

Contents

[Fledgling](#)

FLEDGLING



a short story by

JOHN STACY WORTH

Fledgling

by John Stacy Worth

This is a work of fiction.

All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright (c) 2017 J. S. Worth

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Want more?

If you enjoy this free story and would like to read more like it, 'Fledgling' is one of several short stories included in my ebook collection "Transdimensional Detours". It's available on Amazon and other retailers for only \$2.99. This collection includes eight intriguing tales of friendship, healing, death, forgiveness, family, love, redemption, and faith—with generous helpings of aliens, amphibians, reptiles, magic, and visions; a shot of biological enhancements; a dash of dragon folklore; a vampire, an artist, and a time travelling physician.

Transdimensional Detours can be purchased online at [Amazon](#) and [Other Retailers](#).

I'm also the author of "The Grace Finder Saga", a trilogy of ebooks beginning with Book One, 'Remnant' which is permanently free on [Amazon](#) and [Other Retailers](#), so if you haven't

picked it up yet, I'd suggest you start there.

To get info on upcoming fiction and freebies, join my "Fiction WORTH Reading" group here: <http://jsworth.com/>. Joining this reading group also gives you **immediate access** to Book Two of the Grace Finder Saga, 'Reprobate' for **FREE**. Otherwise it can only be purchased online.

And if you want even more, see the Facebook page here:

<https://www.facebook.com/fictionworthreading>

The reading group will be used for major updates and is opted in via email; the Facebook page will be for promos and such. Since I can't guarantee that something I put on Facebook will be seen on your feed, I need the email list to update all fans for any upcoming releases and so I can send links to occasional freebies (short stories, for example). So come join the fun.

Peace,

JSW 2017.

Novels

The Grace Finder Saga:

REMNANT - Book One

REPROBATE - Book Two

REQUIEM - Book Three

Fledgling

Crouched beside a scorched heap of timber, Jason Aves emptied his mother's urn into her favorite cookie tin. A morning breeze danced over the ashes.

Please not now.

Jason glimpsed a fluttering of black—looked to see a feather drifting toward the tin. He snatched it from the air. A flash of inspiration and he used it to gently coax the rest of the ashes free. Satisfied, Jason set the urn aside and let the feather go. He pressed the tin's lid into place.

With a charred twig, he reached into the coals from last night's bonfire and scratched them into powder. He compared the ashes on the ground to those in the tin. Not even close. Still, what were the chances the old man would ever check, much less remember the color and consistency of his wife's remains? Using a small iron shovel, Jason replenished the urn. Then he dusted himself off, gathered everything, and went inside.

He placed the urn back on the mantle where it had sat for seven years, then the shovel into its station alongside poker and broom. Once he'd stepped away from the fireplace, Jason froze. The entire wall was a shrine, adorned with his mother's photography: a bald eagle she'd spied in the Smokies, cardinals and blue jays in her own backyard, and the seagulls and terns of Cumberland.

Which reminded him, if he was making the nine o'clock ferry, he needed to keep moving.

When he finally got his new Mustang loaded, Jason turned off his cell and dropped it in the cup holder. He had about a thousand dollars of graduation money and two whole weeks to himself. He fired the engine, determined to get out of Jacksonville, do this one thing for his mother, and clear his head for once.



Sara Aves had called it an idyllic hide-away, and Jason could see why. Cumberland was paradise—massive live oaks draped in Spanish moss and vast, peaceful beaches. Let the rest of the senior class have Fort Lauderdale. This Georgia island was perfect. Only three hundred tourists allowed per day, no crowds, no parties, just eighteen miles of relative solitude.

Lulled by the unhurried pace, Jason finished his lunch and began using his small cooler to save stranded jellyfish. Something his mother might've done, he realized.

Then, turning to watch an albatross veer inland, he saw the girl. Wearing a tie-dyed sundress, beads and feathers in her hair, she was scavenging the beach, placing scraps of ocean debris into a pouch.

Don't speak. She's just a dope-smoking hippie.

It was exactly what his father would say. Easing his cooler to the sand, he decided he would speak after all.

“Treasure hunting?”

The young woman drew a feather aside. “Always. What about you? Are you looking for something?”

He felt his heart catch. Either she was stoned or had the most serene eyes he’d ever seen. “Maybe.” *The right spot to scatter my mother’s ashes.*

She craned her neck to peer into his cooler. “Are those jellyfish?”

He picked it up, stepped into the water, and gently sloshed its contents back into the ocean. “Some people save whales. For me it’s jellyfish.”

“Cool.” She smiled. “A death-cheater.”

She had it backwards of course—death had cheated him—but he only shrugged and said, “Nah, I just relate to jellyfish.” He tramped ashore, set the cooler down again.

“I’m Anastasia Hale, and *I’m* looking for magic.” She reached into her pouch and fished around. “It’s everywhere here. Wild horses, castle ruins, tales of love and loss.” She withdrew her hand and opened it, exposing the tiny pile of frosted glass nestled in her palm. “Look, sea glass—tumbled by the ocean. Very powerful mojo.”

He squinted at the handful of fragments, beer bottles shards for the most part. “*Right.*”

“A skeptic! Here.” She grabbed his wrist and transferred the glass into his palm. “I’ll prove it.” She pressed his fingers around the glass and closed her eyes tight.

“What are you doing?” His initial misgivings were justified. The girl was crazy.

“Now open your hand.” She helped him do so. “The first is for your past.” She picked up a red, teardrop fragment and slowly opened her eyes. “Oh. Red, the most precious, and in the shape of sorrow. You’ve had loss, very serious loss.”

He kept his composure. She was just reading facial cues and body language, putting together what anyone with common sense could tell.

She closed her eyes again. This time the glass she retrieved was blue. She looked. “Water! A loss in your past, and in your future an uncertain choice.” She held it up. “You see, water doesn’t know what it wants to be—ice, vapor, a wave upon the ocean. It vacillates, ever changing, never certain. You’re running from loss, *and* you have a choice to make.”

He rolled his eyes and lied. “Wrong on both counts.” He took her hand and dumped the glass back into it.

“Your mother.”

“What?” He felt warmth drain from his face. Time stretched out, and even his heart seemed to limp along like some maimed, broken-limbed creature.

“Your mother died.” She slipped the sea glass back into her pouch. “And you’re expected to fill your father’s shoes, but you’re not sure you can or if you even want to.”

“How did you—”

“No more.” She held up a hand. “This is Cumberland. We should be having fun, not probing the depths of the human soul.” She smiled again. “So are you going to tell me your name or do I have to divine that too?”



Back on the mainland, Jason put his gear in the trunk. He placed the tin—still heavy with ashes—on the passenger seat, let his gaze rest a moment upon the lid. An ocean scene, three gulls silhouetted against the sky.

Settling in, he savored again the new car smell. Dr. Frank Aves had missed the graduation, working another shift in the ER, but no one could say the man didn’t compensate—first with the car and then by allowing Jason to host one last party, complete with bonfire. Guilt might not cover a multitude of sins, but it was good for something.

Jason dug into his shirt pocket and took out a business card. Anastasia had returned on the noon ferry, while he wandered about until four, searching for the right place. He looked to the card. It was two-sided: **Anastasia’s Sea-Trinkets** on one and **Hale’s Bed and Breakfast** on the other, with the same St. Mary’s address for each.



As he pulled up, he spotted her on the porch swing.

Jason parked and got out. He feigned nonchalance, casually making his way to her.

A large book occupied a small wicker table near the swing, a tome of *Ancient Magic*, according to the cover. Anastasia was anchoring eyehooks to sea glass. She looked up and grinned. "I knew you'd come."

"Thought I might bum around St. Mary's for awhile. Maybe head out to Cumberland again." He still needed to spread the ashes.

"I'm hungry." Anastasia set her things aside and hopped to her feet. "Come on. Let me show you the local fare."

He followed her down the steps.



The restaurant was within walking distance. The food, Cajun. From the décor Jason would have never guessed its five star rating. On the tables sat rolls of paper towels, pegboard games, a simple handwritten menu, and a small stack of cards for evaluating food and service.

Anastasia had Jambalaya, while Jason chose the Crawfish Etouffee. The tea was sweet enough to hype up a hummingbird, brought in pitchers and placed center-table so customers could help themselves. They sat outside, listening to seagulls chatter while the sun set behind them.

"My parents own the bed and breakfast," Anastasia said. "I'm helping out till I leave for college. Psychology major,

by the way. I also sell my jewelry, but can't convince folks to pay what it's actually worth."

Jason paused, a crawfish halfway to his mouth. "Psychology." He put the crawfish in. "You know that's only a *bit* more respectable than fortune teller."

She smiled. "Let's talk about you now."

He pushed at his last grains of rice, then spied a pencil half hidden behind a bottle of hot sauce. He traded his fork for the pencil and started doodling on the back of a rating card. "My mother died when I was eleven. Cervical cancer. And Dad, well...all I know is he would've pushed me harder if he'd had time."

"Is he a good man? Someone you'd want to emulate?"

Jason kept scribbling. "I guess. I mean, he tries to give me what I want, so I'll do what he wants. But all parents are like that, right?" He started to meet her gaze, but remembered how serene Anastasia's eyes could be. How they pulled at hidden places.

"Okay, forget him. We still aren't talking about *you*." She put a hand on his. "What makes Jason Aves come alive?"

He felt lightheaded. His fingers relaxed under Anastasia's, his grip loosening on the pencil. What did he care about? What was he truly interested in? He thought about the High School he'd just left. Debate Team, Dad's idea. Science Club, co-sponsored by his father's practice. Then he went back further, remembering a set of pastel crayons an enthusiastic art teacher gave him in fifth grade.

The memory was a buried one, all but forgotten, though now it came vividly. He had shown a class assignment to his father. A drawing of a multi-colored bird, soaring. His father only grunted and said that artists starved.

But his mother had loved it, displaying it proudly in her hospital room. On the day of her funeral, Jason folded it and discreetly placed it under her crossed hands. It was the last thing he'd ever drawn.

Before he could dwell too long, his mind skipped forward in time—to a rare moment of praise from his father after a perfect score on a tenth grade final. “Good,” Frank Aves said. “Now keep doing that. Maybe someday you can pick up where I leave off and save some other kid’s mother.”

“Come back, Jason,” Anastasia called from across the table. She released his hand.

He flushed. “What just happened? What did you do?”

“I take it you didn’t find your happy place.”

He clenched his pencil again and began scrawling. “You want to know what makes me tick?” He looked at the note card, then to her. Back and forth, concentrating on neither.

But a wistful expression lit her face. “I really do.”

“Trying to do the impossible,” he said. “Make my father proud and let go of my dead mother.”

“Ah. You’re trying to prove yourself, and to disprove your greatest source of pain.”

He’d never heard it put so. He met her gaze, awaiting

further analysis.

“Let’s get out of here.” Anastasia stood, once again the weaver and breaker of spells. “Hey, that’s pretty good.” She picked up his scribbling and held it to a bare-hanging light bulb.

He stared at the mess of lines and felt his insides lurch. He hadn’t been drawing with intent, just scratching at the paper. But there, formed by a frenzy of whorls, smears, and crosshatch, stretched the unmistakable form of a bird, winging skyward.

“You have real talent,” she said.

He reached for it. “I was just...doodling?” He wadded it, and then tossed it onto his leftovers. Anastasia stared with an expression he couldn’t decipher: sadness, disappointment, anger? “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Didn’t think you’d actually want that.”

“I just hate to see anyone cast their gifts aside.”

There was no condemnation in her tone. Still, Jason had to steady himself as he went to the register to pay.

Then he walked with Anastasia down moonlit streets. As they talked he began to wonder—if she wasn’t magic, then she was, at the very least, some sort of hypnotist. He decided to spend as much time as possible with this girl who was so incongruent with the world he’d always known. Maybe *she* could call forth his courage and help him tap into the source of her serenity.

Then he heard his father’s echo. *Always waiting for someone else to solve your problems. When are you*

going to grow up?

The sight of the bed and breakfast stilled his father's voice.

"Grab your bags while I go get my jewelry and book," Anastasia said. "I'll check you in and introduce you to my parents."



The next morning they ferried over together. They hiked and swam, while Anastasia filled him in on the island: the Timucuans, seven foot tall natives that the Spanish came to convert; the Carnegies, who purchased the island as their private sanctuary; and the feral pigs and horses, both considered nuisances by the DNR.

Jason listened intently to this enigmatic girl. As they walked along the shore, he found himself wanting to press into her, to touch her shells and sea glass, stroke her skin, and smell her damp, salty hair.

She turned to face him. "I've got something for you."

She went to the skirt of her bathing suit, found its pocket and pulled forth a slim, leather cord. Dangling from one wingtip was a metallic bird—an amalgam of discarded metal that she'd obviously crafted herself.

"An albatross." Her eyes sparkled with the sea.

He recalled the epic poem. "Isn't that bad luck?"

Anastasia shook her head. "Coleridge calls the albatross

a *good* omen. It's only hung about the Mariner's neck after he kills it, once the bad things start to happen. *This* albatross is alive. In flight even." She held the cord open. "Now bend over so I can put it on you."

He obeyed, and then fingered the dark metal. "Kind of crazy looking on me, huh?"

"No, Jason. It suits you." Her own neck was draped with a string of sea-glass. "You *can* be a doctor without becoming your dad, you know."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm not sure I do."

She took one of his hands, guiding it to the small of her back. "Take my word for it. At any rate, you do have a surgeon's touch."

He pulled her closer. Alone on the secluded beach, they kissed quickly.

"We don't want to miss the tour," she said.

They collected their belongings and hurried to the boardwalk, eventually arriving at the castle ruins. Anastasia fished a camera from her beach bag. Like all the tourists, they took turns snapping pictures. A mare and her foal grazing, an osprey alighting upon a tree limb, one another. They asked an elderly gentleman to take a few of them together, back-dropped by the crumbling stones.

Then the park guide came and began his tour.

"The official name of this mansion was Dungeness, but I like to call it the Widow Maker."

Jason grimaced. Pure cheese. Still he couldn't help but listen.

“On days like today, it's not hard to imagine Nathaniel Greene dying of heat stroke while building the original.” The guide wiped his brow with a kerchief, as if to underscore the fact. “His widow finished Dungeness only to have it burn to the ground in the 1860s. Some believe the fire was set by former slaves.” He shrugged as if that was unknowable. “Fortunately Thomas Carnegie purchased the site. But, just like Greene, Carnegie died, and *his* widow finished the new Dungeness—an incredible Scottish-styled castle.” He took a sip from his canteen. “But in 1959 it was torched again, so that today nothing remains but an expansive set of ruins.”

“It's still beautiful,” Anastasia said, raising her arms to the vine shrouded walls.

“All of Cumberland is breathtaking,” the guide agreed, leading them away from the ruins and down a trail. “And some very notable people have been drawn to it. Robert E. Lee's father died here. Of course they moved him to Virginia, to place him next to his son, but the original gravesite remains—which we'll see shortly.”

Jason touched the albatross. Were the father and son close in life, or only brought together in death?

Anastasia chimed in again, “Oh. And JFK Jr. and Carolyn Bessette got married here, in an old African American church.” She squeezed Jason's hand.

“We'll see that too,” the guide said.

Jason shook his head. Was there even *one* happy ending

among the stories surrounding this place? But to Anastasia he said, “You’re so subtle.”

She put her head on his shoulder and whispered, “It was fate brought us together, convergent destiny. Our spirits are entwined now. Inseparable.”

Finally he smiled. *Inseparable*. He liked the sound of that.



Week’s end found them stepping forth again on the shores of Cumberland. He took her hand. “Let’s get going. Our tent isn’t going to put itself up.”

With camp made and a risen moon, they settled in for the night. Anastasia removed her jewelry. She accepted his first advance, and they exchanged shy kisses. She stopped him though, when he sought to remove his albatross. The good omen would bless their night together.

“Besides,” she said. “We’re not going all the way. Not without rings and vows.”

He smiled. Once again she surprised him. A free spirit that was not into free love.

Later, as they lie on their backs gazing up through the tent’s window, Anastasia told him tales of French pirates that had once taken refuge on the island, of lost treasures and the ongoing struggle to preserve the natural ones. She told him of the Carnegies, hitching

rides through the surf on the backs of sea turtles, masters of their own private Eden. Lying there beside her, he couldn't help but think how she was the real treasure, her arms the only true paradise.

I'm not alone anymore. He stifled his emotions before they could overwhelm him and curled against her to sleep.

In the morning Anastasia sat up and slipped on her necklace, anklets, and bracelets. She smoothed out her tie-dyed sundress then crawled to the tent flap. "Nature calls," she said. "Last night was wonderful by the way."

He furrowed his brow. "*Transcendent* is the word I was thinking."

She laughed. "Jason Aves, I believe there's hope for you yet." She moved outside.

Changing into his swim trunks, he could not believe what his life was becoming. Maybe he should even forget Pre-Med and pick a new major, maybe a degree in fine art. He smiled. Frank Aves would—

He heard a snort, followed by a squeal and a panicked scream.

"Jason!"

He scrambled out the tent and toward the woods.

Shoving aside a palmetto he stumbled into the forest and felt the world fall away. Anastasia lie bleeding, her right shin flayed to the bone.

"Oh, Jason!" Her eyes glazed then fixed on something

behind him.

He heard hooves tearing up the earth. Turned just in time to see the boar—about two hundred pounds of fury—head down, tusks raking forward.

“No!” He put himself between the beast and Anastasia. Stretched forth his arms as if to wrestle it to the ground.

It went under his groin. Thrust its snout upward to send him tumbling. His head slammed the trunk of an oak. Fighting for consciousness, he watched it turn to Anastasia.

He heard her feverishly babbling, “Arise, my heart, take flight...I give my life... a sacrificial love...”



They buried Anastasia in her favorite sundress. Her mother picked fresh jasmine blooms and placed them in her hair. Jason noticed two empty eyehooks on her sea glass necklace. He stood at the side of the casket with her parents, determined to keep his composure.

Finally, her father spoke, “The park guide told us that the boars are usually nocturnal, and very shy. This was a freak event. Not your fault.”

Jason wasn't sure who the man was trying to convince.

Her mother laid a hand on his arm. “I feel compelled to give you this.” She reached into a large handbag and brought out Anastasia's book. “I taught her never to question her intuition. We weren't happy that she went

camping with you, but we trusted her. I think she would want you to have this.” She pressed the book into his hands.

Jason nodded. “Thank you. I want you to know, we didn’t...that is I didn’t...you know. Your trust in her was well placed.”

He looked at Anastasia’s hands, crossed upon her heart. Touched the albatross still at his throat.

“Jason.”

He turned, recognizing his father’s voice.

Frank Aves stood there, haggard, eyes bloodshot, as if he were the one who’d been grieving.

“Excuse me,” Jason said, turning from the Hales. He walked over to his father.

“I thought you were in Fort Lauderdale—” Frank Aves stopped. “It doesn’t matter.” He looked away. “It’s all over the news. They were talking about how rare this kind of thing is. How terrible. Then they panned over to you.”

Jason vaguely remembered the news vans, and giving a brief statement in front of a cameraman. “I would have called, but I was kind of ...preoccupied.” He couldn’t remember what he had said to the reporter.

His father put a hand on his shoulder. “Come home, son.”

Jason sighed. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

When he’d told his father about the tin sitting in the front

seat of his car, Frank Aves said, “I know she’s your mother, but that’s not your decision to make.” He rubbed his cheeks, suddenly seeming ancient and infinitely tired. “But if it will help you, well, maybe we could do it together.”

Jason frowned. Hot then cold, as always his father was predictably inconsistent. “Look, I’m sorry. But I need to take care of ...” He couldn’t bring himself to say her name. “They’ve asked me to stay for the funeral.”

His father nodded. “Take a few days. Let me know when you’re ready.”



He stepped outside the tent and followed a dainty set of footprints. Pushing aside the ferns and palmetto, he saw Anastasia, huddled at the trunk of an oak, draped in jewelry and Spanish moss. He hurried over. Knelt.

She opened her eyes. “What now? Do you build upon your father’s Dungeness? Or leave it to crumble?”

He awakened, heart racing like a frantic, caged thing. He pressed his face against his pillow. Though the nightmare faded, the lingering scent of his own sweat triggered painful memories—the salty fragrance of sea in Anastasia’s hair. He heard again the surf breaking, and realized the crashing waves were his own heaving sobs.



The day after the funeral, Jason ferried to the island and sat nestled among the roots of a live oak. He reached into his backpack and took out his mother's ashes. *Mama, what should I do?* Then he noticed a book shoved into one side of his pack. He set his mother's ashes aside and picked up Anastasia's tome, opened it and read. Before long, he knew what he was meant to do.



If it was designed to freak Jason out, the ritual was doing its job. Was it mere coincidence that he still had his mother's ashes, the one crucial ingredient? Or was something else at work? Convergent destiny?

Maybe I'm simply losing my mind.

He camped in the exact ill-fated spot, wearing the same swim trunks he had on when Anastasia died. Under the light of a full moon, he knelt on the sand and opened his mother's tin. He put two fingers into her ashes and then smeared a cross onto his forehead. He thought of all the Catholics he'd seen observing Ash Wednesday. What would the Spanish missionaries think if they could see him? Then he took the ashes and marked an infinity symbol over his heart, a circle around his navel. He closed the tin.

Though everything inside Jason clamored to turn back, he set his face, approached the forest, and pushed the foliage aside. He went to where she'd died. Knelt. A recent downpour had washed the spot clean and

rejuvenated the crushed ferns and grasses. Then he caught a hint of reflected moonlight. He reached down and picked up a sea-glass trinket—crimson, like a drop of blood frozen in time, and with a broken clasp attached at one end.

He put the sea-glass in the pocket of his swim trunks. *What now?* He heard a rustle of feathers, followed by a screech. Looked for the source. A silhouette flitted across the moon. He started running, following the erratic screech and the sound of beating wings. Touching the albatross at his throat, he chased the one overhead.

Now prove you're not a bad omen.

He ran south along the beach, checking ever so often to make sure the bird was still there. It turned westward. He followed, into the foliage again. He lost sight of it, but kept moving until he found himself in a clearing. A shriek. He looked over. The bird alighted clumsily atop a tombstone. He moved closer.

General Henry Lee's original resting place, though now just an empty grave. The bird stared, bobbed its head as if urging him to look downward. He did so. There at the bird's feet, as if purposely set upon the gravestone, was another glass fragment.

He picked up the glass and held it to the moon. This piece shone blue-green, as clear as coastal shallows. His skin tightened into gooseflesh as he pocketed the glass with the other.

"What next?" he asked his feathered guide.

And was answered. *My precious son, now you face the*

truth.

Though its beak didn't move, he knew the bird had spoken, and in a voice he'd never forgotten. "Mama?"

I became as much a weight as everything else. But now let me help in the one small way I can. After tonight, choose your own path, nothing for my sake anymore. Or your father's. Know that I give you all my courage, all my love. A sudden gust lifted the bird. *Come.*

He followed again, onto a sandy trail. It didn't take long for Jason to realize where he was being led. He turned a corner to arrive at Dungeness. He squinted, disbelieving. A shimmering patina of moonlight lit everything like a ghostly flame. He looked around but the bird was gone.

Then he heard Anastasia. "Hello Jason." She stood atop the weathered steps, a string of sea-glass about her neck.

He ducked through a wooden barricade, hurried up the steps to a stone doorway. It was Anastasia as he remembered her: in her sundress, eyes shimmering like sunlit waters.

He stopped, unwilling to reach out, for fear she'd evaporate at his touch.

"Beloved, why have you come? Do you know?"

"You have to ask?" He choked down tears. "For you."

She put an ethereal hand into his chest. "You will always have me. Right here." His heart kindled, and his entire being flooded with warmth. The aura surrounding

Dungeness faded, transferring slowly onto Jason.

He tried to grab her wrist, but his fingers passed right through. “That’s not good enough. We were supposed to be inseparable, remember?”

“We are inseparable. You have me in the only place that ever matters.”

His voice trembled. “Then *you* tell me why I came. Why you had to die too!”

She pointed to the grassy fields beyond him. “For this.”

He looked to find a bloody-tusked boar, pawing the ground. He turned to Anastasia but she was gone.

He focused again on the boar. “Be real. Let one thing tonight be flesh and blood!” He vaulted down the steps, slid through the barricade. Ran headlong, ready to pull those tusks to his chest—where they could razor through his flesh and cut out the pain.

The beast squealed, tearing the ground as it rushed forward.

He spread his hands to give it access, threw himself upon its tusks.

And found himself grappling with a human form. Powerful arms took him by the neck to wrestle him down.

“What are you doing, Jason? All these years and you’re still pining after ghosts?”

Jason lie stretched on his back, shoulders pinned under his assailant’s knees. He looked up into a shadowed,

though familiar, face.

“Dad?”

A hand came down and struck his cheek. “She isn’t coming back! Why can’t you just accept that?” He slapped Jason again. “I’ve tried to do my best. Given you everything.” The assault now was verbal, as he yelled in Jason’s face, “What do I have to do? What do you want?”

Jason bucked, rolled his father off, and crawled atop him. “It was never about what I wanted!” He barreled in with both fists, punching in quick succession. “You never bothered to ask. Never had any faith that I could make my own decisions.”

He stopped. His father’s profile lie shrouded in darkness and blurred by his tears. When the head turned again the features had shifted. Jason stared into his own bloodied face.

“Have faith,” it echoed. Jason realized then that the voice had never changed. All along it had been his own, not his father’s.

Before he could process the realization, his twin surged upward, shape-shifting again. He tumbled, got to his feet only to find he was once more facing the boar. It raced toward Jason, then hit him hard, throwing him into the air. As he sprawled toward Dungeness, his head impacted stone. He struggled to rise as the boar came rushing, but collapsed flat on his back.

A snouted face hovered over him. He reached with both hands and took hold of its tusks. His last sensation was of a coarse, wet tongue lapping his cheek.



Jason became aware of a hand stroking his brow. He opened his eyes. “Anastasia?”

She leaned in. “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

He tried to sit up.

“Not yet.” She pressed gently against his chest. “You’ll be out of that bed soon enough.” Anastasia still wore her sundress, her lower legs exposed and unmarred. She stood barefoot, with anklets of aluminum pop-tops winking atop perfect, dainty feet. “My parents are in the lobby with your father. I found his number in your cell phone, and he got here within the hour.” She caressed his cheek. “He gave permission for me to be here when you woke up.”

Jason faltered. The simple gesture of allowing this girl to be at his side caused a subtle shift, like a cage door opening. He shook his head. “But how? I saw you gored, bleeding to death. Anastasia, you died!”

She scrunched her nose. “You rushed that boar before it could even get to me. You attacked it. Took the tusks in your *hands*.”

He pulled his hands from beneath the bed sheets. Both were bandaged across the palms, which he realized were stitched and tender.

She reached to his throat, picked up the charm anchored

there. "I told you this was good luck." She pulled her fingers away. "Oh. They haven't done a very good job of cleaning you."

Hooking the fabric with his thumbs, he gently lifted his hospital gown to peer beneath. Light gray patterns stained his chest.

Anastasia sniffed the hint of ash on her fingertips. "A spell!" She looked at him intently. "So did it work?"

Relief flooded his mind. "Actually, I think I completed one that you began." He wasn't going crazy. It had *not* been a dream. Jason pushed back with his elbows and sat up.

Anastasia didn't protest this time, but instead helped adjust his pillow. Jason felt then the albatross resting gently against his throat. He looked to the sea glass around Anastasia's neck. There were no empty eyehooks.

Then he told her all that happened in their now-averted future. And though the words were grossly inadequate, he whispered, "Thank you."

Her eyes were radiant and serene. "So are you *truly* back in the land of the living? Have you finally laid your past to rest?"

Jason gave a single nod. "I believe I can even handle the future now." Though still undecided about everything, he realized it no longer mattered. Whatever his decisions, they would be his own.

He kissed Anastasia's hand, touched the albatross, and *soared*.

The end.

About the Author:

Though John Stacy Worth may write from a Christian world view, as he once told his wife, “ ... This ain’t your Mama’s Christian Fiction.”

His books have no Amish folks (cool as they are), no 1800s Western setting with a focus on romance (and Western Romances do indeed rule). His fiction is more like, “Did you ever wonder what a Behemoth was, and how you might kill one?” Or, more importantly, “What’s Leviathan taste like?”

And such crucial questions as, “Can a vampire get saved? What were the Nephilim really like? What happened to those Cherubim and that flaming sword guarding the entrance to Eden?” And, “If you could travel through time to witness the crucifixion and resurrection what would you tell the disciples?”

John Stacy Worth has been writing and illustrating stories like these since he was old enough to trace comic books. He grew up in rural Georgia, reading every Tarzan novel he could get his hands on, then moved on to Asimov, Tolkien, Orson Scott Card ... you get the picture.

Since those days (way back in the twentieth century) it's rumored he served in the U.S. Navy (14 countries and, some say, about every island in the Caribbean), spent a year undercover as a High School Science Teacher, then a Chemist for Merck Pharmaceuticals, and (according to certain sources) he's now at a Nuclear Power Plant.

What's known for sure is that he's happily married, somewhere back in Georgia, with two awesome sons. He still likes to draw and make up stories, loves God, and talks about Jesus if you give him half a chance.

His books are just beginning to show up online; He's also rumored to promote his fiction at <http://fictionworthreading.com/>. And hey, if your mama is that rare and precious type that occasionally wonders "What's up with Nessie?" or "You know, I believe that Bigfoot critter might be real...", send her his way. This might be your Mama's Christian Fiction after all.

P.S. And if you would be so kind, once you or your mama finish reading one of his strange and wondrous tales, would you consider leaving an honest review online? At Amazon, or whichever retailer you happen to choose. It's said that this makes him smile, raise his hands in thanks to

Heaven, and opens his heart to receive fresh revelation for another tale.