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Opening extract from

Dishonour Among Thieves

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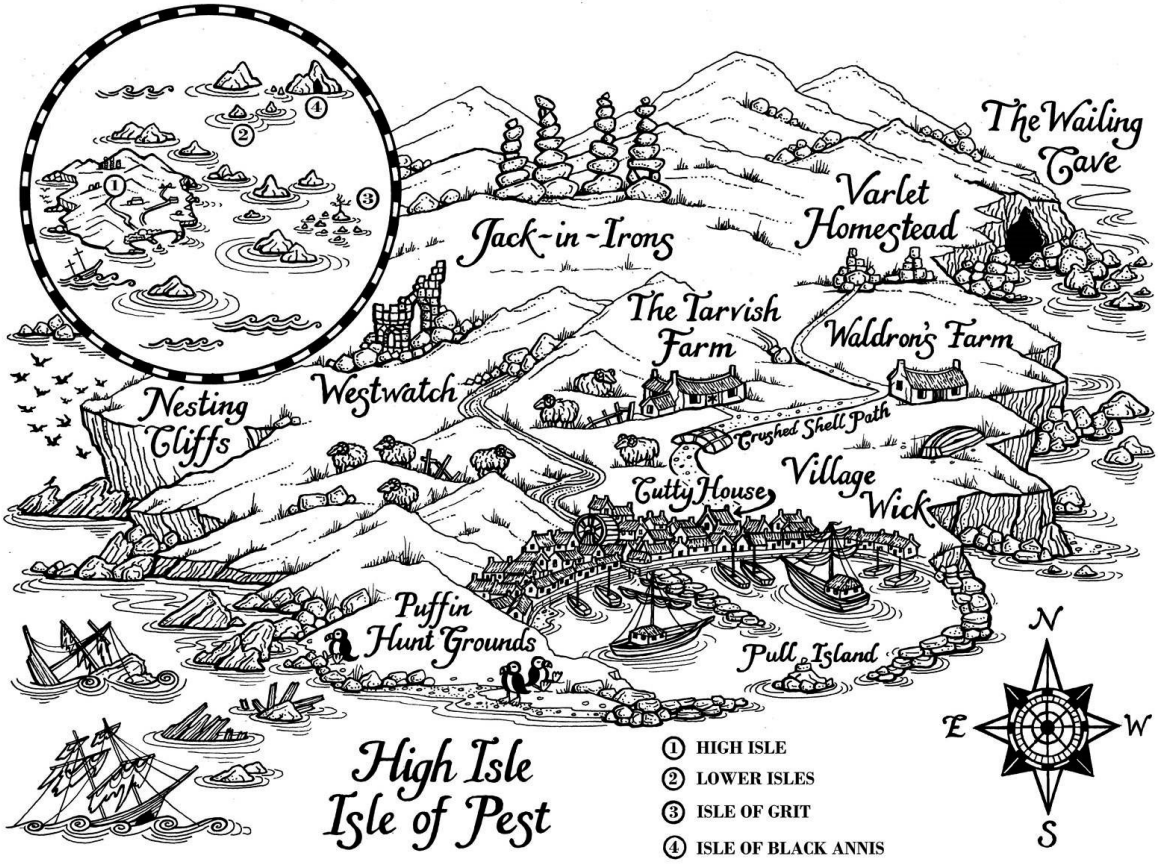
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④ ISLE OF BLACK ANNIS

A SHANTY ABOUT BARGAINS...

Come all would-be heroes and join me in song,
And curse the dread outlaws plagued this Isle for so long.
So take heed my warning, of no favours ask,
Beware the dread outlaws in shadows and masks.
In shadows and masks, in shadows and masks,
Beware the dread outlaws
In shadows and masks.
Our troubles were many, our hopes they were slim.
A dark stranger arrived, he packed promise with him.
On the greyest of nights a bargain was struck,
What then seemed good fortune turned black ugly luck.
In shadows and masks, in shadows and masks,
Beware the dread strangers
In shadows and masks.

They'll promise you freedom and all that you dream,
But look past their guise, they're not what they seem.
Your sons and your daughters, in bed safely tuck,
Hold tight what you cherish for that they shall pluck.
In shadows and masks, in shadows and masks,
Beware the dread scoundrels
In shadows and masks.
My son he now stalks the dark b'yond the sea,
Family forgotten, but what matters to he?
So take heed my warning, of no favours ask,
And curse the Luck Uglies in shadows and masks.
In shadows and masks, in shadows and masks,
Curse the Luck Uglies
In shadows and masks.

– 'Shadows and Masks',
From *Songs of Salt and Stout*
and other High Isle Favourites



ONLY TROUBLE KNOCKS AFTER DARK

It wasn't often that anyone thumped the cottage's rusting iron door knocker after dark, but Rye O'Chanter still never expected to find three twisted, leering faces on the other side. They loomed down at her from behind flurrying snow. Rye knew *what* the masked figures were, if not *who* they were, so perhaps there was no need for alarm. Then again, Luck Uglies had never just shown up on her doorstep before. She took a careful step backward.

Abby O'Chanter joined her, a cloak flung over her nightdress. She'd already untied her hair ribbon for the night and her dark locks fell loose past her shoulders. In her arms she held the family pet, a regal beast with thick black fur and keen yellow eyes. He was as big as a young

child, and as he stretched his long forelegs, he extended sickle-like claws for the benefit of the visitors. Shady could be a ferocious guardian when motivated, which wasn't all that often. Abby combed his luxurious mane with her fingertips and raised an uninviting eyebrow. Rye's mother had never been one to spook easily.

"What is it?" she demanded of the visitors.

The tallest of the three ducked his head under the fresh evergreen garland strung along the doorframe. Shady let out an unexpected rumble from deep inside his throat, the kind he generally reserved for unwelcome denizens of the bogs. Rye saw her mother slip her fingers around his runestone collar in case he decided to misbehave.

The masked figure hesitated, then opted to lean forward without stepping inside. The gnarled leather of a long, beakish nose jutted from under his cowl, so close to Abby's ear it seemed it might jab her. Under Shady's careful watch, the man whispered something that sounded like the rustle of dead leaves. He cocked his head as he spoke, and the mask's hollow black eyes met Rye's own.

The figure leaned back and snow once again settled on to his cloaked shoulders.