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Opening extract from
Dance of the Dark Heart

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recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
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Jack Orion was as good a fiddler
As ever fiddled on a string
And he could make young women mad
With the tune his wires would sing

Jack Orion (Trad.)

‘ . . . it makes my heart die to think what fortune I
have that I cannot be always in your company.’

*Letter to Thomas Culpeper from
Katherine Howard, Queen of England, Spring 1541*

I

There had been omens. Bad ones. A blood-coloured ring around the moon. Crows on the woodpile, watching the shack. A tree that fell without being axed, keeling over in its prime, like a man with a curse on him.

Old Scratch noted these occurrences—the moon, the crows, the tree—but kept his own counsel. For one thing, he had no one to tell. For another, nature had sent him trouble enough, that winter, without him seeing more of it wherever he happened to look.

The snow had come early, blanketing the land on All Souls' Eve and re-covering it at regular intervals, up to and beyond the Solstice. Old Scratch had never known such a persistent piling up of the stuff. Day in, day out it came, with drifts touching what passed for his roof and no respite, not even on melt days, because the melting only went so far before the sky turned goosey-grey again and down came another load, white upon white upon white.

Old Scratch was sick of the sight of so much white. It pained his eyes. It gave him bad dreams in which he went wading, thigh-deep, through rivers of milk,

or unravelled a shroud, layer after bone-white layer, terrified of who, or what, he might uncover.

Even his goats were white, the lumpen things, and getting to them—keeping a path clear, from his shack to theirs—was griping his back and doing little to improve a temper that had never been all that sunny.

Although not yet ancient, or even especially old, years of scraping along with no one to share a sup of ale with, or a cuddle, or a laugh, had taken their toll on Scratch. He was as dry as a stick. As reclusive as a snail. And extreme weather conditions jangled him, the way extreme emotions might have done, had he ever been exposed to any.

When the knock came, at what passed for his door, his heart leapt so high, and banged so fast that he put a hand to his chest and pressed it there, as if to keep things in.

It was late afternoon, January twelfth, the sky and the snow such a similar shade of nothing-at-all that the world beyond the shack seemed to be in limbo, with no up or down to it and no way in or out.

There had been a melt that day, but not enough—nowhere near enough, Old Scratch was certain—to allow for easy walking, and only a fool would have risked laming a horse along lanes as slippery as glass.

‘Who’s there?’ His voice sounded odd, so he cleared his throat and tried again. It had been three moons, at least, he realized, since he had spoken to another living soul.

‘Is it you, young Frizzle Face? Is it?’

No answer came, but then it wouldn’t.

‘Bang thrice more if it be thee. Four times if you have something I’d like and would fain come in.’

Silence.

Old Scratch scowled and scratched at his rags.

‘Bothersome boy,’ he muttered, lurching the few steps to where his door sagged against an impediment of logs. ‘Tiresome little whelp.’

But his mouth watered as he began tossing aside the logs, for the boy from the monastery (who else would it be?) might have brought him an egg. Two eggs if he was lucky. Already, with another dozen or so logs still to be shifted, Old Scratch was imagining those eggs, cracked into a dish, the yolks as bright as slipping suns, the colour as welcome to him as nourishment.

‘Trust you, Frizzle. Trust you to show up when I’m finished for the day, and barricaded in . . . Just like a monkery-boy to pay a call on Old Scratch when it suits the tolling of his own bell, and never mind the . . . *Sprites and fires!*’

The door fell in. Old Scratch would have caught it, normally. But this . . . these . . . what he saw . . . took him so much by surprise that he allowed the door to land, with one almighty bang, dislodging the displaced logs, and sending them tumbling, wood upon wood upon wood.

‘What in the name of all the . . . ?’