

I HOLD MY FATHER'S PAWS

David D. Levine

In his short career to date, new writer David D. Levine has won the James White Award and the Phobos Fiction Contest, and capped it by winning a Hugo Award this year for his story “Tk’tk’tk.” A graduate of Clarion West, his stories have appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *Albedo One*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Talebones*, *All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories*, and elsewhere. He lives in Portland, Oregon, where he and his wife, Kate Yule, coedit the popular fanzine *Bento*.

In the poignant story that follows, he shows us that family bonds can be very hard to break—even if you change your species to do so!

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THE receptionist had feathers where her eyebrows should have been. They were blue, green, and black, iridescent as a peacock’s, and they trembled gently in the silent breath of the air conditioner. “Did you have a question, sir?”

“No,” Jason replied, and raised his magazine, but after reading the same paragraph three times without remembering a word he set it down again. “Actually, yes. Um, I wanted to ask you... ah... are you... transitioning?” The word landed on the soft tailored-grass carpet of the waiting room, and Jason wished he could pick it up again, stuff it into his pocket, and leave. Just leave, and never come back.

“Oh, you mean the eyebrows? No, sir, that’s just fashion. I enjoy being human.” She smiled gently at him. “You haven’t been in San Francisco very long, have you?”

“No, I just got in this morning.”

“Feathers are very popular here. In fact, we’re having a special this month. Would you like a brochure?”

“No! Uh, I mean, no thank you.” He looked down and saw that the magazine had crumpled in his hands. Awkwardly he tried to smooth it out, then gave up and slipped it back in the pile on the coffee table. They were all recent issues, and the coffee table looked like real wood. He tested it with a dirty thumbnail; real wood, all right. Then, appalled at his own action, he shifted the pile of magazines to cover the tiny scratch.

“Sir?”

Jason started at the receptionist’s voice, sending magazines skidding across the table. “What?”

“Would you mind if I gave you a little friendly advice?”

“Uh, I... no. Please.” She was probably going to tell him that his fly was open, or that ties were required in this office. Her own tie matched the wall covering, a luxurious print of maroon and gold. Jason doubted the collar of his faded work shirt would even button around his thick neck.

“You might not want to ask any of our patients if they are transitioning.”

“Is it impolite?” He wanted to crawl under the table and die.

“No, sir.” She smiled again, with genuine humor this time. “It’s just that some of them will talk your ear off, given the slightest show of interest.”

“I, uh... thank you.”

A chime sounded—a rich little sound that blended unobtrusively with the

waiting room's classical music—and the receptionist stared into space for a moment. "I'll let him know," she said to the air, then turned her attention to Jason. "Mr. Carmelke is out of surgery."

"Thank you." It was so strange to hear that uncommon name applied in someone else. He hadn't met another Carmelke in over twenty years.

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Half an hour later the waiting room door opened onto a corridor with a smooth, shiny floor and meticulous off-white walls. Despite the art—original, no doubt—and the continuing classical music, a slight smell of disinfectant reminded Jason where he was. A young man in a nurse's uniform led Jason to a door marked with the name "Dr. Lawrence Steig."

"Hello, Mr. Carmelke," said the man behind the desk. "I'm Dr. Steig." The doctor was lean, shorter than Jason, with brown eyes and a trim salt-and-pepper beard. His hand, like his voice, was firm and a little rough; his tie was knotted with surgical precision. "Please do sit down."

Jason perched on the edge of the chair, not wanting to surrender to its lushness. Not wanting to be comfortable. "How is my father?"

"The operation went well, and he'll be conscious soon. But I'd like to talk with you first. I believe there are some... family issues."

"What makes you say that?"

The doctor stared at his personal organizer as he repeatedly snapped it open and shut. It was gold. "I've been working with your father for almost two years, Mr. Carmelke. The doctor-patient relationship in this type of work is, necessarily, quite intimate. I feel I've gotten to know him quite well." He raised his eyes to Jason's. "He's never mentioned you."

"I'm not surprised." Jason heard the edge of bitterness in his own voice.

“It’s not unusual for patients of mine to be disowned by their families.”

Jason’s hard, brief laugh startled both of them. “This has nothing to do with his... transition, Dr. Steig. My father left my mother and me when I was nine. I haven’t spoken to him since. Not once.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Carmelke.” He seemed sincere; Jason wondered if it was just professional bedside manner. The doctor opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and stared off into a corner for a moment. “This might not be the best time for a family reunion,” he said finally. “His condition may be a little... startling.”

“I didn’t come all the way from Cleveland just to turn around and go home. I want to talk with my father. While I still can. And this is my last chance, right?”

“The final operation is scheduled for five weeks from now. It can be postponed, of course. But all the papers have been signed.” The doctor placed his hands flat on the desk. “You’re not going to be able to talk him out of it.”

“Just let me see him.”

“I will... if he wants *to* see you.”

Jason didn’t have anything to say to that.

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Jason’s father was lying on his side, facing away from the door, as Jason entered. The smell of disinfectant was stronger here, and a battery of instruments beeped quietly.

He was bald, with just a fringe of gray hair around the back of his head. The scalp was smooth and pink and shiny, and very round—matching Jason’s own round

head, too big for the standard hardhats at his work site, BIG JASE was what it said on his own personal helmet, black marker on safety yellow plastic.

But though his father's head was large and round, the shoulders that moved with his breathing were too narrow, and his chest dropped rapidly away to hips that were narrower still. The legs were invisible, drawn up in front of his body. Jason swallowed as he moved around to the other side of the bed.

His father's round face was tan, looking more "rugged" than "wrinkled." Deep lines ran from his nose to the corners of his mouth, and the eyebrows above his closed eyes were gray and very bushy. It was both an older and a younger face than what he had imagined, trying to add twenty years to a memory twenty years old.

Jason's gaze traveled down, past his father's freshly shaved chin, to the thick ruff of gray-white fur on his neck. Then further, to the gray-furred legs that lay on the bed in front of him and the paws that crossed, relaxed, at the ankles, with neatly trimmed nails and clean, unscuffed pads.

His father's body resembled a wolf's, or a mastiff's, broad and strong and laced with muscle and sinew. But it was wrong, somehow. His chest, narrow though it was, was still wider than any normal dog's, and the fur looked fake—too clean, too fine, too regular. Jason knew from his reading on the plane that it was engineered from his father's own body hair, and was only an approximation of a dog's natural coat with its layers of different types of hair.

He was a magnificent animal. He was a pathetic freak. He was a marvel of biotechnology. He was an arrogant icon of self-indulgence.

He was a dog.

He was Jason's father.

"Dad? It's Jason." Some part of him wanted to pet the furry shoulder, but he kept his hands to himself.

His father's eyes flickered open, then drifted closed again. "Yeah. Doctor told me." His voice was a little slurred. "What the hell'r you doing here?"

"I ran into Aunt Brittany at O'Hare. I didn't recognize her, but she knew me right away. She told me all about... you. I came straight here."

he'd told his boss on the phone.

. Letting him draw the wrong conclusion, but not too far from the truth.

It's my father,

He's in the hospital. I have to see him before it's too late

His father's nose wrinkled in distaste. "Never could trust her."

"Dad...*why*?"

He opened his eyes again. They were the same hard blue as Jason's, and they were beginning to focus properly. "Because I can. Because the Consti... gives me the right to do whatever the hell I want with my body and my money. Because I want to be pampered for the rest of my life." He closed his eyes and crossed his paws on the bridge of his nose. "Because I don't want to make any more damn decisions. Now get out."

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Jason's mouth flapped open and closed like a fish. "But Dad..."

"Mr. Carmelke?" Jason looked up, and his father rolled his head around, to see where Dr. Steig stood by the door. Jason had no idea how long he had been there. "Excuse me, I meant Jason." Jason's father put his paws over his face again. "Mr. Carmelke, I think you should leave your father alone for a while. He's still feeling the effects of the anesthetic. He may be more... open to discussion, in the morning."

"Doubt it," came the voice from under the crossed paws.

Jason's hand reached out—to stroke the forehead, to ruffle the fur, he wasn't sure which—but then it pulled back. "See you tomorrow, Dad."

There was no response.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Jason leaned heavily against the wall, then slid down to a sitting position. His eyes stung and he rubbed at them.

“I’m sorry.” Jason opened his eyes at the voice. Dr. Steig was squatting in front of him, holding a clipboard in his hands. “He’s not usually like this.”

“I’ve never understood him,” Jason said, shaking his head. “Not since he left. We had a good life. He wasn’t drinking or anything. There weren’t any money problems—not then, anyway. Mom loved him. I loved him. But he said, ‘There’s nothing here for me,’ and he walked out of our lives.”

“You mentioned money. Is that what this is about? You know he’s given most of it to charity already. What remains is just enough to pay for the craniofacial procedure, and a trust fund that will cover his few needs after that.”

“It’s not the money. It was never the money. He even offered to pay alimony and child support, but Mom turned it down. It wasn’t the most practical decision, but she really didn’t want anything to do with him. I think it was one of those things where a broken love turns into a terrible hate.”

“Does your mother know you’re here?”

“She died eight years ago. Leukemia. He didn’t even come to the funeral.”

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said again. He sat down, let his clipboard clatter to the shiny floor next to him. They sat together in silence for a time. “Let me talk with him tonight, Mr. Carmelke, and we’ll see how things go in the morning. All right?”

Jason thought for a moment, then bobbed his head. “All right.”

They helped each other up.

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Jason's father jogged into the doctor's office the next morning, his lithe new body bobbing with a smooth four-legged gait, and hopped easily up onto a carpeted platform that brought his head to the same level as Jason and the doctor. But he refused to meet Jason's eyes. Jason himself sat in the doctor's leather guest chair, fully seated this time, but still not fully comfortable.

"Noah," Dr. Steig said to Jason's father, "I know this is hard for you. But I want you to understand that it is even harder for your son."

"He shouldn't have come here," he said, still not looking at Jason.

"Dad... how could I not? You're the only family I have left in the world, I didn't even know if you were dead or alive, and now... this! I had to come. Even if I can't change your mind, I... I just want to talk."

"Talk, then!" His face turned to Jason at last, but his blue eyes were hard, his mouth set. "I might even listen." He lowered his head to his paws, which rested on the carpeted surface in front of him.

Jason felt the little muscles in his legs tensing to rise. He could stand up, walk out... be free of this awkwardness and pain. Go back to his lonely little house and try to forget all about his father.

But he knew how well that had worked the last time.

"I told them you were dead," he said. "My friends at school. The new school, after we moved to Cleveland. I don't know why. Lots of their parents were divorced. They would have understood. But somehow pretending you were dead made it easier."

His dad closed his eyes hard; deep furrows appeared in the corners of his eyes and between his brows. "Can't say I blame you," he said at last.

"No matter how many people I lied to, I still knew you were out there somewhere. I wondered what you were doing. Whether you missed me. Where did you go?"

“Buffalo.”

Jason waited until he was sure no more details were forthcoming. “Is that where you’ve been all this time?”

“No, I was only there for a few months. Then Syracuse. Miami for a while. I didn’t settle down for a long time. But I’ve been in the Bay Area for the last eleven years.” He raised his head. “Selling configuration management software for Romatek. It’s really exciting stuff.”

Jason didn’t care about his father’s job, but he sensed an opening. “Tell me about it.”

They talked for half an hour about configuration management and source control and stock options—things that Jason didn’t understand and didn’t want to understand. But they were talking. His dad even managed to make the topic seem interesting. A wry smirk came to Jason’s lips when he realized he was getting a sales presentation from a dog. A dog with his father’s head.

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Jason and his father sat in the courtyard behind the clinic, under a red Japanese maple that sighed in the wind. The skyscrapers of San Francisco were visible above the fence, which was painted with a colorful abstract mural. A few birds chirped, and the slight mineral sting of sea salt flavored the air, reminding Jason how far he was from home.

A phone with two large buttons was strapped to his father’s left foreleg. He could push the buttons with his chin to summon urgent or less-urgent assistance. He sat on the bench next to Jason with his legs drawn up beneath him, his head held high so as to look Jason as much in the eye as possible.

“I would have had to have something done with the knees one way or the other,” he said. “They were just about shot, before. Arthritis. Now they’re like new. I was taking laps this morning, before you showed up. Haven’t been able to run like that in years. And being so close to the ground, it feels like a hundred miles an hour.”

Jason translated that into kilometers and realized his dad wasn't speaking literally. "But what about... I dunno, restaurants? Museums? Movies?"

"After they do the head work I'll have different tastes, and I'll get nothing but the best. Museums—hell, I never went to museums before. And as far as movies, I'll just wait for them to come out on chip. Then I'll curl up with my handler and go to sleep in front of them."

"Of course, the movie will be in black and white to you."

"Heh."

Jason didn't mention—didn't want to think about—the other changes that the "head work" would make in his father's senses, and his brain. After the craniofacial procedure, his mind would be as much like a dog's as modern medicine could make it. He'd be happy, no question of that, but he wouldn't be Noah Carmelke any more.

Jason's dad seemed to recognize that his thoughts were drifting in an uncomfortable direction. "Tell me about your job," he said.

"I work for Bionergy," Jason replied. "I'm a civil engineer. We're refitting Cleveland's old natural gas system for biogas... that means a lot of tearing up streets and putting them back."

"Funny. I was a civil engineer for a while, before I hired on at Romatek."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"I was following in your footsteps, and I didn't even know it."

“We thought you were going to be an artist. Your mom was so proud of those drawings of the barn, and the goats.”

“Wow. I haven’t done any sketching in years.”

They stared at the mural, both remembering a refrigerator covered with drawings.

“You want me to draw you?”

Jason’s father nodded slowly. “Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that.”

Someone from the clinic managed to scare up a pad and some charcoal, and they settled down under the maple tree. Jason leaned against the fence and began to sketch, starting with the hindquarters. His father sat with his hind legs drawn up beneath him and his forelegs stretched straight out in front. “You look like the Sphinx,” Jason said.

“Hmm.”

“You can talk if you like, I’m not working on your mouth.”

“I don’t have anything to say.”

Jason’s charcoal paused on the page, then resumed its scratching. “Last night I read a paper I found in the restaurant. The *Howl*. You know it?” The full title was *HOWL: The Journal of the Bay Area Transpecies Community*. It was full of angry articles about local politicians he’d never heard of, and ads for services he couldn’t understand or didn’t want to think about.

“I’ve read it, yeah. Buncha flakes.”

“I found out there are a lot of different reasons for people to change their species. Some of them feel they were born into the wrong body. Some are making

a statement about humanity's impact on the planet. Some see it as a kind of performance art. I don't see any of those in you."

"I told you, I just want to be taken care of. It's a form of retirement."

The marks on the page were getting heavy and black. "I don't think that's it. Not really. I look at you and I see a man with ambition and drive. You wouldn't have gotten all those stock options if you were the type to retire at 58." The charcoal stick snapped between Jason's fingers, and he threw the pieces aside. "Damn it, Dad, how can you give up your *humanity?*"

Jason's dad jumped to his four feet. His stance was wide, defensive. "The O'Hartigan decision said I have the right to reshape my body and my mind in any way I wish. I think that includes the right to not answer questions about it." He stared for a moment, as though he were about to say something else, then pursed his lips and trotted off.

Jason was left with a half-finished sketch of a sphinx with his father's face.

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He sat in the clinic's waiting room for three hours the next day. Finally Dr. Steig came out and told him that he was sorry, but his father simply could not be convinced to see him.

Jason wandered the lunchtime crowds of San Francisco. The spring air was clear and crisp, and the people walked briskly. Here and there he saw feathers, fur, scales. The waiter who brought his sandwich was half snake, with slitted eyes and a forked tongue that flickered. Jason was so distracted he forgot to tip.

After lunch he came to the clinic's door and stopped. He stood in the hall for a long time, dithering, but when the elevator's ping announced the arrival of two women with identical Siamese cat faces he bolted—shoving between them, ignoring their insulted yowls, hammering the door close button. As the elevator descended he gripped the handrails, pushed himself into the corner, tried to calm his breathing.

He landed in Cleveland at 12:30 that night.

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The other hard-hats at his work site gave him a nice card they had all signed. He accepted their sympathies but did not offer any details. One woman took him aside and asked how long his father had. “The doctor says five weeks.”

Days passed. Sometimes he found himself sitting in the cab of a backhoe, staring at his hands, wondering how long he had been there.

He confided in nobody. He imagined the jokes: “Good thing it isn’t your mother... then you’d be a son-of-a-bitch!” Antacids became his favorite snack.

The little house he’d bought with Maria, back when they thought they might be able to make it work, became oppressive. He ate all his meals in restaurants, in parts of town where he didn’t know anyone. Once he found a copy of the local transpecies paper. It was a skinny little thing, bimonthly, with angry articles about local politicians and ads for services he wished he didn’t know anything about.

Four weeks later, on a Monday evening, he got a call from San Francisco.

“Jason, it’s me. Your dad. Don’t hang up.”

The handset was already halfway to the cradle as the last three words came out, but Jason paused and returned it to his ear. “Why not?”

“I want to talk.”

“You could have done that while I was there.”

“OK, I admit I was a little short with you. I’m sorry.”

The plastic of the handset creaked in Jason's hand. He tried to consciously relax his grip. "I'm sorry, too."

There was a long silence, the two of them breathing at each other across three thousand kilometers. It was Jason's father who broke it. "The operation is scheduled for Thursday at 8 A.M. I... I'd like to see you one more time before then."

Jason covered his eyes with one hand, the fingers pressing hard against the bones of his brow. Finally he sighed and said, "I don't think so. There's no point to it. We just make each other too crazy."

"Please. I know I haven't been the best father to you..."

"You haven't been any kind of father at all!"

Another silence. "You've got me there. But I'd really like to..."

"To what? To say good-bye? Again? No thanks!" And he slammed down the phone.

He sat there for a long while, feeling the knots crawl across his stomach, waiting for the phone to ring again.

It didn't.

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That night he went out and got good and drunk. "My dad's turning into a dog," he slurred to the bartender, but all that got him was a cab home.

Tuesday morning he called in sick. He spent the day in bed, sometimes sleeping. He watched a soap opera; the characters' ludicrous problems seemed

so small and manageable.

Tuesday night he did not sleep. He brought out a box of letters from his mother, read through them looking for clues. At the bottom of the box he found a picture of himself at age eight, standing between his parents. It had been torn in half, the jagged line cutting between him and his father like a lightning bolt, and crudely taped together. He remembered rescuing the torn photo from his mother's wastebasket, taping it together, hiding it in a box of old CD-ROMs. Staring at it late at night. Wondering why.

Wednesday morning he drove to the airport.

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There was a strike at O'Hare and he was rerouted to Atlanta, where he ate a bad hamburger and floated on a tide of angry, frustrated people, thrashing to stay on top. Finally one gate agent found him a seat to LAX. From there he caught a red-eye to San Francisco.

He arrived at the clinic at 5 A.M. The door was locked, but there was a telephone number for after-hours service. It was answered by a machine. He stomped through menus until he reached a bored human being, who knew nothing, but promised to get a message to Dr. Steig.

He paced the hall outside the clinic. He had nowhere else to go.

Fifteen minutes later an astonished Dr. Steig called back. "Your father is already in prep for surgery, but I'll tell the hospital to let you see him." He gave Jason the address. "I'm glad you came," he said before hanging up.

The taxi took Jason through dark, empty streets, puddles gleaming with reflected streetlight. Raindrops ran down the windows like sweat, like tears. Jason blinked as he stepped into the hard blue-white light of the hospital's foyer. "I'm here to see Noah Carmelke," he said. "I'm expected."

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The nurse gave him a paper mask to tie over his nose and mouth, and goggles for his eyes. “The prep area is sterile,” she said as she helped him step into a paper coverall. Jason felt like he was going to a costume party.

And then the double doors slid open and he met the guest of honor.

His father lay on his side, shallow breaths raising and lowering his furry flanks. An oxygen mask was fastened to his face, like a muzzle. His eyes were at half-mast, unfocused. “Jason,” he breathed. “They said you were coming, but I didn’t believe it.” The sound of his voice echoed hollowly behind the clear plastic.

“Hello, Dad.” His own voice was muffled by the paper mask.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“Dad... I had to come. I need to understand you. If I don’t understand you, I’ll never understand myself.” He hugged himself. His face felt swollen; his whole head was ready to implode from sadness and fatigue. “*Why, Dad? Why did you leave us? Why didn’t you come to Mom’s funeral? And why are you throwing away your life now?*”

The bald head on the furry neck moved gently, side to side, on the pillow. “Did you ever have a dog, Jason?”

“You know the answer, Dad. Mom was allergic.”

“What about after you grew up?”

“I’ve been alone most of the time since then. I didn’t think I could take proper care of a dog if I had to go to work every day.”

“But a dog would have loved you.”

Jason's eyes burned behind the goggles.

"I had a dog when I was a kid," his father continued. "Juno. A German Shepherd. She was a good dog... smart, and strong, and obedient. And every day when I came home from school she came bounding into the yard... so happy to see me. She would jump up and lick my face." He twisted his head around, forced his eyes open to look into Jason's. "I left your mother because I couldn't love her like that. I knew she loved me, but I thought she deserved better than me. And I didn't come to the funeral because I knew she wouldn't want me there. Not after I'd hurt her so much."

"What about *me*, Dad?"

"You're a man. A man like me. I figured you'd understand."

"I *don't* understand. I never did."

His father sighed heavily, a long doggy sigh. "I'm sorry."

"You're turning yourself into a dog so someone will love you?"

"No. I'm turning myself into a dog so I can love someone. I want to be free of my human mind, free of decisions."

"How can you love anyone if you aren't *you* any more?"

"I'll still be me. But I'll be able to *be* me, instead of thinking all the time about being me."

"Dad..."

The nurse came back. "I'm sorry, Mr. Carmelke, but I have to ask you to leave

now.”

“Dad, you can’t just leave me like that!”

“Jason,” his father said. “There’s a clause in the contract that lets me specify a family member as my primary handler.”

“I don’t think I could...”

“Please, Jason. Son. It would mean so much to me. Let me come home with you.”

Jason turned away. “And see you every day, and know what you used to be?”

“I’d sleep by your feet while you watch movies. I’d be so happy to see you when you came home. All you have to do is give the word, and I’ll put my voiceprint on the contract right now.”

Jason’s throat was so tight that he couldn’t speak. But he nodded.

The operation took eighteen hours. The recovery period lasted weeks. When the bandages came off, Jason’s father’s face was long and furry and had a wet nose. But his head was still very round, and his eyes were still blue.

Two deep wells of sincere, doggy love.

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