



MASTERS of WAR



AND I HOPE THAT YOU DIE AND YOUR DEATH WILL COME SOON

I'll follow your casket by the pale afternoon
And I'll watch while you're lowered down to your deathbed
And I'll stand over your grave 'til I'm sure that you're dead

Bob Dylan

On a January morning in 871, the armies of Wessex confront the invading Vikings. The young King Ethelred has been defeated previously because the Vikings have a champion against whom no-one can stand - a giant known as Longshanks. Ethelred believes his God will drive the heathens from the Old Shires while his younger brother, Alfred, places more trust in steel than in prayers. As the pious Ethelred kneels to hear Mass in his camp, the impetuous Alfred leads his troops on a dawn assault. The battle of Ashdown begins overcoming problems as the combat and imagined violence that dominate most RPGs.

THE CONUNDRUM

Briar Knights encounter a series of visions set in a winter landscape. Briar Knights from Age I will dream these visions rather than enter the Hedgerow.

AGE: Swords

NEMESIS: Raven Margrave

FIELD: a Battlefield

You cross a wintry battlefield. Ravens peck at the eyes of fallen warriors in mail armour, some Saxons, some Vikings, all covered in snow blotched with red blood.

COGNIZANCE: an Emissary of the Dark

In the midst of the battlefield stands a Viking in a masked helm, with runes on his skin and ravens perched on his shoulders. He challenges and defeats all comers (although no one dies or loses Resolve in the Hedgerow).

ARMIGER: a ruler - or an Old God

Fleeing the terrible warrior, you encounter a prince in bright mail lying wounded on a pile of bodies. Ravens attack his eyes and pluck one out.

SINISTER: Hag

The raven carries the eyeball to a cackling Hag who drops it in her cauldron.

BAN: do not perform Gleans

"No more songs", the Hag shrieks. "Let there be no more songs to sweeten the winter wind."

BLAZON: a tree

Looking up, you see, looming over the fallen prince, a crooked blackthorn tree with white blossom on one frail branch.

THE CONUNDRUM EXPLAINED

Travel to the Age of Swords and confront the Raven Margrave in a battlefield. An Emissary of the Margrave must be defeated or redeemed. Seek out a prince - or perhaps the one-eyed Old God known as Grimm. Beware the sorceries of a Hag or Witch. Do not perform Gleans. A blackthorn tree is a Mythic Site that might help.

The Briar Knights emerge from the Hedgerow on a hilltop with a blackthorn, albeit not in bloom (the Naked Thorn). It is the dark of pre-dawn. On a ridge above stands a Viking army, its campfires glowing. Advancing from the other direction is the army of Wessex with its dragon banners. The Briar Knights are caught between the armies.

Roll for Gear, Spells, and Resolve. Determine the starting size of the Nemesis Die. PCs who are native to Age I may choose to start the scenario at the Wessex camp or the Viking camp up on the ridge.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ADVENTURE

This adventure has a freeform structure, made up of encounters based on drawing Taroc Cards. If you use a Major Arcana Tarot deck, remove cards 20 and 21 and treat 0 as 20. Alternatively, take a normal deck of cards and shuffle together Diamonds Ace-10 (representing the numbers 1-10) and Clubs Ace-10 (representing 11-20). For visual flavour, substitute the Queen of Hearts for #3, the King of Diamonds for #4, a Joker for #5, and the Jack of Clubs for #12.

Set aside cards #2, #3, #4, #5, #11, #13, #15, and #16. From the remaining cards, create a face-down 'Adventure Deck' made up of cards drawn at random equal to twice the number of PCs, then shuffle back in cards #3, #4, and #13 (the mandatory encounters); finally place card #5 at the bottom of this Adventure Deck - this card is the climax of the scenario.

Each card in the Adventure Deck reveals an encounter or vignette from the story; these are described below. The cards that have been set aside reveal encounters that take place at the Wessex Camp [#11, #16] or the Viking Camp [#2, #15] that don't need to occur during the adventure.

MOVING AROUND THE BATTLEFIELD

Draw the top card of the Adventure Deck to reveal the current encounter. At the end of an encounter, make a Nemesis Check, then draw the next card. Between encounters, narrate the blinding sleet or snow that lifts to reveal battles and skirmishes taking place across the length of the hillside. Usually, half an hour passes between encounters, but some encounters describe other scenes that can be accessed nearby – for example, encounter #13 is next to encounters #9 and #12. If the PCs go to investigate a nearby encounter, go through the Adventure Deck and remove it (or leave it in, but when it is drawn later, set it aside and draw again).

PCs might decide to enter the Wessex or Viking camp. If they do, draw cards #11 or #16 (Wessex) or #2 or #15 (Viking) that had been set aside instead of drawing from the Adventure Deck. Once the PCs return to the battlefield, go back to drawing from the Adventure Deck as usual.

The WESSEX CAMP is lit by torches and guarded by a shieldwall of Saxons waiting to be given the order to attack. Entering the camp openly requires Fay PCs to make Glamour Checks (d8; d12 against ABBOT CHILDERIC). KING ETHELRED's tent [#16] is distinguished by a red banner with the Golden Dragon of Wessex.

Up on the ridgeway, the VIKING CAMP is deserted except for terrified slaves and the priests of the Raven God carrying out their sacrifices [#15]. It is easy for PCs to enter and sneak about. NANA THE HAG [#2] brews potions in her tent of human skins.

SPECIAL RULES FOR RESPITES AND NEMESIS CHECKS

Briar Knights cannot take Respites except at the encounters that specially permit this [#1, #5, #7, #10, and #17].

While the Nemesis Die is Nd6 or smaller, a Malignity arrives. Once it is Nd8 or higher, Longshanks attacks again (use the #4, whether his card has already been drawn or not).



#1 – THE MAGUS – THE CHESS GAME

The Viking king Bacseg is guarded by six knights; he plays Norse chess (*hnefatafl*), with pieces representing the troops on the battlefield. He is poised to capture the White King but hesitates. He has dreamed that it is his wyrd (fate) to die today. His ferocity has given way to gentle resignation.

This dream has granted Bacseg the Sight. He welcomes Briar Knights and offers an Oath:

*Swear that you shall find my daughter Freydis [#3],
who has gone into battle, and bring me news that she lives.*

If PCs return to Bacseg (make a Nemesis Check) after Freydis has found Sidroc, they find his camp overrun and the king dying. As well as the normal reward, he bestows a Treasure:

NORN CHESS SET: This walrus ivory chess set confers its d8 Doom Die to making Schemes. Its Virtue is to Soak all Peril during one Threat Level for the owner's side in any large battle.

If the PCs confront Bacseg in other ways: Scope 4 TL 2 Pd8, *Armoured, Deadly, Tactical*. Ignore *Deadly* and shrink the Peril if the PCs try to escape or negotiate.

#2 – THE WITCH – THE HAG MOTHER

[VIKING CAMP] Nana is a *völva* (heathen priestess), but now the camp is emptied she has taken her true form – a decrepit Hag. She prowls the camp and if she detects Briar Knights with the Sight [d12], she greets them as old friends. She boasts of LONGSHANKS (*“my beautiful boy, so tall, so fierce”*) and that she has secured oaths from everything – from the snow in winter to the blossom in spring – to cause no harm to her boy.

Rather than combat, Nana demands a riddle. If posed Alfred's riddle [#17], she solves it in this way:

*They lie the future, when Völundr's cunning craftwork is revealed,
when a girl and boy fall in love: that is the greatest lie of all.*

She has her own riddle:

*What guest brings joy when heralded
Pains as he approaches
Pains when he arrives
But the greatest pain is when he leaves
The hearth is cold where he once delighted me.*

The answer is “a Mother's Son” (or “Longshanks” or simply “a child”). If PCs cannot answer this, Nana will devour them (treat as a d12 Defeat). Otherwise, she lets them go, saying, “Greet my darling boy in my name”.

#3 – THE WARRIOR QUEEN – THE SHIELD MAIDEN

[MANDATORY ENCOUNTER] Freydis is a Viking princess but she has rejected womanly arts to become a shield maiden. She is broad shouldered and strong-jawed and can fight (and curse) as well as any man. She searches the battlefield for her lover SIDROC since they were separated by the Saxon assault. She offers an Oath:

*Swear you will go with me to seek my love and stay with me till I am beside him again,
in life or death.*

Freydis is a d6 Ally (*fierce shield maiden searching the battlefield*). If an Oath-bound PC encounters the Field of Bones [#13], then they discover Sidroc nearby [#9].

If PCs confront Freydis in other ways: TL 1, Pd6, *Armoured, Deadly*.

#4 – THE ONE-EYED KING – THE EMISSARY OF THE DARK

[MANDATORY ENCOUNTER] Longshanks is the Viking champion, a giant who fights naked, his body painted in runes. He wields a sword and wears a masked helmet. He is attended everywhere by a MALIGNITY (hence the *Alarm/Blind Hazards*).

Longshanks cannot be defeated in battle, so any successful Challenge against him involves escaping, tricking, or temporarily trapping him; in the final encounter a success means he is temporarily stunned. PCs defeated by him are Stricken (d10) – or optionally Vanquished (d12) in the final encounter [#5]. Unlike the other encounters, Longshanks can be encountered several times due to Nemesis Checks. A second encounter with Longshanks will be cut short after the first Threat Level by the arrival of PRINCE ALFRED and his troops: they drive the giant away, but Alfred is wounded; encounter #17 follows next if it has not already occurred.

If Briar Knights greet Longshanks in his mother's name [#2], he will spare them on one occasion – at the climax, this means he does not roll his Peril Die during one Threat.

TL 3, Pd10, *Alarm, Armoured, Deadly, Injury + Blind, Tactical, Warded*; ignore *Armoured/Deadly/Injury + Blind* and shrink the Peril Die to d8 if PCs use trickery or flee/hide.

#5 – THE DRUID – NAKED THORN HILL

[FINAL ENCOUNTER] The PCs return to the Naked Thorn Hill. If ALFRED has been encountered already [#4 or #17], he is here, wounded, guarded by his surviving knights and BISHOP HEMUND [#14]. The PCs may take a Respite here but, whether they do or not, everyone on the hill will be encircled by the Viking army [#8]. LONGSHANKS [#4] arrives for the final showdown.

The site may be Awakened by a Glee of Pentacles, by the Aestel of Alfred [#17], or by invoking Grimm's Blessing [#12]: the blackthorn bears winter blossom.

Move straight to this scene if the Nemesis Die advances past Nd12.

Alfred's guards are a d8 Ally against Longshanks, as is Bishop Hemund. During the second Threat, Ethelred's reinforcements arrive, acting as a d10 Ally.

If the Blackthorn Blossom is plucked, it confers a d12 Die against Longshanks. Pierced by the thorn, Longshanks collapses and the Challenge ends immediately.

Proceed to the EPILOGUE.

#6 – THE LOVERS – THE SHIELDWALL

A line of Saxons advances. They invite Martial PCs to join them: make Outcome Checks against Pd8 to do so (Pd6 if not Martial) and lose Resolve equal to the difference on a failure. PCs who accompany them for a while learn their battle song is the Elder Lore of Pentacles:

Hige sceal the heardra, [Thought shall be the harder]
heorte the cenre, [Hearts the keener]
mod sceal the mare, [Spirit shall be more]
the ure maegen lytlath [Even as our might lessens]

If PCs confront the Saxons, the Challenge is Scope 4, TL 2, Pd8, *Armoured, Overwhelming*. No Nemesis Check is made at the end of this if the PCs march with the Saxons.

#7 – THE WAGON – BEHIND THE LINES

A wagon contains supplies for the Viking army. It is lightly guarded but the guards can be overcome, evaded, or negotiated with: Scope 2, TL 1, Pd8, *Armoured*. PCs can fill their inventories with appropriate gear and may take a Respite here.

#8 – STRENGTH – THE VIKING ADVANCE

The Viking shield wall advances towards the PCs, who must fight, fool, or evade them: Scope 4, TL 2, Pd8, *Armoured*, *Overwhelming*.

#9 – THE HERMIT – THE DESPERATE VIKING

A voice cries for help. A warrior lies impaled on stakes, bleeding to death. This is Sidroc, son of a Viking lord. He has been mortally wounded by a fall and dreads this dishonourable death; he offers an Oath:

*Help me stand and raise my sword, then slay me with your weapon,
that I might die a warrior's death.*

If FREYDIS [#3] is present, she will insist on being Sidroc's slayer. Doing so, she declares:

*Death is a fate far better than life
Greater than fate, greater than love,
I name you Sidroc Heartbreaker now
For you have proved love greater than death.*

This is Elder Lore of Swords. Freydis keeps vigil by Sidroc's corpse for the rest of the adventure. The Lore can be used to solve Grimm's riddle [#12].

#10 – FORTUNE – UNLIKELY STABLEMATES

Respite is possible in a ruined cottage if the PCs make peace with a group of rd4+1 Vikings also sheltering there (TL 0, Pd8, *Armoured*, *Tactics*, shrink Peril Die and ignore *Tactics* if PCs offer to share food, drink, or healing). Vikings will teach a fragment of *Völuspá* (Elder Lore of Pentacles).

#11 – JUSTICE – THE INQUISITOR

[WESSEX CAMP] Abbot Childeric the Inquisitor and his monks scour the camp for spies and heathens. Childeric is a Frankish monk who is King Ethelred's counsellor. He is a bigoted Inquisitor of the Witch-Harrow who searches for heathen spies and their demonic allies.

Accompanied by two burly monks, he interrogates strangers using the Sight (d8). If he captures Briar Knights, he will imprison them (Defeat d6) in Gold Iron chains: Scope 2, TL 3, Pd8, *Cold Iron*, *Tactical*, *Sight*, *Sorcery* (Holy Word stuns Fays, makes mortals kneel, no soak allowed against next TL for those who lose Resolve).

#12 – THE GIBBET – THE OLD GOD

Grimm is a pathetic figure, naked and scrawny under his filthy robe and hood, scurrying among the corpses, collecting teeth and eyes. Posing or solving a riddle will bring him to sense.

If set Alfred's riddle [#17], he answers:

*In the body of a king, who crafts a kingdom, and tempers its forging with war,
for the greatest king is the greatest of smiths: that is where the bones of Wayland lie.*

Grimm has his own riddle for the Briar Knights:

*I consume myself yet am not consumed
I alter not when alteration I discover
I am a fire that cannot be extinguished
I cross battlefields to seek my cold kindling*

The answer is “the love of a woman for a man” (as Freydis will answer immediately, if she is present) but “Freydis” or simply “Love” will suffice. If the players cannot solve it, try a Check vs Pd8 (Grimm is not at full power).

If the riddle is answered, Grimm blinks with surprise: “*Love, you say? Yes, I suppose that must be the answer.*” He stands straight, regaining some of his majesty, and offers his Divine Oath:

Swear to me that, when I return demanding a gift, you will grant it.

If any Briar Knight so swears, Grimm reveals:

*The Old Hag has made all things swear to do no harm to her warrior son, from the ice in winter to the blossom in spring. But what of the thorn that blossoms in winter?
Aye, that might prick his tender flesh and lay the warrior low.*

If the Oath-bound PCs return to NAKED THORN HILL [#5], they can call on Grimm's Blessing to awaken the Mythic Site.

#13 – THE REAPER – THE FIELD OF BONES

[MANDATORY ENCOUNTER] The battle has swept over this field, leaving it full of corpses. PCs can plunder armour and weapons but there are so many dead eyes through which the Raven Margrave scries that the Nemesis Die automatically advances. A MALIGNITY of crows feasts here: Scope 2, TL 1, Pd6, *Alarm/ Blind, Evasive, Overwhelming*. From here, PCs proceed to encounter #9 or #12 without drawing a card.

#14 – PATIENCE – ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIER

BISHOP HEMUND directs a troop of Saxon thanes: Scope 3 (or 1 if alone), TL 1, Pd8, *Armoured, Cold Iron, Tactical 1, Entrap*. Hemund is Alfred's friend and counsellor – and a warrior as well as a priest. He will be encountered reciting the 23rd Psalm while delightedly slaughtering Vikings. Here it is in Old English:

Drihten me raet (The Lord rules me – WHALLOP!!!)

Ne byth me nanes godes wan (Nor do I want for any good thing – STAB!!!)

And he me geset on swythe good feohland (And He settles me in right good pastures – BATTER!!!)

And fedde me be waetera stathum (And leads me to the water's shore – CRUNCH!!!)

Hemund's performance is Elder Lore of Swords.

He will offer Briar Knights an Oath to rouse KING ETHELRED [#16]:

Return to our camp and rouse Ethelred from his knees; tell him spears not prayers are needed here, unless he is determined to exchange his earthly kingdom for a heavenly one!

Hemund is an engagingly down-to-earth Bishop with a love of violence. He will be present at NAKED THORN HILL [#5].

#15 – THE FIEND – SACRIFICES TO THE DARK

[VIKING CAMP] Cultists of the Raven God sacrifice Saxon prisoners to the Dark by hanging them then impaling them with spears. The Nemesis advances if the PCs do not prevent this: Scope 2, TL 1, Pd6, *Alert then Entrap, Warded*.

#16 – THE TOWER – THE KING AT PRAYER

[WESSEX CAMP] King Athelred is praying in his tent while priests say Mass. Entering the tent requires only a d6 Check – unless ABBOT CHILDERIC is present (combine with #11 for a more challenging scene). Persuading the King to lead the assault is TL 1, Pd4, *Cold Iron, Entrap*.

King Ethelred is a severe man, only a couple of years older than Alfred, but aged by cares. He believes ALFRED has gone to his death and only a miracle can defeat the Vikings. He needs to be shaken from his melancholy: tales of Alfred's heroism can do this, or a Glee of heroism (Swords) or leadership (Wands). If stirred, he rallies his troops and marches to join Alfred in battle: retreat the Nemesis Die if this happens.

#17 – THE STAR – THE PRINCE OF THE LIGHT

Prince ALFRED leads a group of Saxon thanes: Scope 3, TL 1, Pd8, *Armoured, Tactical 1*. He has made a camp, waiting for the snow to lift, and will offer a Free Respite for allies.

Younger brother of King Ethelred, Alfred is impetuous but charismatic and astute. He possesses the Sight and automatically identifies Briar Knights. He will be respectful, asking them his riddle:

Where do the bones of Wayland lie?

The riddle has no fixed answer, since Wayland is an Old God of smith work and craft, but Alfred will reward describing a barrow mound, the field of corpses [#13], a working smithy, any work of craftsmanship or beauty, or the answers offered by NANA [#2] or GRIMM [#12]. The reward is a Treasure:

THE AESTEL OF ALFRED: A jewel engraved with “*AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN*,” (Alfred had me wrought). The Doom Die (d6) can be used for any Check or Challenge to learn information or solve riddles; its power, if its text is read aloud and the Doom Die rolled then advanced, is to activate the Virtue of any awakened Mythic Site.

PCs might encounter Alfred three times: here at his camp, once if he comes to their aid against Longshanks [#4], and at the climax at Naked Thorn [#5]. PCs can attempt answers to his riddle at each meeting.

#18 – THE MOON – THE FAY KNIGHT

A powerful warrior fighting for the Saxons is CRAWBAN the Tatterdemalion: Scope 3 if leading a troop of Saxon footsoldiers, TL 1, Pd6, *Armoured, Deadly, Tactical 1*.

Crawban takes the form of a Saxon thane and enjoys being a bold warrior. If he identifies Briar Knights with the Sight he will try to flee; if they include a Flayboglin he will order his troops to attack (but without Deadly since he hangs back from the fight). If captured he will vow service in exchange for not being sent back to guard a wheatfield. He is a d6 Ally (*wily and ferocious Fay warrior*) who confers *Deadly* (+3 to his Soak Die) for a PC in heroic battle.

Crawban can guide Briar Knights into the WESSEX CAMP without making Glamour Checks, or take them to GRIMM [#12], or NANA at the Viking Camp [#2]. He can drop hints about the answers to various riddles. If posed Alfred's riddle, he suggests:

*Wayland crafted the sword named Gram, that slew a dragon, or so I heard.
It was laid to rest in the dragonslayer's grave, like all good swords.*

#19 – THE SUN – CHILDREN OF WAR

A group of children scour the battlefield, driving away warriors with slings: Scope 2, TL 0, Pd4, *Evasive, Ranged*. They are led by a boy DYGBEORN, once a Frankish slave, now leading a gang of boys and girls, slitting the throats of dying soldiers and robbing them of rings and coins. He is suspicious and uncouth, but if shown kindness he can offer help. He carries SIDROC's ring (which FREYDIS will recognise immediately and seek to take from him with violence) – he can guide PCs to the FIELD OF BONES [#13] where he found it.

If Dygbeorn accompanies the PCs, he is a d6 Ally (*sneaky and vicious battlefield brat*). He can lead PCs off the battlefield (Nemesis Check) to his lair, a long barrow known locally as WAYLAND'S SMITHY (a possible solution to Alfred's riddle, #17). Briar Knights can take a Respite here, but Dygbeorn will not accompany them back to the battlefield once he has left it.

#20 – THE FOOL – THE ICE BREAKS

A frozen river is under the snow and the ice cracks under the weight of warriors. Vikings and Saxons fall into the freezing water; PCs must make an Outcome Check vs d8 to avoid this. Getting out is TL 0 (or 1 if rescuing someone else), Pd6, *Injury*. Rescuing a NPC could lead to encounter #1 (KING BACSEG), #3 (FREYDIS), #14 (BISHOP HERMUND), or even #17 (ALFRED), without having to draw another card.

EPILOGUE

Under his helmet, Leif Longshanks is a young man with a faint blonde beard and frightened eyes. A rejuvenated Grimm appears to demand his prize – he wants to spirit away the youth. Grimm kneels beside the boy, throws his cloak over him, and the two of them disappear into the Hedgerow, along with the furious ravens.

The Viking army is routed. The Briar Knights will be thanked by Alfred on behalf of his brother, Ethelred. Freydis arrives under a flag of truce to beg for the body of her father, King Bacseg, which Alfred persuades King Ethelred to grant. The Briar Knights must pass judgment on Crawban the Tatterdemalion and make arrangements to hide or entrust Treasures in this Age before they return through the Hedgerow.

Everyone will encounter Leif Longshanks again in the next adventure, *Shelter From the Storm*, available at DriveThruRPG.

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A ROLEPLAYING GAME OF RUSTIC FANTASY

