

## TWO BOYS

by Steven Popkes

Although he spent ten years getting a B.S. in Zoology and an M.S. in Neurophysiology, Steven Popkes now works on avionic software for NASA's Ares Rockets. In his spare time, Steve has published two novels and about thirty short stories. His latest tale for us takes a look at how Neanderthals might cope with the modern world.

Now:

Alice wasn't sure what she expected.

She'd heard from both Janesha Craig and Freddy Ali that a Neanderthal family had moved into Bolton. The rumor was there was a boy and he'd be in school today. Home room came and went. Rumors washed over the school: He'd come and decided the school was too intimidating, the school wasn't good enough for him, he wasn't good enough for the school, the secret service decided security wasn't sufficient, he'd run away from the secret service. The rumors agreed on one thing: He was here in town and he wasn't coming to Bolton Middle School.

"I bet there is no Neanderthal," Alice whispered to Janesha in third period. "I bet it was just someone who had himself modified to look like a Neanderthal."

Janesha thought for a moment. "Then they better have a good lawyer," she said. "My Daddy was on the Mattel team against a Neanderthal form copyright suit last year? And *he* said Mattel never had a chance. And that was just over that silly action doll and not an actual modified *person*." Janesha shook her head. "Daddy says everything's covered by copyright. Nothing left for us but piercing and scarification. *Boring*."

Neanderthals had been all over the news as long as Alice could remember, brokering a peace deal in Malaysia, managing environmental reconstruction in Brazil. It seemed like every Social Studies class had some current events topic in which they figured prominently. She especially liked the restoration of the Brazilian highlands. But she'd never seen a Neanderthal in the flesh.

When she had a chance, Alice looked up Neanderthals. They were recreated fifty or sixty years ago from a frozen Neanderthal woman found under the retreating Paradies Glacier. Now they had two reservations—one in North Dakota and the other near Basel, Switzerland. She could access all the technical literature she wanted, and if she ever wanted to learn about nucleotide differences and phenotypic expression of hox complexes, she'd know right where to look. Just not right now, thank you very much. But there was next to nothing about their likes or dislikes, culture or marriage practices. She lowered the credibility rating and found out it was really the Neanderthals that had caused the melting of the Greenland glaciers, triggering the coastal flooding and collapse of the arctic fisheries at the same time. Neanderthals used up rationed power for their own purposes, thus causing the brownouts. That was how they melted the glaciers. Neanderthals had penises the size of your arm—and *you could, too!* Neanderthal girls were born with beards. Don't make a Neanderthal mad; he'll rip off your head and crap down your neck. Really. No fooling. *Really*.

In other words, only Neanderthals knew about Neanderthals, and they weren't talking.

\* \* \* \*

Then:

Tom Nicholson spoke to himself under his breath as he wrote the words. "Outside of Antarctica, the glaciers of Greenland are the largest on earth."

He liked writing with a pencil, by hand, on white ruled paper. He liked the smoothness of the sheet, the texture of the graphite on the paper, the feeling of the tiny yellow pencil impossibly dwarfed by his huge hand. Later, he'd scan or dictate the report into his computer. But for now, he enjoyed just writing it out.

"The warming trend now seems irreversible," Tom continued. "But even so, it will be fifty years or more before the Greenland Glacier is completely melted. The consequences—"

"Tom?" called his mother from downstairs.

"Working on my paper, Mom," he answered.

"Come on down," Agatha called up.

Tom sighed and slipped off the chair. He stretched for a moment. He should figure out how to cushion the chair to fit the curve of his back. One of these days.

He started to jump down the stairs, checked himself. While it was fun to jump the full length down to the landing, the noise scared Mom. Tom walked down instead.

He turned the corner into the kitchen. She was waiting for him, standing next to a small table with a cake on it. On the corner counter was a continuous news feed. This time it was environmental destruction in Brazil and how the denuded rainforest was being destroyed by an unconfined Amazon River. He ignored it. There was always something on. Mom was a news junkie. Tom stopped in front of the cake. It wasn't his birthday. Not Christmas. Then, he had it.

"Conception Day." He laughed.

"You forgot?"

"Hey, I bet most people would forget once in a while if they had two birthdays."

Agatha nodded and led him into the kitchen.

It was chocolate with bananas. Nice. "Any ketchup?"

Wordlessly, she pulled a bottle out of the refrigerator and set it in front of him.

"The paper's almost done," Tom mumbled around a piece of red-smeared cake. "I can hand it in later today."

Agatha nodded absently and sat across the table from him. "You're fifteen now."

"Not until spring, Mom. It's *Conception* Day. Not *Birth* Day."

"Would you like to be home schooled?"

Tom chewed on a piece of cake so he didn't have to answer immediately. He glanced at his mother warily. "No," he said after he had swallowed.

"Are you sure?"

"Mom, I like school. Absarokee is fine. I got friends there."

"Other modified children."

"Not all of them but some. Yes. Modified just like me. We have a good time together."

"You could learn more at home. I could teach you."

"*Mom, I like school. I want to stay. In school. Okay?*"

"All right." She sat back in her chair and folded her hands. "You are *fourteen* years old, after all. You should be able to make some of your own decisions."

Great. Now he had hurt her feelings. It was only the two of them. Agatha had told him about an anonymous sperm donor when he was six. Tom had never wondered much about his absent father. He'd read about kids so desperate to know their fathers they'd traveled hundreds or thousands of miles to meet them. He didn't understand it. What did he need with some man he'd never met?

"I only want what's best for you," she said distantly.

"I know. But I'm doing okay at school."

"I know."

Tom bit his lip. He really didn't want to get into this. But if he didn't, who knew what might come later? "Is there something wrong?"

"No."

"This is about Kurt Nakana, isn't it? His mom called, right? I just picked him up and held him. I didn't hurt him. I know the rules. I was careful. But he kept after me about looking different. He hit me a couple of times, but I didn't think anything of it. And then he picked up a rock. Somebody was going to get hurt. Not me, maybe. But Sol isn't very strong. Rahul looks like a wolf boy, but he scares easy. Kurt wouldn't take no for an answer. So I took the rock away and held him up in the air until he started crying. I wanted him scared. But that's all that happened. I *swear!*"

His mother watched him for a moment. She put her hand on his. "I'm not concerned about Kurt Nakana. I'm sure you didn't do anything I wouldn't be proud of."

"Then why all the worry about school?"

"Go on. You'll be late."

\* \* \* \*

Now:

Alice used her personal project time to see if there actually was a Neanderthal in Bolton. There was no news about Neanderthals, of course. Whenever she searched for news about Neanderthal families, minus all the political rot, she found no more than articles on old Tom Nicholson, P'Chk Pandit Nicholson, and the relentless Neanderthal use of public privacy laws.

But the real estate records were a matter of public record and easily accessible.

Alice looked at properties recently bought and sold, figuring Neanderthals would buy rather than rent so they could renovate a house to suit their needs and because they could probably get better privacy. She found three sales that might suit and after school, she lied to her mother. Then she told Janesha she was going looking for cave men.

"Want to come along?" Alice zipped up her backpack.

"You have got to be kidding. I'd rather do homework," Janesha said with a smile. "But have fun. Maybe he's cute."

"Don't be mental."

The second sale was on a cul-de-sac not far from home. It was a nondescript white ranch house with a slab porch. The property butted up against park land. The yard was trimmed but uninspired. There were no flowers, but a small fruit tree grew in the middle of the front lawn. A boy sat at a picnic bench, writing in a notebook. From the slant of his neck and size of his shoulders, Alice guessed she had found pay dirt.

When the boy looked up, she knew she was right.

They stared at each other for a moment. Then the boy closed the notebook and walked over to her.

"Bill Nicholson," he said and held out his hand. "I'm the Neanderthal you must be looking for."

Bill was shorter than she was—he couldn't have been more than five-three—but broad. He wore a T-shirt that had a picture of a gerbil tightly wrapped in black tape labeled "Spastic Holocaust." Not a great band, but not bad. He wore thin shorts even though there was a hint of frost in the air. Maybe the cold didn't bother him. Alice noticed the muscles in his arms and the size of his hands, the thick cords of his legs. Even Tim Matthias, who had been in gymnastics since he was three, didn't have muscles like that. Bill looked like he could toss Tim over the top of the school.

He had black eyes marked with thin white streaks and a hint of laughter. That's what struck her then: Bill looked like he was about to laugh. Not at anything particular. Just in general.

"Who says I'm looking for anybody?" This close, she could smell him, a dusty, papery smell. Like old books, but completely different.

"I know the neighbors. You don't live around here. And nobody is going to *walk* up this road by accident; they're going to be looking for one of us—me or Tom. You're too young to

be a reporter—and they would know better than to look for one of us anyway. So: it's either celebrity hunting for Tom or some high school girl looking for the new Neanderthal in town."

"Tom?"

"Old Tom Nicholson is visiting us," Bill said. "You want to stay for dinner?"

"Tom." She blinked at him, not immediately comprehending. "Tom *Nicholson*? The first Neanderthal?"

"You catch on quick," Bill grinned at her. "He flew in last night from Basel. You have a name?"

"Alice." Alice felt suddenly shy. Tom was *famous*.

Bill picked up on it. "It's okay. Don't worry. You'll like him. Raised by humans to be a regular guy."

"Oh." She made the connection. "So, is he your grandfather?"

Bill laughed, a sound like a bass drum being pounded by walnuts. "It's only been three generations. Truth is we're all related. And just to confuse matters, a lot of Neanderthals take the Nicholson name to spread the blame." He grinned at her.

She stared at him. She wasn't sure what to make of that. Was it a joke? "Who's to blame?"

Bill chuckled. "Exactly. We'll get along just fine."

\* \* \* \*

Then:

The discussion in biology class was on organ modification. The instant the subject came up, the class looked at Tom and Rahul. It bothered Rahul but Tom didn't mind. After all, wasn't Rahul the spitting image of Jack Brubaker, the Wolf Man? Wasn't Tom, himself, the perfect representation of the Swiss Ice Maiden? That is, if she weren't dead. If she hadn't been frozen thirty thousand years ago. If she were male.

It was just the nature of the town. The first whole body modification had been publicly uncovered here in Absarokee when that reporter discovered the Wolf Man. People interested in variations on the human theme tended to settle here. There was nothing special about it. Everybody started out from the same human embryo.

Class ended and Tom made his way to the gym. As he walked past Price's math class, he saw Kurt Nokana watching him.

The locker room was quiet. The current PE class was still in the gym and the next class hadn't arrived. He grinned. Tom liked to change by himself.

What he'd said to his mother was only generally true. He *did* like school. He *did* have friends. But that didn't mean the school didn't have its share of idiots. Kurt Nokana didn't stand alone. Tom liked baggy clothes that hid the differences in his physique and he could

meet taunts with a smile. The modifications his mother had purchased included strength and speed the others couldn't match. Nobody in his right mind would fight him. But kids were like dogs; they gained strength in numbers. His big hands, slope shoulders and slanted face couldn't be hidden. They invited the pack's interest. Tom didn't like to give them any extra opportunities.

Sol was standing next to the wall when Tom came down the row of lockers. Oh, well. Sol was better company than some.

"Sol," Tom said gently. "You have to change. We're playing baseball today."

Sol shook his head. "Catolico Rojo bomb threat in New York again. I saw it on the bus."

"That's got nothing to do with us out here. Not today. You need to change your clothes."

"Don't want to." He looked completely miserable.

Tom could see what was coming clearly now. Sol was going to start whining during baseball. Kurt or one of his friends would do something to Sol, something calculated to cause one of Sol's spinning seizures. They'd stand around Sol, laughing at him when he couldn't stop walking in a circle. Tom wondered if Sol's parents thought Sol's enhanced math ability was worth it.

Then, when Coach Driscoll was distracted, Kurt would have his chance at pay back against Tom. It could be something innocent—yanking Tom's pants down or something—but Tom doubted it. Kurt had already learned he couldn't embarrass Tom. You had to care what the pack thought to be embarrassed. Tom was perfectly able to pull up his shorts without stopping play. And what was worse, Tom had embarrassed Kurt in a test of strength the way an adult would calm down a toddler. Kurt needed visible effect. That meant something more serious.

Tom sighed. It seemed to him he wasted a lot of time figuring people out. Did people like Kurt even realize what they were planning or did they think things just happened to them? As far as Tom could tell, most people never knew what they were going to do.

Tom wasn't ready to face Kurt just yet. Tom chuckled. Kurt was the alpha male in his monkey group. Stronger and louder than the rest of them. But to get revenge on Tom, he had to use someone as weak as Sol.

He thought it through, then stood up and walked over to Sol. Sol was crying quietly. Pretty funny any way you look at it.

"Be quiet, Sol," Tom said softly.

Sol shrugged. "Can't."

Tom slapped him gently.

Sol shook. Then, slowly and steadily, he began to turn in place.

Tom arrested the spin and got him to walk outside the locker room to the hall. As

soon as Tom let Sol go, Sol began spinning again.

Vice Principal Brigham was walking down the hall.

"It's Sol Pearson, sir," Tom told him. "He's having a seizure. He gets them all the time."

"I know that," Brigham snapped. He was one of those teachers who didn't like children. "I'll take him to the nurse."

"Thank you, sir."

By the time Kurt and his buddies reached the field, Tom was hitting pop flies to the coach.

"Hey, guys," he said cheerily. "Ready to play ball?"

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Now:

Alice didn't know what to expect from a house filled with Neanderthals. On the porch was a worn cane bottom chair. As they walked up the driveway, an older Neanderthal opened the door and stepped out. "Hey, Bill," he said.

"Hi, Dad. Alice, this is my dad, Sidney Nicholson."

Bill's father looked past him. "Bill! You brought somebody for dinner. How thoughtful." He grinned.

Alice had a sudden image of the main entrée.

Mister Nicholson waved at her. "Got you. Saw it on your face. We're vegetarians."

"Really?" Alice was surprised. It didn't fit.

"Yeah," Bill said. "Doesn't taste the same if you don't kill it yourself."

Alice stared at him. "Is that a joke?"

Bill stared back. "Not if I have to explain it."

Sidney chuckled. "Go on in and get a soda or something. Frieda got to be a little much so I came out here for a rest. I'll be in directly."

"Frieda?" Alice murmured as they stepped through the door.

"Sidney's wife."

"And your mom?"

Bill shrugged. "It's complicated."

The house opened to the living room. One wall had been turned active and there were various windows open here and there on different landscapes and a few news stations Alice didn't recognize. But on one she recognized P'Chk Nicholson making a speech; she knew him from assignments in Mrs. Dalglen's class. There was a Neanderthal in an adjacent window commenting on the image in a guttural, clicking language.

Bill followed her gaze. "All news. All Neanderthal. All the time. Come on."

Frieda was in the kitchen cooking something with garlic in it. Alice could smell that much. She was taller than either Sidney or Bill, pale and fully human. Now, Alice was really confused.

Frieda glanced up from the stove, saw Alice past Bill. "She better not be a girlfriend."

Alice barked a short laugh, more out of surprise than anything else. Bill smiled at her.

Frieda turned back to her stove. "You say that now. But then he gets under your skin and the next minute you're married to him. Believe me, / know."

Bill stepped up behind her and kissed her cheek. "Come on, Frieda. Don't you love us?"

"What do you know about love?" She pushed him away. "You or your father."

"Everything you taught us. Where's Tom?"

"In the back. Dinner in twenty minutes. Get out of here."

"She's *not* your mother, is she?" asked Alice as they walked down the hall.

"Hardly. It's—"

"—complicated. You said."

Bill nodded, unfazed. "We do things differently. Partly because we're not human and partly because we only got started a few decades ago. The Mothers raise us until we're of age. Then, we move in with the Fathers. That happens most of the time. But I like Sidney—he's not just someone who took me in. He's my real dad—and he has a human wife. So the Fathers allowed me to come down here with him. In a couple of years, I'll go back to the reservation and sire a few kids. Then, it's time to go to work."

"Your marriages are ... arranged?" Alice was appalled.

"We don't usually get married at all. Just the Fathers and the Mothers. Sometimes, people pair up, but not all that often. Neanderthals don't pair bond the same way as humans."

"Sidney did."

Bill smiled thinly. "Yeah. We're still trying to figure that one out."

The hall ended in the back porch. Instead of a slab with a narrow roof over it, as in the front porch, this was an enclosed deck. The sun was getting low in the west and the light on

the porch was golden.

An old man sat in a captain's chair facing the sun. He looked *old*. Thin and used up. His fingers were curled into loose fists and the skin was blotched. But Tom Nicholson couldn't be much more than fifty. Sixty, tops. She'd read that much. He looked twice that age. His head leaned to one side and he was snoring softly. A cane leaned against the wall in front of him.

"Have a seat," Bill gestured to one of the other chairs.

"What do we do now?" Alice sat as far from Tom as she could.

"Wait for him to wake up." Bill settled himself down, comfortably. "Or until dinner."

\* \* \* \*

Then:

Tom was good at throwing and hitting. Running, not so much. His team chose him to be pitcher. He toned it down. Once in sixth grade he'd thrown a runner out at first and broken the hand of the boy playing first base. He'd only been allowed back in school on probation. That year there had been a rumor he was the clone of Babe Ruth.

But this was just a game in PE.

He was up to bat in the third inning, two outs and a runner on second. He settled himself and Jimmy Tedeschi, one of Kurt's gang, threw the ball at his head.

It was such a surprise that Tom just stared at the ball until, at the last minute, he caught it.

He tossed the ball gently in his hand. This had clearly gotten out of hand. Tom stared at Jimmy speculatively. Jimmy paled. Tom remembered that kid in sixth grade.

Kurt called lazily, and safely, from center field. "Come on, Nicholson. Play ball."

Tom smiled back to give the impression of no hard feelings. He tossed the ball back to Jimmy.

On Jimmy's next pitch, Tom slammed it right past Jimmy's ear directly at Kurt. Kurt caught it neatly but Tom knew it hurt.

"Third out," Kurt said just loudly enough to be heard in the infield.

"So it is," said Tom as the bell rang.

Kurt was going to have to be dealt with.

\* \* \* \*

Now:

"Do I smell garlic?" Tom said.

Alice and Bill hadn't been sitting there more than five minutes.

"Did we wake you up, old man?" Bill said easily.

"What? Did you show me some respect while I slept? Couldn't be. I'd be dead of shock." Tom stood up slowly. "I'm Tom Nicholson, missy," he said to Alice as introduction.

"Alice Nokana."

Tom stared at her speculatively. "Kurt Nokana's daughter? He married late, didn't he?"

Alice stared back at him. "Do you know my father?"

"Knew him when we were kids back in Absarokee. Didn't you know I was from here? You must have looked us up when you met Bill."

"It wasn't mentioned."

Tom retrieved his cane. "Damned lawyers. They always go too far. I just wanted us to have a little privacy."

"Sidney says it keeps up the mystery," Bill said quietly.

Tom laughed shortly. "I bet it does at that." Tom walked ahead of him.

"This is weird. Did you know he knew my father?" Alice whispered to Bill.

"No, he didn't," said Tom, turning at the end of the hall. "Neanderthal ears. And I didn't know you were coming. And Sidney and his lovely wife Frieda had no idea the Nokanas were in Bolton. Just me." He lifted a hand casually. "Or you can believe we really did melt the Greenland glaciers."

Alice didn't know what to think. She silently followed Bill into the dining room.

"Garlic's not a spice," Tom said as he lowered himself into a chair. "Not the way Frieda uses it. It's a vegetable."

"It's the arsenic, Tom," Frieda said sweetly as she brought in two separate plates. "Garlic's the only thing that will cover the taste." She handed one to Alice. "I'll share my dinner with you."

Tom grinned at her. "I like that one. I'll use it later."

Sidney came in the front door. He stopped in the living room for a moment and then came in the dining room. "Pandit's scheduled a news conference at seven."

Tom nodded. "Plenty of time for a good meal."

Alice set her plate down. It was macaroni and cheese. Frieda's plate held the same. Nothing strange about it.

Frieda returned with a covered bowl. She lifted the top and a wave of garlic and hot peppers rolled over the table. Alice choked.

“Breathe through your mouth, dear,” Frieda said serenely. “It’s easier.”

“What is it?”

“You don’t want to know. I call it—well, never mind what I call it. It’s Neanderthal bouillabaisse. I have to use a respirator when I cook it.”

“Come on, Frieda,” said Tom. “Surely you’ve gotten used to it by now.”

“Not likely,” Frieda snorted.

Sidney chuckled “Last time she ate some she had the runs for three days.”

“That’s quite enough, Sidney.” Frieda glared at him.

Sidney shrugged and spooned some stew into his bowl.

“You see,” Tom said conspiratorially to Alice. “This sort of food is the secret source of Neanderthal strength.”

“No, Tom,” Bill said around a mouthful. “That comes later. I know. My bedroom is next to yours.”

“Don’t say that,” Tom said. “She might want to talk to me after dinner. You’ll scare her off.”

“She can use Frieda’s respirator,” Bill said generously.

This is like living in some strange play, Alice thought as she picked at her macaroni. She couldn’t help wondering if they were like this all the time or just when they had a human guest.

Sidney stood up. “Okay. Time for the analysis.”

“Bring your bowls.” Frieda said wearily.

They decamped to the living room. The Neanderthal speaking before had erected a map showing the Middle East. Sidney thoughtfully put on the subtitles. It was a recounting of the history, treaty by treaty, war by war, of the region. From what Alice was reading, the commentator had just started describing the Six Day War back in 1967.

Bill sat on one side of her on the sofa, Sidney on the other. Tom settled down into an easy chair in the corner. Frieda pulled in one of the kitchen chairs and sat next to Sidney.

“Pandit did a good job,” Tom said quietly.

Sidney shrugged. “Persuaded a bunch of idiots to see what’s been in front of their faces for a hundred years.”

Tom leaned towards Alice. “Persuading idiots is what we do best.”

“Tom,” Sidney said quietly. “She’s still a guest.” He muted the display.

“Hell, Sidney. It *is* what we do. What jobs do Neanderthals always take? Negotiators.”

“Paleontologists,” offered Bill.

Tom chuckled. “That’s not a job. That’s an avocation.”

“Why?” Alice interrupted them. “Why do you do it? I’ve seen you in the news since I was a kid—before I ever knew what a Neanderthal was. You’re always there: environmental conferences, trade deals, diplomatic missions. Why?”

Silence fell.

After an uncomfortable moment (Alice had the idea that the length of that moment was purely Tom’s decision), Tom cleared his throat.

“Bill?” Tom looked over to him. “What does ‘P’Chk’ mean?”

“‘Speaker for a Dead People,’” Bill said immediately and grinned.

Tom grinned back. He leaned toward Alice. “There’s no doubt in any of our minds your ancestors did my ancestors in. Probably skinned them and ate them. We’re just as smart as you. We’re not good at abstract math but we’re whizzes at geometry. You’re taller. We’re stronger. You can run for miles but we’re quicker on the sprint. Any one of us could take six of you but you breed more quickly. Why did we get killed off?”

Bill snorted. “Innate genetic inferiority.”

Tom shrugged. “Remains to be seen. Try again.”

Alice stared at Tom. “I have no idea.”

“You guys are better organized.” Tom settled back in his chair. “You have churches, political parties, tea societies, save-the-glaciers groups, mourn-the-glaciers gatherings, unions—in short, every possible way a weak creature can organize itself against a stronger creature. We had *none* of that. The surprise isn’t that it happened. The surprise is it didn’t happen instantly.”

“How do you know that?” Alice felt heat rising in her face. There was something about Tom that just *got* to her. “You weren’t there.”

“Of course not. But who’s better qualified to speculate than me?” Tom cackled. “We’re only tolerated because of the recent invention of collective guilt. The environmentalists *love* us. We’re the exterminated species that came back from the dead. Countries love us—we have no allegiances. We have *no* historical axe to grind with any one group. And we don’t have a human point of view. We can come into a situation absolutely clean—better than the Red Cross or the United Nations, since we can’t be accused of being a tool of the constituent country.”

“Why should we listen to you?”

Tom grinned at her crookedly. “Stand *up!*” he said in a sudden, deep voice.

Without thinking, Alice was on her feet.

“It’s called innate authority,” Tom said mildly.

“He’s on,” Sidney said and demuted the display.

P’Chk Pandit Nicholson stepped up to the podium. He seemed to radiate strength without effort. Alice could feel everybody’s gaze, including her own, drawn to him. Was this what Tom meant by “innate authority”?

Pandit nodded and smiled around the room. He opened his notes, glanced at them to make himself ready and opened his mouth to speak. At that moment, one of the reporters stood up and shot him in the face. The blood exploded behind him and he fell. There was pandemonium and screaming.

Sidney muted the display. Tom looked at Sidney. Then looked away. They pursed their lips. Their faces grew red.

Alice looked at Bill. He stared serenely at the ceiling.

Frieda buried her face in her hands.

Sidney broke first, howling with laughter. Tears streaming down his face. Tom pounded the floor with his cane. Bill wouldn’t look at her but he was giggling just the same.

Alice looked up at the display. P’Chk was slumped over the podium. Three people were shouting at each other, over him. Two men were leaning over him. P’Chk was eased to the ground. Then, the feed was cut and a human announcer was speaking silently to the camera.

Tom got control of himself and rubbed his eyes with a tissue. Sidney leaned back against the sofa. Bill was catching his breath. Frieda was crumpled over, her shoulders shaking as she wept.

“You are all crazy,” Alice said. “Psychotic.”

“Oh, yeah,” Tom said as he discarded the tissue into the wastebasket. “That’s another thing we have that you don’t. A sense of humor.”

\* \* \* \*

Then:

Tom pulled the mail out of the box and looked through it as he walked up the driveway. There were the usual pleas from various charities, a continuing clamor for money and empathy. It seemed to Tom that Agatha was on every mailing list in the country. Below those, Tom found a letter from someone named Bott addressed from the school. Tom knew no one at the school named Bott. Agatha wasn’t home from the lab yet. This wasn’t all that unusual. Maybe he’d make an omelet for dinner. Some kind of peace offering.

He put the mail and his backpack on the kitchen table and started rummaging in the

refrigerator. Mushroom and cheese for Agatha. Curry and anchovies for him. He could spice it up with a little Tabasco.

He chopped up the onions and grated the cheese. As he was buttering the pan, he began to wonder about the letter. First, it was an actual, paper letter, which meant it was something official. Tom wondered if it weren't for charitable organizations, circulars and government mail if there would be a post office at all.

He poured down a layer of egg followed by a layer of cheese and the mushrooms. He sprinkled in the spices and waited for the underlying egg to firm up.

This morning Agatha had asked him about home schooling. Agatha always told him they had come to Absarokee so he could have a normal life. He would fit in here.

Tom folded over the omelet, then turned it. The smell of mushrooms and cheese filled the room.

It came to him that it was no accident an official note from the school would arrive the day Agatha had broached the subject of home schooling.

He grimaced as he separated the omelet from the pan and lifted it onto the plate. He poured in the mixed eggs and anchovies of the second omelet. It probably *was* Kurt Nokana. Somehow, he was going to have to manage this. Tom finished the second omelet and put it on a plate.

Well, the first step to controlling the situation was to find out what it was. He ripped open the envelope and pulled out the notice.

"Dennis Bott" was the head of the newly formed Absarokee School District Genetic Testing Service. Genetic testing of all students had been scheduled for next fall to coincide with the start date of the new Absarokee Health Service.

What did this have to do with Kurt Nokana?

The answer dawned on him: nothing.

He wasn't surprised at the testing—the school committee had been trying to get the local option passed for years. The sticking point had always been medical insurance. If that was taken care of, testing was sure to follow. Not that the subject was high on his list of interests. But you couldn't scratch a rock in this town without starting an argument on genetic and cosmetic engineering. Of course, being who he was, Tom might be considered biased.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling Agatha's behavior and the notice were related. What could be so odd about his genetics Agatha would be scared of genetic testing? Illegal use of copyrighted genetic material? Unregistered clone markers? Did he have some chromosomal claim to the long vacant Russian throne? Tom grinned. He hoped so. He could use the money.

His grin faded. Agatha knew something. Something important enough to avoid genetic testing. He felt it in his bones.

He leaned against the table and looked at his hands, thinking. After a moment, he held his hands in the air, staring at them. Where do you hide a needle? Not in a haystack.

You hide a needle among other needles. How do you hide a freak? Among other freaks. But all of the other freaks would pass a genetics test. Why wouldn't he?

He closed his hands. Stood for a full minute. The door closed quietly behind him as he left.

\* \* \* \*

Now:

Alice stood on the porch, staring blindly into the woods. She felt tears on her face but she didn't understand why she was crying. What was the P'Chk to her? What was Bill or Tom or any of the others to her?

"It was civilization that saved us," came a voice behind her.

It was Tom. He stopped beside her. "If we'd been invented in the nineteenth century, we'd have been killed for sport—shot like the Tasmanians. But now human beings are civilized. Which means they grew something that resembles a conscience. So they let us live."

"What was so funny in there?"

"Best thing for the Israelis would be to settle all the conflicts over there once and for all. They've been fighting over that patch of ground for a century. Best thing for the Palestinians would be to hook their wagon to Israel's star—the country has more educated people per square mile than anywhere on earth. So what do they do when somebody pulls everything together? They shoot him dead." He looked at her. "You don't find that funny?"

"It's horrible."

"True enough, but so what? It's still funny."

Alice shook her head.

Tom shrugged. "Your dad was stubborn, too. Didn't like me at all for years. Then, one night, I went over to talk to him. It came to me that I had been completely wrong. I'd been challenging him all along without ever realizing it—pissing on him as if I were a tomcat." Tom stamped his cane down. "So I went over and heard him out. Took him a while to get started but he managed to call me every sort of abomination under the sun." Tom turned around and found the chair. He sat down slowly.

"What did you say?"

"I told him he was right." Tom settled himself down. "After all, they had killed us once, hadn't they? Humans had created this beautiful invention: the ability to subsume themselves into each other. We could never have done it. Oh, we can talk things out and figure out what to do, but humans together create an independent creature."

"A creature?" Alice stared at him. Horrible *and* crazy.

"Memes. Institutions. Cultural icons. Symbols. Call it what you like. God had to take a rib from Adam to make Eve and you've all been joined at the hip ever since. You all donate

something from yourselves to the group—a little intelligence and some words—and these cultural *things* are created. I think the first one must have been religion. Something people could die for.” Tom chuckled. “And something that drops average IQ about forty points. Pandit didn’t negotiate between two countries. He negotiated between fifty, maybe sixty, memes, cultural icons, points of view. The only reason he could do it—the only reason *anyone* could do it—was because he couldn’t partake of it.”

“You told my dad all this?”

Tom laughed out loud. “Hell, no. We were only fourteen. I didn’t figure this out for years. I said he was right and it wasn’t my fault. I’d been born that way. But if he’d be patient and treat me just as if I were as good as anybody else, I’d do better. He agreed to take me under his wing.” Tom snickered. “He stood right by me, too. Later, I introduced him to some people I met out there and he got a good job.”

“You got my dad his job?”

Tom leaned toward her. “He doesn’t know it. I’ll be grateful if you never tell him.” He settled back in his chair. “Oh, I know you’ll tell him eventually. But I’ll be dead and he’ll forgive me.”

Tom fell silent. The crickets began chirping. Inside, Alice could hear voices. First, Frieda’s strident bellowing followed by Sidney’s deep, calm murmur.

“I hope you’ll be a friend to Bill,” Tom said, leaning forward on his cane. “He needs a friend out here.”

Something in his voice caught Alice’s attention. “Because he’s all alone?”

“No. We’re always alone. That never changes.” Tom shook his head. “Because Sidney’s going to be the next P’Chk. That’s why I’m here.”

“Did you know that man was going to get killed?” Alice stood up and turned to him.

“Of course not. Don’t be silly. Pandit knew there was a risk. The successor is obvious. I came here to help things along in case something bad happened.”

“Something bad did happen.”

“That’s why Bill’s going to need a friend.” Tom sighed. “I’ve got to go in there and see if I can’t help Sidney with Frieda. After having a human wife, patching up the META negotiations ought to be easy.”

Alice sat back down. A few moments later, Bill came out.

“You okay?” he asked from the doorway.

“Sure. Come and sit down.”

“Yeah.” He came over and sat heavily in the chair next to her. He sniffed the air. “Old Neanderthal smell. You never forget it.”

Alice giggled, surprising herself.

Bill smiled at her. "Take your time. You'll get it."

\* \* \* \*

Then:

Agatha was waiting for him when he got home. She was sitting at the kitchen table as he came in the door.

"Where have you been?" Her voice was a little shrill.

"Talking to Kurt Nokana," he said as he put his backpack onto the chair. "Decided I needed to patch that up if I was going to be home schooled."

Agatha didn't speak for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"I figured it out." He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a can of tomato juice. "I'm not ready to go public so I'd better be ready to be home schooled for a while." He sipped the tomato juice. "How did you steal a piece of the ice maiden?"

"I was one of the investigators sent over to help the Swiss," she said quietly. "I stole an egg that first evening when everything was still chaotic. Then I froze it—I had to use the Hauptmann technique. It was dicey. Human eggs don't often survive freezing."

"Why did you do it?"

She stared at him levelly. "I didn't know then. I just knew I wanted it. Someday I would figure out what I wanted to do with it—study it. Clone it. It was a prize waiting to be taken."

"Then what?"

"Then I waited. The ice maiden ended up in the Swiss courts. After that, the Swiss were the only ones that had access."

"Why am I a boy? One X, get another X and you get a girl. The ice maiden didn't have any Y chromosomes."

"The Neanderthal Y was already mapped. I used a modified human Y as a starting point. It served."

"Why did you have me at *all*?"

"Look around you, Tom," she said softly. "Things are falling apart. People have every tool imaginable to save themselves and things are still falling apart. Everybody can see the problems right in front of them and things are *still* falling apart. People are so smart they can find new and better ways to work around the awful things they've created and think they've solved the problem when they've never even touched it. But the world is just *fine*. *We're* the problem. I can't change human beings but I thought, maybe, I could give them a new point of view."

"Me," Tom said flatly.

Agatha smiled and reached over to take his hand. It was comforting. He looked at her. She was still the woman who'd raised him. As different as she appeared to him now, he could see the woman he knew underneath. He squeezed her hand back.

Let's see, he thought. The humans who killed us now need us to save them from themselves.

As Agatha stared at him, Tom started laughing. m