had started was leaving him, and he was I feeling afraid.

They were returning to the net, and showing off by flying in the tightest formation they had ever tried, when he said, "Danal, can I fly with you like this next time? This is the best birthday there has ever been. Thank you."

Cawn laughed. "But it isn't even I your birthday."

"Stop teasing him, Cawn," said Danal. Keeping one eye on his place in the formation he went on, "It isn't your birthday, so far as we know, be cause nobody here knows when you were born. We don't even know your name, but after today we'll have to stop calling you stupid. You found the SB plastic sheets and were smart enough to see how we could fly with them. If we had found them we would probably have done the same, but you did it first, and as a result we had more fun than we ever have before. So don't worry, we will not fly again without our instructor. It is we who should thank you.

"If you want to," he went on, "you can make this your birthday, too, and from now on we'll have parties on the same day. Why are your eyes wet?"

"I don't know," he said.

By the time they reached their waiting parents, there were adults crawling all over the Center, removing the padding from the machines and detaching and stowing the netting. His parents said that they could have their picnic at home, and after that they did not speak, which was not the way they usually behaved on a birthday.

He had no interest in the picnic be cause, no matter what the others got, he would be given the usual soft, tasteless mush. On other birthdays this made him angry, but today they all told him that he could play with their games if he was very careful. He had just finished a long, complicated game without either winning or breaking anything when he heard the distant sound of the docking siren.

His father left quickly and his mother sat down beside him. She put a thin hand on the back of his neck.

"Please," he said, "I don't want to leave you. I like it here, now."

She began pushing her fingers through his hair, the way he liked her to do, without speaking.

"I-I know you don't like me," he said, "because I'm big and stupid and sometimes I break things and make you angry. And because you don't give me nice food to eat and father does nasty things when I am alone in my room-

"But he had to do those things to you," she broke in, "to find out why ordinary food made you sick and the reasons for the other things wrong with you. We explained it to you, but you didn't understand. He didn't mean to hurt you, or risk frightening the other children.

"Don't worry," she went on, tightening her fingers in his hair and shaking his head gently, "he will never do those things to you again."

"It's all right," he said quickly. "He can do it again if he wants to. The food you give me is all right, too, and I don't mind getting other people's old presents. But I'm not as stupid and clumsy as I was, you saw me flying in the Center and, and I'll try to be better and not break things and speak my words properly and-" Suddenly he turned and wrapped his arms so tightly around

her that she moaned and her breath puffed into his face. He had forgotten that he was not supposed to hug the other members of the family like that.

"I'm sorry" he said, letting his arms fall loose again. "It's just that today was nice, the nicest day I ever had.

Even Danal and Cawn like me now and, and I'm getting smarter. Please, I don't want to be sent away."

The others had stopped eating and playing their games to look at their mother. Danal said, "Why should he be sent away?"

When she replied she was looking only at him but seemed to be answering everybody.

"I'm sorry" she said, "but you don't belong here. You already know or suspect some of this, because sometimes the boys say things they shouldn't. But this may be the last chance I have to tell you how you came to be here and why you have to go away. I believe that you have become intelligent enough to understand what I'm saying."

He had been found as a very young infant who was close to death in a survival pod that was thought to have come from a small ship which had detonated nearby, scattering its wreckage so finely that they had been unable to discover anything about the number or identity of the occupants. The incident had been reported to the childcare authorities on the home world, but that was very far away and the response time was expected to be in proportion to the distance. As a temporary measure, because of his father's profession plus the fact that they were the only couple with children on the station, they had offered themselves as temporary foster-parents.

They had not thought that the period would be a lengthy one because everyone had expected him to die.

"But you didn't die," she went on, "although many times we thought you would. Especially when the nice, ordinary food we tried to give you brought out a rash on your entire body, or raised your temperature or made you throw up or dirty your bed.

You kept growing bigger but not much smarter and you couldn't talk right and you broke things all the time. We didn't know what was wrong with you, and when your father tried to find out, you cried and I made him stop it. The stuff we give you now doesn't taste nice, but it is specially prepared so as not to make you sick. We hadn't the proper facilities for treating you here and our authorities, who would know better what to do, have been very slow to respond so that we became the only family you had.

"We tried to treat you and love you as one of the family," she went on, placing her other thin, boney arm tightly around him, "we really did.

Your father and I, I mean your foster-father and I, came to like you a lot, and we will miss you. But now we have to pass you on to people who will know how to treat you properly. You have never been happy here and -"

"But I'm happy now-" he began, when the voice of his father on the communicator made him break off "We're ready for the handover," he said over the sound of many other voices talking loudly in the back ground. "Quickly, dear, bring him to the rec room. Bring everyone to the rec room."

That was a room big enough to hold everyone on the station, his mother had once told him, which was fitted with machines and games that exercised the body as well as the mind. She had laughed and added that only grown-ups were allowed to go there because the adults drank things that were not suitable for children.

Now he would be able to see it but he didn't want to go.

"No!" his mother replied in a voice even louder than his father's. "It's been hard enough trying to say good bye to him here. Having to do it all again in public wouldn't be fair to him or the other children, or me. Give us a few more minutes together, then I'll bring him to you."

"You don't understand, dear," said his father. "Bring everybody. You'll all want to see this. They sent another doctor to look after him. But it wasn't our child care authorities who sent her, it was theirs!"

He was afraid, and on the way he hung back for as long as possible until his

mother pushed him through the recreation room door. But when he saw the figure standing in a clear area of floor beside a table that barely came up to her knees, something so strange and wonderful happened in his mind that he could hardly breathe.

She was big and thick and so tall that her head almost touched the room's high ceiling. Her legs and arms and body bulged out so much that they made her white coveralls look tight, and there were two big, soft bulges on the front of her chest. She had a big head, too, and hair like his except that it was black with gray streaks in it. Without knowing why, he let go of his mother's hand and ran to her. She knelt down quickly so that he ran straight into her open arms.

They squeezed him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. But they were big, soft arms, not like his mother's thin, hard ones, so they didn't hurt him. Her eyes were like his, too, because they were beginning to get wet.

She pushed the soft, pink edges of her mouth against his forehead for a moment, which was the first time anyone had done that to him, then gently moved his arms from around her neck and stood up. Looking at the people crowding the room, she began to speak nonsense words. But there was a box on the table beside her, which repeated them so that he knew what she was saying even though he didn't understand all the words.

"Based on the elapsed time since the accident to their survey vessel," she said, "plus the genetic information available to us on his parents' medical files, which dictates the hair and eye coloring and other inherited physical characteristics, I have no doubt that this is their son. Because of the vast distances involved between the accident site and our respective home worlds, the bureaucratic delays, the general disbelief on both sides that it was possible for him to survive for so long, a very long time passed before we learned about the survivor or your people would allow us to do anything about him. Regrettably, the greater share of the blame is ours because, instinctively, and we now realize mistakenly, our two cultures disliked and distrusted each other and I deliberately avoided making the contact in depth that would have reduced our growing hostility. But this incident, the way you have cared for this child as one of your own, will end what could have become a very dangerous situation.

"The major responsibility for that," she went on, looking only at his father, "lies with you, Doctor, and your family. With minimum physiological information and a subject who was too young to be able to speak or help himself, not only did you devise the food regimen that enabled him to survive in good health, your family adopted him, cared for and brought him up as one of your own. Fostering such a child must have posed extreme difficulties for everyone concerned, and if the positions had been reversed I do not believe that I could have coped with them, but I am sure that my later physical examination will only confirm the fact that you have raised a strong and healthy seven-year-old Earth-human boy. My sincere professional and personal compliments to all of you.

"Now that we are beginning to learn more about your culture," she continued, "including the deep significance you place on a person's birth-date and correct personal identification, I can tell you that his name is Thomas Carmichael although, because of his youth, we would call him Tommy..."

"Tomee," said Wana, leaning back onto her tail to look up at her, "is a nice name."

Cawn said, "And now he has a birthday, too."

"Now," said Danal, "he has two birthdays."

She smiled down at them and went on, "Now that they know you have kept him alive, he has many relatives who are anxious to have him home as soon as possible..."

He heard but did not listen to the other things everyone was saying because he was hugging and saying good-bye to the only family he had ever known. He was careful not to squeeze their thin, shiny bodies too hard, and he was especially gentle with little Wana who had always been his best friend.

Without knowing why he did what the giant, gray-haired woman had done to him, he pushed his mouth against the top of her tiny, round head just between the eyes.

Her eyes were not like his because they opened and closed from the sides and they didn't get wet, but he had the feeling that she wished they could.