



THESE FANTASTIC WORLDS

JAKE JACKSON

FOUR SHORT DARK TALES

Welcome to the first edition of These Fantastic Worlds, a special online magazine available only to subscribers of the Jake Jackson mailing list. Thank you for signing up.

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These short tales first appeared in the SF & Fantasy Short Fiction Podcast, available on iTunes, Stitcher and more...



Jake Jackson is an SF and dark fantasy author. His fiction explores the interplay between dreams, memory, imagination and self-delusion. Through long and short fiction, epic poetry, music and art he aims to create a body of work which explores our place in the universe, its origins, myths and futures. The first books will be published in 2016/17

Based in London where he lives with his family, he has also worked and travelled across the USA, edited a number of books on mythology, (including *Myths and Legends*, *Celtic Myths and Native American Myth*) and created over 25 how-to music books, including *Beginner's Guide to Reading music*, *Guitar Chords*, *Piano Chords*, *Songwriter's Rhyming Dictionary* (Amazon author page [here](#)). His 2012 music release **Jakesongs**, appears on on **iTunes**, **Amazon**, and **Spotify**.

Jake operates the website **THESE FANTASTIC WORLDS** which features all things dark and fantastic, from movies to fiction, art, mythology and science fiction.

Authors featured include: Ray Bradbury, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood.

Fantastic Artists include: Frank Frazetta, Jeffrey Catherine Jones, Barry Moser, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, William Blake, Gerhard Richter, Bernie Wrighton, Barry Windsor Smith and Virgil Finlay.

For **updates** and further information on the fantastic (movies, fiction, art, writing and more) please take a look at thesefantasticworlds.com



Vampyres and humans have fought each other for centuries, but how can you defeat a creature who simply can not die?

ECHOES | DARK BLOOD

“The dead live forever.” He had heard these words sputtered and rasped at his back for thousands of years. For the first few decades he had laughed at the idea, exhilarated, then as a few hundred more rushed by, the seasonal changes of his youth were replaced by grand sweeps of history and he began to realize the implications. It was a prophecy, an insult.

Once handsome, haughty and high-necked, Salvador had been hunting for centuries. He remembered the miasmic taste of human flesh before he and his kind had been chased from the cities, and the brownfield lands had been set alight, their perpetual flames separating vampyre and humankind. So the vampyres, ever pragmatic in their desires, swept into the mountains of old Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia, and ravaged through the wild. They became masters of the forest, reducing themselves slowly to a feral state of mind, barely speaking, as they battled to feed, and, in time, they spread out ever further from each other, to extend their chances of survival.

Salvador remembered the last conversation he had had with one of his own blood, the dark blood of the undead. A woman who had become, for the convenience of the hunt, his pair. In their youth they had meant something to each other, but human emotions were shed from their bodies, as soon as the hunger for the fresh blood of the living had taken them. No longer did they yearn for company, or conversation, now it was for the blood, only the red blood, for it satisfied them, kept them alive in the long nights, and the dark, burning days.

“So, I must leave you.” His companion, had stood in the deep forest, her hands on her hips, face and clothes ragged with the dirt of the years, her

hair as tangled as ivy, weaving across her face, and down to her waist. Her voice was low, inflected with the long despair of her kind, scarred by the battles with wolves, and bears, and recently the packs of mountain tigers eager to protect their own paths and hideaways.

“It makes sense.” He nodded curtly. His haughty tones had been ground from him, and lingered only distantly on barely audible grunts.

“I have known you, for nearly a thousand years.” The redundant facts hung between them.

“I’m surprised you still count them.” Salvador felt a slight discomfort, and knew that in a previous life he would have interpreted its meaning. But now, nothing mattered. Even the animals were in retreat, there was little for the vampyres to survive on but insects and fern. The pairs had begun to split and find new territory.

There had been days where no animal passed by. It was as though they had learned to communicate in ways beyond the simple territorial noises of their nature. Salvador realized, as the long years stretched behind him that the animals possessed similar qualities to humans, in their desire to group together, the passing of knowledge from one to the other, from one generation to the next. They had learned to hide from the vampyres.

So the hunger grew. And the vampyres did not die, they became more crazy the longer it took them to feed. Salvador tried to keep the bodies of animals he had killed, saving parts of them for the long, barren weeks, but soon they stank and festered, and so many times he would stumble through the woodland, coughing, retching, hallucinating.

Once, he reached the edge of the mountain forest, and dragged himself up to the cliff-top, and wondered why he didn’t fling himself off. What was his purpose? What was his motivation,

his enjoyment, his usefulness? Thousands of years of hunger, satiation, sleep, now long periods of desperation clutched at his eternal state of being.

And always, he would remember those who had succumbed to the despair of the cliff. The shambling, broken creatures on the scree below, they still lived, but their bodies burned slowly in the morning sun; no longer able to raise themselves they suffered the slow death of the burning days, but spread over the years, each moment dying a little more, with no food, and no ability to leave, with every bone in their body either shattered, or repaired into such an impossible misshape that no longer could they use their limbs. Those who had dragged themselves out would find themselves attacked eventually by the mountain lions, their heads ripped from the bodies, and gleefully discarded down the chasms by the remnants of fierce and frightened packs. But still they lived, without the means to move, or feast.

Over two thousands years had passed since the vampyres had been separated from the humans. It had been several hundred since Salvador had encountered any other vampyre. And nearly 50 since he killed his last animal, and surrendered to its lively juices.

Now the forest lay silent. And Salvador looked across at the nearest city. A once Golden Gate now shivered in the dank air. He noticed that the fires in the fields all around had long been silenced, and wondered how he could not have noticed. The intense hunger he supposed, had led him to sleep for weeks, almost hibernating. He had taken to masticating handfuls of grass and leaves, but they seemed infected and made him gag. He tore strips of bark, but the trees too seemed to be dying.

It was early evening and Salvador looked out across the valley and observed the sun jerking downwards from the hazy sky. He determined to

find out if there was any food near the human city, and if his head was torn from his body by some baying mob, then so be it.

He shambled down the trail, following the line of the old forest, along the old highway. No birdsong disturbed his journey, no animals fell silent at his passing, everything was still except for the chaotic fall of his own feet.

He reached the burnt ground that marked the line between human and vampyre. No fires of any sort flared around him as he fled through and rolled onto the human side. He coughed, and clutched at his chest: the lack of meat and blood over the last decades had left him weak. He could feel the random pulse of blood through his veins, aching and tearing through his own body, wearily seeking vitality.

Soon he approached the City walls, build like a prison's, but designed to keep everyone out.

Now there was no one.

And as walked up to the massive central gate, he found it slightly ajar, as though a wind had opened the mighty gates on a whim. But within, there was only dust. No humans, no rats, no flies, no life whatsoever.

He roamed through the streets that had cradled his youth, but found little to remember, still less to eat. He penetrated further throughout the dense, silent streets, watching for traps, for hidden signs.

But he was tired, starving. The whole city had either been abandoned, or the inhabitants had been incinerated in the hot, pulpy sun of the last few hundred years.

Salvador clambered up the broken inner-city highway, its gigantic girders rearing into the sky, as though they had tried to reach the sun but had fallen back, melted and contorted. He

placed a foot across the top, and gazed at the desolate streets below, stretching into the darkness beyond. He missed his footing and tripped. He fell at an awkward angle on the raised girder, and suffered a blow to the chest as he slumped down, then the sharp, rusted edge of another girder, disturbed by his fall, swung across and sliced his head from his torso. Salvador's body slumped high, while the head of the most ancient of vampyres, a cautious and determined creature, bounced once before landing disrespectfully into a nascent vat of tar, laid as a trap by long forgotten humans.

He woke. His head still almost immersed in the vat, a single eye exposed to the sky. He could just trace the desiccated remains of what had been his body for some thousands of years, swinging limply in the wind, with the chains and the cables of the broken road above.

And then he felt the itching and the pulsing. His dark blood had combined with the tar and had slowly begun to eat its way out of his skull.

"The Dead live forever," how right they were, but little did they realize the horror of it all. Salvador saw other heads, their eyes wide, and other bodies, shivering in the emerging dawn, the burning sun releasing its fingers of torture to creep across the ground, and banish the night. Oh, so now he understood pain again, regret, remorse, finally, and as the dark blood munched at his undying head, he wondered at the pointlessness of his conscious existence. Death it seemed was unattainable, but utterly desirable.



Every night, just before she went to bed, the little girl opened the secret drawer. Inside, the creature stirred: things were about to change...

ECHOES | HOSHIKO

Hoshiko's mother finished reading the story. She leaned to extinguish the bedside lamp. The distant sounds of an owl arced around the roof of the little cabin nested high in the woods.

"Goodnight Mumma."

"Night, night sweetheart. Sleep tight."

"Okay." The little girl smiled. She drew in the gentle fragrance of her mother's skin, and recalled all the happy memories of her few short years. It made her feel safe. Even after her father had died, and her mother had spent so many months in tears Hoshiko now felt calm in the protection of their home, and the hounds in the yard, and the wolves in the wood.

Sometimes she would say quietly to herself, muttering disconsolately, that she felt her father had left them in body, but not in spirit. She wished it was so. At night, when she looked out of her window, to the valley below, she connected the pinpoint stars in the sky, with the blinking lights of the hamlet, each one flickering to a close as the candles were blown into silence, and the night drew in. In her mind she tried to draw the smiling face of her father.

This night though, she yawned more readily than usual, and didn't ask for another page to be read.

"Are you--?" her mother stroked her head, a slight hesitation teasing at her breath.

"Yes Mumma. Just tired." She yawned again, and opened half an eye, surprised that her mother was so easily deceived.

"Alright then, I'll tuck you in." Hoshiko turned her head on the pillow, and curled up, seeking the warmth of her own body amongst the cold patches of the bed.

"Love you."

"Love you too." She felt her mother's eyes sweeping across the room, her pause for reflection, then the soft footsteps to the door, the wheeze of the door handle closing and the erratic creak of the wooden stairs receding gently to the living room below.

Hoshiko felt her breathing slow, and fought her body's desire for sleep: her mind was too excited, as she remembered what she had found on the window just two days before, in the crook of the night, as the house and the forest all around lain deep and fast with sleep.

* * *

It had started with a tiny thump, then what sounded like a bag of sugar bursting, and scattering into silence.

Hoshiko had been terrified, but curious. The quiet night had stretched across her mind, but determined, she whisked back the sheets, and reached for the chair, moving it over to the high window.

She had rubbed her eyes, and dragged wisps of hair from her face. She sighed quietly, placed her hands on the inner ledge, and pulled herself onto her toes. Timidly she lifted up her eyes, and she saw a tiny object nestling in the corner of the outside ledge. It was a creature, curled against the windowframe.

"Oh!" Hoshiko caught her breath, and nearly fell from the chair. Her eyes dropped down, and for a moment, she wondered if she had willed this as a dream. She paused, and gathered her courage to look again.

Her eyes flicked open.

It was still there. Nestled against the side of the window, looking a little forlorn.

"Aww." Hoshiko reached out, overwhelmed by this curious, slumbering little being.

Carefully she arched her arms upwards and placed her hands underneath the prone form, gently scooping up the warm body, and brought it to her chest. Still standing on the chair she cradled the little figure and smiled, feeling a slight shiver beneath its shimmering skin. She stepped down carefully and looked around her dark room, wondering what to do with her new charge.

"Come on now." She spoke soothingly, trying to resist the temptation to stroke the creature.

"How about here then?" She remembered that her top drawer was only half full of socks and leggings.

"You'll be safe here."

"Yes." A voice dropped into her head, the sound of an echo without an origin, a shadow without a body.

"Oh! Did you--?" Hoshiko's eyes leapt wide.

"Yes." A low, gentle whisper, almost a chuckle, surged into her ears as the little girl stared at her cupped hands.

"I can't see your lips move." She tried to stop herself blinking.

"Of course, my sweetheart."

"Oh," she hesitated, unsure what to do.

"I am tired." The voice dropped into Hoshiko's head again.

"Shall I call my Mom?"

"No. She's the very last person you should call."

"But I don't have secrets from my mother!"

"Then you must decide whether you should trust me or not."

"But I don't know you." Hoshiko chewed her bottom lip, and looked hard at the little creature in her hand. "I--" She paused, a frown pricking at her forehead, then decided to place the creature in the drawer. She returned to her bed, eventually to fall asleep, both excited and troubled.

* * *

The next few days were full of anxieties and wonder. She checked on the creature, moving it from drawer to drawer each night, trying to avoid her mother's artful eyes.

After five days, when her mother had finished reading her story that night, and the candle was smothered, her mother closed the door and left the room in darkness as usual. This night though the familiar voice rose once more in Hoshiko's head.

"Now, I am rested. Come, there is much to do."

Hoshiko threw open her eyes and flung off her bedclothes and headed for the chest of drawers. She could see a glow trickling from the edges between the wood, and when she looked inside, she could barely see the little figure within a burst of tiny lights.

"All is not what it seems." The voice in her head spoke softly again.

The little girl put a hand to her mouth. She seemed unable to blink. She held her breath. She was not sure what to think about this creature of light.

"Bring me to the middle of the room." The voice commanded Hoshiko. "Don't worry. You won't have to do anything, as long as your mother does not come in."

"Place me at the centre of the room." Hoshiko raised her hands, the figure cradled within. "That's right. In the air, in the very centre."

The little girl lifted the tiny figure on the flat of her palm and slowly let go. The creature stayed suspended in the air, its eerie light pulsing.

"Now, you must listen carefully." the voice in the Hoshiko's head continued, "you are being held as prisoner. Your mother is not who you think she is. You have not lived here all your life. Your father did not die." The words, terrifying, shocking, were spoken kindly. The little girl began to cry.

As the creature finished, the room began to shiver into life, calling deep surges of shadow, swirling the dust from the corners of the room into a quiet storm.

"Do you know your name?"

The little girl looked through her tears, and stammered, "Hoshiko?" The shadows quivered around her legs.

"Yes, but do you know what it means?"

"I--" The little girl grimaced, her eyes fought the tears, as she tried to think.

"Have you never been told? Think hard, think back."

Hoshiko struggled, "I'm not sure," remembering something before, words spoken that she had not heard. Or were tidied away. She rattled around in her memories, and found filaments of light, buried deep.

And then, she found it, the voice, the stories, endless rainbows of stars, and she looked up at

the blistering ball of light in the centre of her room, and heard the voice of her father call her softly from her eternal past.

"Hoshiko: Little star!"

"Yes!"

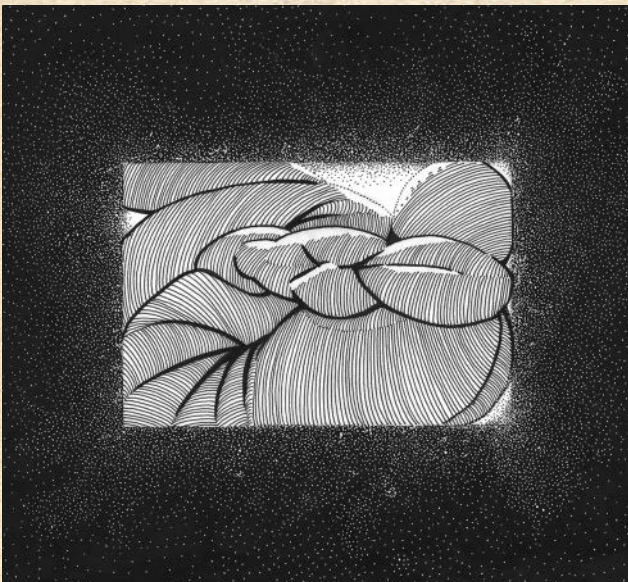
The room burst. A thousand shards of light wriggled free from the walls, the floor and the timbers of the ceiling splintered into fragments. The darkness inside the room, and the entire forest beyond shattered wide, unravelling years of deceit, and imprisonment.

And in the centre of the ever widening ball of light, now massive, the little girl spoke without lips.

"Father, you came for me!"

"Of course. Always."

And the little star, with her father, shot into the heavens, two comets flaming through the dark skies, hurtling towards the meadows of light beyond; and below, an angry figure, a misshapen, hideous beast, shook its fists and raged at the dying light of the disappearing stars.



The creature woke, surround by dead bodies. Shocked and disgusted it heard a lonely call for help...

ECHOES | BYTES

As the sun licked across his rough, pocked-marked face, Tor, slumbering amongst the roots of the ancient copse, stirred. The emerging light spread warmth through his creaking veins and he tried to lift an arm. Something heavy lay on top of it. As he yanked it free he grunted and realised his mouth was smeared and fetid. And in the air around, the stench was intolerable. He spat, and coughed. Then remembered something of the night before.

"Ah, why can't I control myself!" He slapped the tree. Leaves trembled, flecks of dust and dirt shuddered from the branches and scattered around the hollow that had held Tor's sleeping form during the hours of darkness. Sighing, Tor watched the passage of the aimless motes, his eyes traveling down the length of the tree until they fell upon the other bodies lying amongst the tangled roots. Tor put his hand to his mouth. Fourteen of them, each mangled into a variety of contortions, limbs bent into unlikely positions, horns shattered, hands either missing or truncated.

Tor bent over and retched. Tiny pieces of flesh, and red, wriggling lumps slithered onto the ground, slipping into earthy crevices, their foul aroma adding to his general discomfort. The lumps seemed to take on a life of their own, which disgusted Tor further; he lifted his head and drove his horns into the ground, crushing the pulpy masses, splitting them. He watched the dark juices ooze inelegantly.

Tor breathed deeply, trying to take control of himself. He looked up again, and his eyes glanced through the gap in the trees, further into the copse. There were more bodies, discarded and folded over every root and stone.

"I don't remember all that!" He scratched his chest, noticing the dried blood on the broken nails. "Not sure what I do remember." He stepped over the nearest body and peered behind the tree. The dense foliage beyond was still gripped by the darkness, but it was clear that the whole floor of this area of woodland was covered in bodies.

"Uh." Somewhere he heard a moan. He turned swiftly, narrowed his eyes and crouched. The sound came from outside the copse, towards the slow, painful, rise of the sun. He shielded his eyes and tried to see beyond, to the stretch of land that lay between him and the distant hills. But the sun was too bright. He decided to ignore the moan. Perhaps it was just one of the trees, or the wind passing through.

He had just managed to calm himself, when he heard the moan again. This time it was a little closer. So he stepped back and tried to hide himself behind the nearest tree. But his horns tangled with the branches and rattled at the wood.

The moan stopped, mid-sound, it's owner suddenly aware of a presence, if not its location. Tor closed his eyes, he felt sick again. He took another step back but this time stepped on a twig, which snapped. "Oh come on!" He hissed in frustration at himself. He shook his head and stepped out of the shade, his foot striking out beyond the wooded copse. It squelched. His foot felt wet, and uncomfortable. He looked down. He had stood in the stomach of another body. And to its right was another prone form, this one face down but it was next to a further body whose head was all but severed.

"Oh God." Tor placed his palms across his face and tried to hide the tears that squeezed from his eyes, slipped across his cheeks and queued to fall from his chin. For a moment he stood there, feeling foolish, with the sun hauling itself up slowly from afar, warming his hands, he allowed himself to look through the gaps between his fingers. What he saw horrified him.

"Who could have done this?" He allowed his arms to drop by his side. In front of him, in the valley and the plains that sought across to the hills of the horizon, was a sea of death. Bodies piled on top of bodies, a charnel pit of flaccid flesh and broken limbs, rib cages thrust into the air, skin and muscle fluttering, gored.

And then he heard the voice again. This time it simpered.

"No, oh no!"

Tor was puzzled, through the sight of his disgusted eyes he began to see a pile of bodies, just to the left of the copse. Where everything else on view across the entire landscape was either silent or still, this pile of death shivered, then rocked. Tor looked on, apprehensively, as the pile shook again to reveal a bloodied figure pushing through the corpses, emerging from a frothing, oozing gap.

Tor moved across to put out his hand.

"No, no," the figure's filmy eyes popped and lolled, then widened with fear. Both it's horns were broken, and, as it clambered out of the wallowing hole its Boney spine, spikes protruding fiercely, was clearly broken. The creature's gait was awkward, and angular, as though walking backwards through a narrow tunnel.

"Let me help you!" Tor moved forward again, his hand reaching out, but the creature shuffled back, scrambling up the bodies behind it.

"NO!" It's voice came to an abrupt end, as the creature fell backwards onto the splintered, exposed ribs of another wretched body. The voice died in a babbling blackness. Tor let his hand drop to his side. He looked out to see if anything else moved, but apart from the slowly shortening shadows the piles of bodies lay inert, a few trees behind him shedding leaves and dust still, as a faint

breeze picked at their branches, and dabbled with the rotting flesh all around.

He looked at his hands, saw the smears of blood, the streaks of dirt and death across his arms. He seemed strangely satisfied to be the only remaining creature on this landscape, as though a part of him had started to act independently of his conscious mind.

Suddenly, he felt what seemed to be a huge fist smash into his back. It shoved him forward, but he managed to stop himself falling. He shook his head, he couldn't breathe, and tried to turn, but the force of the blow had shocked his body and he couldn't even twist. But behind him he heard a fluttering and spinning. The air exploded with tiny buzzing sounds and whirls, and he found his body was collapsing, folding in on itself, his skin shrivelling as the bones and muscle seemed to disintegrate. He screamed in pain and confusion.

As the remnants of himself fell to the floor, his empty limbs, his unravelled skin folding onto the body-strewn plain, his brain and eyeballs were the last to function. He saw a huge cluster of tiny spores blooming out from behind him, spinning and expanding; they scattered into a storm of colour and fell upon the bodies all around, devouring every particle in their path.

Tor's last memory was his first, accessed in these final moments. He remembered his full name, Terraform Unit 101, and remembered lying down in a lab, with the container of terra-bytes inserted into his back, primed for activation when he had destroyed all living creatures on the planet, preparing the way for the new settlement of species. The demon experiment had reached an end.

His synthetic cranium shattered, his eyeballs rolled out, and within seconds the terraforming spores consumed the host unit that had incubated them for centuries.

The gasman, a reluctant family man on a late emergency call, is surprised by the welcome he receives at the shop at the end of the alley.

ECHOES | MASKS

The row of fourteen grim faces seemed to float in the dark shadows just below the beams, under the stairs. The gasman had been called to fix the leak and had been heaving at the inlet valve when the lights flickered, dimmed and finally extinguished. He remembered the call he'd made to his wife, earlier that evening.

"Just one more call to make."

"Wilbur dear, you're not getting any younger. I know you think you're superman, but you can't go on all day and all night." Her warm, loving tones purred from his phone.

"Come on sweetheart," he sighed in the face of this familiar argument, "I'm not going to be all night, just this last job."

"Ah, but we both know what that means. Your jobs can last five minutes or five hours." His wife sounded regretful, resigned even. Did she know he slipped away sometimes to have a quiet drink before returning home, he wondered? He loved his wife, and his five children, but he was so tired at the end of the day he found the noise at his arrival, too much to bear. Every day.

He took every job they offered him, even the late ones, especially the late ones. Although he was tired, and near to retirement age he was still one of the strongest of the gas fitters, certainly the most experienced. All the younger fellows clocked-watched and rushed home to their young partners, grateful that Wilbur would always pick up the emergency jobs, the ones that arrived at the last minute and required a volunteer to take them. Fondly he remembered watching the time himself,

checking off every minute until the end of the shift, but now the weary years of children, the clatter expectation, and love was almost too much to bear. Perhaps they had been wrong to have children so late.

Of course, he felt guilty, and berated himself for being disloyal. As he trudged down the alleyway to his last appointment, the lamplight casting longing glances at the full moon peaking over the high tenement walls he remembered, the arrival of the first of his exhausting five children.

Up to then Wilbur and Wilma had been the dynamic dubya, the WW, the wonder woman and her Wide-eyed Wonder, the heartbeat of every late night party, dancing and laughing, having a good time, the toast of the friends, the envy of their neighbours. That all changed with the children. And he did love them, he told himself, time and time again, to keep the perspective, to remember what a joy and blessing they were, and when he read to them, or hugged them, he always felt the warm glow of parenthood, as it should be, as it was written in all the manuals and magazines he and Wilma had read in the months before their first child had graced their home, before burning steadily through their bank account.

Indeed, he began to take more jobs, working late to earn the overtime to pay for the clothes and the packed lunches, the school trips and the birthdays. Wilma understood the need, and would have been pleased to earn herself, as she had before, a teacher in the local school. But the cost of childcare, and the niggling accusations of neglect kept her at home.

He didn't resent this family that needed its father, but he saw it for what he thought it was, a succubus, feeding off the energies of his life, draining him to a husk, his brain crumpled like fragile, burnt ball of paper in the moment before it would expire in the exhaustion of its years.

And oh, they were very noisy. With the five of them he no longer had a little room of his own into which he could retire at the end of his day, just for a short half an hour of peace, a bridge into the relentlessness of being the father and the provider. Now the room had gone, with the fourth child, lilit, shoving him from his sanctum, like a cuckoo in the nest.

So, with these thoughts hurtling, as ever, in his head, he approached the shop at the end of the lane. It was early December with only the promise of snow, but the creep of early nights brought Christmas ever nearer. The alley seemed to narrow as he had approached the shop. When he looked back the walls behind him were unfeasible high, peering down on him, accusing him of neglect, they seemed to question his motives for taking this last job, on this day. He shrugged, turning his attention to the nondescript door in front of him.

He laid down his heavy bag of tools, then, using the ornate brass knocker tapped on the solid wooden portal. There was no immediate answer. He waited for a moment, wondering, as always, how long it was respectable to walk away in such a situation. His usual answer was to count to forty. There was no logic to it, but thirty was the number he employed for his press-ups when he was younger, and fifty seemed too long to be standing outside someone's house without raising suspicion.

He had just decided to turn and leave when the door opened cautiously.

"Ah, the gasman. I've been so looking forward to seeing you." That was an unusual welcome. Most people complained about how long they had to wait, or moaned about the problem that had prompted the need for the gasman.

"Yes. may I come in? This is my last call, and I'm hoping it won't take too long.

"Oh, me too!" The old man entangled his bony fingers, disconcerting Wilbur who felt the old man's eye linger on his face, a little longer than was comfortable.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Well, as usual, as soon as the Winter comes, I turn on the boiler and does it work? Of course not." The old man looked up at Wilbur with a kindly, expectant expression. "I have an important customer whose coming to my shop tonight, so I'm hoping you can help me quickly. I mustn't let him down."

"I see. Perhaps you could show me to the boiler, then?"

"Of course." They walked through the house. On every wall, there were garish costumes, and posters, outlandish paintings and sculptures, stuffed goats and rats."

"I run the joke shop, in case you're wondering." The old man gave such a look to Wilbur that it made him shiver with need to escape. "The customer I must meet tonight has a very particular requirement, so I hope you can solve my problem."

"Uhuh." Over the many years of repairing and maintaining the gas appliances Wilbur had visited many strange homes.

"It's here." The old man gestured to the door under the stairs.

"Of course." Wilbur sighed. "I could have guessed that."

"I don't think it will take too long." The old man smiled; it was almost a rictus.

Wilbur opened the door and saw immediately the gas connections snaking across the walls.

"Look, I'll need to turn this off before I check the boiler." He regarded at the old man and received a nod in return. In the tight space below the stairs he bent down and tried to find two of the most obvious wrenches for this sort of job. The door closed quietly, without him noticing, but he did see the masks hanging above his head, their phosphorescent pallor glowing subtly. Unconsciously he found himself count them. All fourteen were grim, their dark sockets awaiting human eyes to fulfill their purpose.

Then the lights cut out.

Wilbur looked up and saw the masks still illuminated eerily. He slipped, fell and crashed his head against the gas pipe behind him, knocking himself out.

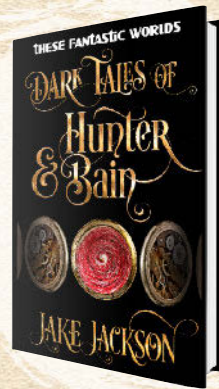
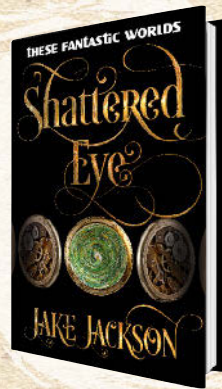
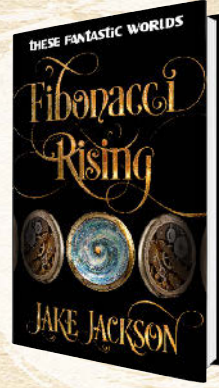
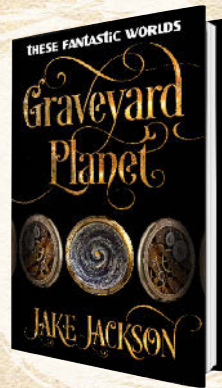
The door opened swiftly. The old man appeared with a knife, and kneeling down, he held it to Wilbur's face.

"My customer needs fifteen masks. I think you can help me!"



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