

Cliffhangers Presents

Black Water

Episode One: Eckersley Manor

By Duane Maxwell



Black Water is a short **Forgotten Realms** adventure for four 12th-level characters. The party may consist of any mix of classes. The adventure is a reasonable challenge for 10th- to 12th-level characters and may be set in any campaign world. In the **Forgotten Realms** setting, the adventure takes place on the western edge of the Marsh of Chelimber, but any marshy area with a small farming village nearby serves well as an appropriate setting.

Adventure Background

Someone's been raiding livestock in Eckersley Manor. But this is nothing new. The villagers have been feuding with the people of a neighboring village to the north, Hunter's Landing, for nearly a generation. No one remembers clearly the original cause of the feud, but in the intervening time, both villages have heaped insult onto injury, and the resulting dispute serves as the major focal point of evening discussions in local watering holes in the two villages.

Recently, it seems one of the villages has decided to end the feud once and for all. In the past three weeks, the villagers seem to have stolen or killed more livestock than they did in the previous year. At least, that's what each of the villages think. Because of the feud, people of one village have almost no contact with those of the other, so they don't realize that one village suffers the same fate as the other. The raids between the two communities can account for some of these losses, but not all of them. Something else is at work here, but the villagers of both communities are too blinded by their hate to see that.

Things took a turn for the worse two days ago when Eckersley Manor villagers found a family living on an outlying farm murdered and horribly

mutilated. Their corpses were hacked apart and strewn about inside the sagging shack they called home. The pigpen gate was open, and the pigs missing.

When word of this atrocity reached the village, the elders put their heads together and decided to punish Hunter's Landing and end the threat its inhabitants pose to decent people. When the characters arrive, they find an entire community getting ready for war.

Hooking the Characters

The easiest way to involve the characters is for them simply to be passing through the area. The villages are not on a major trade route, but the roads are serviceable. Perhaps the characters are on their way north to investigate troubles in the Nether Mountains. Or maybe they're on their way to Waterdeep to pass the winter. They could even be emissaries from Waterdeep or one of the northern cities to the elven kingdom of Evereska. Regardless of how they're drawn to the area, the characters find themselves in Eckersley Manor on a cool, rainy evening just as night begins to descend. The village doesn't look too promising, but it's probably at least marginally drier in its inn than sleeping out in the open.

The Villages

Although the characters arrive in Eckersley Manor rather than Hunter's Landing, the description that follows could serve equally well for either. The principal difference between the two is the dilapidated manor house that gives Eckersley Manor its name.

Eckersley manor is damp -- everywhere. The entire village looks like it is about to collapse into a pile of rotted wood. If travelers were to pass by in a year or so, all they would see is a mound of mulch that looks as if a giant cypress tree had fallen and disintegrated. Mists from the nearby Marsh of Chelimer waft through the community, carrying with them the sickly sweet odor of fetid bog and honeysuckle. The track that leads from the north-south trail that eventually skirts the northern edges of the High Moor is little more than a strip of mud that deposits travelers at the front of the local watering hole, a dubious place inappropriately named the Sweetwater Inn. Besides the inn, there is a blacksmith and a wheelwright, a cooper, a brewer, and a dry goods store. Further down the track, a tannery and slaughterhouse share a yard. Surrounding the town are about a dozen visible small farms. Each of the farms has a combination of vegetable patches and livestock, mostly pigs and sheep, with a few scattered cows. On the other side of the north-south track, on slightly higher ground, are some larger farms with tilled fields.

The Cliffhanger

As the characters approach the muddy little village, they see the farmers and craftsfolk of the area fingering weapons, examining them suspiciously, and looking to one another for assurance. The uncertain townsfolk look ready for a fight. Players trying to gauge the intentions of the villagers can make a Sense Motive check (DC 10) to realize that the villagers are scared, not truly hostile.

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Episode Two: A Building Feud

By Duane Maxwell



Black Water is a short **Forgotten Realms** adventure for four 12th-level characters. The party may consist of any mix of classes. The adventure is a reasonable challenge for 10th- to 12th-level characters and may be set in any campaign world. In the **Forgotten Realms** setting, the adventure takes place on the western edge of the Marsh of Chelimber, but any marshy area with a small farming village nearby serves well as an appropriate setting. In the first episode, the heroes approached the wary citizens of Eckersley Manor, noting the ready weapons and hostile looks of the townsfolk.

The Muddy Trail

When the characters come down the muddy trail that connects with the road, they find not a sleepy little hamlet, but a community astir with preparations for a fight. Some people are trying to erect a palisade wall, while others are piling up spears and other assorted weapons suitable to a small farming community. A red-faced man in the blacksmith's shop, sweat pouring off of him, is pumping furiously at a sharpening wheel while another man is sharpening a dagger. A small pile of knives and daggers lies at the second man's feet, and another pile, newly sharpened, sit on a workbench nearby.

When the characters arrive, several people give them hard stares, nervously fingering weapons as they do. A tall, slender man in his early thirties with a scar running down his left cheek onto his neck approaches the party, pleasantly asking them if there's something he can do for them. He introduces himself as Dengram Olmaris (neutral male human Rog 3, Bluff +8), the owner of the Sweetwater Inn and more or less mayor of the village.

Dengram is initially indifferent to the PCs. Characters who make a Diplomacy check (DC 15) can adjust this attitude to friendly. (See page 149 of the **Dungeon Master's Guide** for more information on NPC attitudes.)

Once the characters explain that they're looking for a place to spend the night, Dengram tells them that he's booked up. If the characters' diplomatic efforts are successful, he will make some room for them. Of course, a dry place to sleep is hard to find right now, so it may cost a bit extra. If the characters are obviously armed as wandering adventurers or sellswords, he eyes them speculatively and offers them an alternative: If they help the villagers of Eckersley Manor mete out justice to the murderers from Hunter's Landing who killed Goodman Flint and his wife and son, he'll house them, feed them, and liquor them up free of charge, and he'll see what he can do about getting them a discount on any goods and services they might need before setting off on their way again.

The characters may very well ask exactly what happened. If they do, they'll be met with a chorus of indignant stories about the evil of the scum that inhabit Hunter's Landing, people who would kill an entire family and then mutilate the corpses. Olmaris gets them to quiet down so he can explain what happened. He tells them of the feud that has lasted for nearly a generation between the two villages, citing examples of the wrongs done them at the hands of Hunter's Landing. Recently, however, they have gone too far. In the last few weeks, they have stepped up raids on Eckersley Manor, carrying off livestock, sabotaging wagons, and so on. But last night, they went so far as to break into Goodman Flint's home, kill him, his wife, and his son, and then mutilate the corpses,

strewing body parts around their small farmstead like so much refuse. So it's time the people of Eckersley Manor ended the dispute once and for all.

What's Going On

As veteran adventurers, the heroes might sense that they're not getting all the truth from Olmaris. In his defense, it's not that he's deliberately lying; rather, he and the villagers just witnessed a terrible atrocity, and they're not thinking straight at the moment. Most of them are convinced that Hunter's Landing is behind the recent raids and the murder of the farm family. They have found tracks leading back to Hunters Landing.

Of course, there are also half-truths here. Rumors have floated into the village that Hunter's Landing has suffered similar raids. Although the Eckersley Manor folk have already engaged in some reprisals of their own, the rumors persist of livestock just butchered out of hand and left to rot. But the villagers swear they did not kill any of the livestock. What they could not capture they drove off. To a farmer, it is a waste of good meat simply to slay livestock out of hand. A week ago, some of their own animals were slaughtered as well. Some of the villagers claim that Hunter's Landing folk are destroying their own livestock and making it look like Eckersley Manor villagers are doing it. These folk claim that the loss of the herds of sheep and cows may prompt the merchant costers to step in and take action against Eckersley Manor. Wiser heads suspect that a gang of bandits has set up in the area or that some of the lizardfolk are raiding out of the Chelimber. But no one has ever found tracks leading into or out of the Marsh, so the Hunter's Landing theory currently holds sway. Dengram Olmaris does not believe for a moment that Hunter's Landing is responsible for all the livestock slayings, but he sees an opportunity to channel the villagers' rage against Hunter's Landing and seize the fisheries near that village, enriching both

Eckersley Manor and himself at the same time. So he has chosen to remain silent about his doubts, not mentioning his fears that something more dangerous is at work here. When the adventurers arrive in Eckersley Manor, it is as if they are the answer to his prayers. Characters who are suspicious of Dengram's description can make a Sense Motive check (opposed by Olmaris's Bluff check) to realize that the innkeeper knows more than he's letting on.

The heroes can try to dig up some info from the villagers. This is actually more difficult than it might seem, for the villagers are currently whipped up into a bit of a frenzy. Initially, they won't accept the notion that someone other than the people of Hunter's Landing might be responsible for what is going on. If a hero makes a successful Gather Information check (DC 20), he can find out that they have been raided like this in the past, but never on this scale. Usually just a few animals, usually sheep, went missing. One villager, Rand the blacksmith, says that the recent spate of attacks began after a trio of hunters ransacked a sod house about three miles into the swamp. Only one of the hunters made it back to the village, burbling something about a troll who carried two axes and cut the other two down in the blink of an eye. The man was too badly injured for the herb healers to do much for him, so there wasn't anything else from the man. So far, the blacksmith says, no one else seems to want to believe that the two events might be related, so fired up are they to blame the folk of Hunter's Landing. So instead of checking things out, they get ready to kill their neighbors.

The heroes might wish to investigate this other possibility (assuming they're at all interested in the events here). However, the people of Eckersley Manor are planning to attack their enemies in Hunter's Landing tonight. Convincing the other villagers that they should hold off attacking the other

village until someone checks out this other possibility is difficult. Heroes must succeed at a Diplomacy check (DC 22) to do so. If the heroes do this successfully, Olmaris will agree to wait until tomorrow night to attack Hunter's Landing. With a bit of grumbling, the other villagers follow his lead.

The Cliffhanger

Another villager, a woman named Selka who knows the near part of the Marsh from a decade or so of experience as a hunter, says she knows of the place the other hunters claimed to discover. Almost due southeast of the village is a small island in the Marsh. The far side of the island has a small landing on it, beyond which is a sod house. She says a very large creature lives there (or at least used to), but she doesn't think it's a troll. She didn't see any axes, either; it was sharpening a spear point.

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Episode Three: Dangerous Waters

By Duane Maxwell



Black Water is a short **Forgotten Realms** adventure for four 12th-level characters. The party may consist of any mix of classes. The adventure is a reasonable challenge for 10th- to 12th-level characters and may be set in any campaign world. In the **Forgotten Realms** setting, the adventure takes place on the western edge of the Marsh of Chelimber, but any marshy area with a small farming village nearby serves well as an appropriate setting.

In the first and second episode, the party met the inhabitants of Eckersley Manor, a small town on the edge of a marsh. Talking to the villagers, the party learned that recent raids on the village might be the work of some swamp predator. Hearing conflicting reports about what sort of predator might be lurking in the swamps, the PCs continue their short investigation in this third episode and then head into the swamp.

What's Really Going On

The hunters who invaded the sod house (see Episode 2) encountered its owner: an ogre named Krain. The ogre tore two of them to pieces, injured the third, and let him crawl back to where he came from as a message for the other villagers. Krain was angry, and he meant to make them pay for violating his home and trying to steal from him. Unfortunately for the villagers on the western edge of the Marsh, Krain is no ordinary ogre. He is the spawn of an ogre and some fiendish creature of the lower planes. He chose to make his home in the Marsh mostly to be left alone. He is a mercenary who has made numerous enemies over the years. His home in the Marsh serves as a refuge where he can find a bit of peace. He lives near enough a secondary trade route that he can maintain contact from time to time with various agents. Every so often, he is gone for months at a time, serving in some army somewhere. Although his outlook and ways are evil,

he is willing to live in relative peace here in the Marsh. After making an example of a few lizardfolk intruders a few years ago, other creatures in the Marsh have not bothered him. The villagers at the edge of the Marsh didn't disturb him much either after he scared a few of them off.

With the invasion of his home, however, his patience has come to an end. He is aware of the enmity between the two villages, so he set about getting them to kill one another off. He began raiding outlying farms, capturing or killing livestock, destroying equipment, and so on. In each attack, he was careful to leave some evidence of other people's involvement. He doesn't know very many details about either of the two villages, so he made most of these signs simple: tracks leading back to one of the two villages, one community's livestock found in the possession of the other community, and so on. As he himself leaves no tracks, it was easy to hide his involvement.

Eventually, however, someone discovered him. On a moonless night, he raided the farm of Goodman Flint. Flint's boy woke up and shouted out a warning before Krain could slip away. If the villagers thought there was some sort of creature stirring up trouble for them, they'd arm themselves for a hunt or try to convince some other authority to bring in professional bounty hunters. He didn't want to have to deal with those who would eventually come, so he made a split-second decision to silence the family. He killed all three within the space of a few heartbeats, and made it look like the villagers of Hunter's Landing butchered them.

The reaction of the folk of Eckersley Manor meant that his ruse succeeded.

With the happenstance arrival of the heroes, however, that may change. Krain is only aware that the heroes have arrived later in the night that they arrive. He comes to see if Eckersley Manor has attacked Hunter's Landing yet, and he spots the heroes' horses in the corral. He retreats to the Marsh to prepare a few defenses should they be bounty hunters or others who might come after him. Then he waits, choosing to fight on his ground rather than theirs.

The Marsh

The Marsh of Chelimber is a low area fed by the runoff of surrounding mountains. It is the site of a small kingdom from around the time of Waterdeep's early days, but since then has been home mostly to lizardfolk and other reptilian creatures. Most of it is water, although there are many islands dotting the Marsh. Willows and other water-loving trees abound in the area, and there is abundant undergrowth, mostly vines, creepers, and so on. Along the edges of the Marsh there are trails through the undergrowth, but to navigate them successfully requires a local guide. The swamp trails have many dead ends and switchbacks, and it is easy to get lost in the maze of vegetation. Most people traveling through the Marsh do so by flat-bottomed boat.

The Marsh teems with life. There are all sorts of creatures native to such terrain, as well as some unnatural creatures. A few of the central and eastern islands contain ruins of the all-but-forgotten kingdom of ages past, but most of the Marsh has remained unchanged over the centuries. Most of the animals in the Marsh avoid contact with humans and other intruders. Other creatures, however, are aggressively territorial. Dungeon Masters who wish to use this adventure as a springboard for further exploration in the Marsh should consult the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual* for ideas on what other interesting encounters the heroes might experience in the area.

The Traps

Krain is especially adept at crafting natural traps, and he has built some in the general area of his home. Many of these are for trapping animals for food; others are for killing his enemies. The DM should place several of these in the heroes' way as they close in on Krain.

The Dungeon Master should consult the following list to determine what sort of traps the heroes might encounter (see page 115 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for descriptions):

- Spear Trap (blade could be rusty or coated in filth, possibly inflicting disease on the victim, at the DM's option)
- Deadfall Trap (use Falling Block Trap)
- Swinging Log Trap (use Crushing Wall Trap)
- Scything Blade Trap (blade could be rusty or coated in filth, possibly inflicting disease on the victim, at the DM's option)
- Large Net Trap (Krain will attempt to lure the heroes into this one and then strike once the trap has captured one or more of them.)

The DM need not use all of these, and she might choose to use one more than once. The problem for the heroes is that they need to keep up with Krain, but they're on his ground. He lures them into these traps as many times as they fall for it, trying always to remain one step ahead of them.

Because of the terrain, there is only one pit trap: a 10-foot-deep pit with about three feet of water in it. When a hero triggers the trap, he falls down a slippery short incline that dumps him feet-first into the pit. Beneath the water are sharpened stakes that are designed to momentarily slow the victim. Treat these as caltrops (see the description of these on page 107 of the *Player's Handbook*). Also in the water are two water snakes (Snake, Medium-Size Viper; see pages 200 and 202 of the *Monster Manual* for information). Startled by the victim's fall into the pit, they attack repeatedly. They are unable to get out of the pit, so they

bite out of fear. The sides of the pit are slick, muddy clay. Climbing out requires a Climb check (DC 20: adequate handholds, slippery). If the victim avoided damage from the sharpened stakes, he may climb at half his normal movement rate as a full-round action, enabling him to get out of the pit in a single round (see the description of the Climb skill on pages 64-65 of the *Player's Handbook*). If the caltrops hidden in the water injured the victim, his base movement rate is halved. Of course, other heroes can assist the victim's escape by lowering a rope, for example.

Covered Pit Trap: CR 2; Reflex save (DC 20) avoids; 10 ft. deep (1d6, fall), +0 melee (1d2 caltrops for 1 point of damage each and slowing effect); Search (DC 20); Disable Device (20).

The Cliffhanger

Once the PCs get past the pit trap, they can see the small, slumping hut that they've come to find. A Spot check (DC 20) reveals something moving inside.

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Episode Four: Swamp King

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The Enemy: Krain the Slayer

Krain makes his home in the western half of the Marsh of Chelimber. His lair is a sod house extending from a dry cave in the side of a hillock about three miles from the western edge of the Marsh. His home is surprisingly clean and well maintained. It is also secure. A number of deadly traps guard the paths that lead to it.

Krain is a deadly opponent. He thinks, plans, and outwits his opponents rather than simply smashing them. He also employs straightforward tactics, but only when he has rendered his opponents helpless through stratagem. He spent several years as a mercenary, and he has gained a keen understanding of warfare. Ambush, hit-and-run, and traps are his preferred tactics. Once he knows enemies are about, he sets up ambushes, striking swiftly and brutally from hiding and then fading into the swamp. With his woodland stride ability, he can hide in dense undergrowth or tangled briars, erupting from his hiding place at the right moment. His use of the ranger spell *pass without trace* typically makes it impossible for others to pursue him. He takes great delight in killing scouts and others separated from a main party. He attacks them first,

leaving their broken bodies for the rest to find.

Krain relies upon a number of weapons to defeat his enemies. He carries a quiver filled with about a dozen javelins. He uses these for hunting and as a ranged weapon. He usually tosses one or two of these and then disappears into the wilderness, appearing later to hurl a few more. Whenever possible, he attacks from ambush to make use of his sneak attack ability. He also carries a long spear, with which he holds enemies at bay. With his Combat Reflexes, smaller opponents often find it costly to close to melee range with him. Once he has done his damage with javelin and long spear, he relies on his primary weapons: a razor-sharp greataxe and a battleaxe. Both weapons are sized for humans, and he uses one in each hand. With his greataxe, he can sever the head from a bull in one blow.

He has an animal companion, a bad-tempered giant crocodile named Dread. The crocodile large lurks around the island, although it is occasionally absent while it hunts for food. Heroes who find the island encounter both Krain and Dread.

Krain the Slayer: Male half-ogre/half-fiend Rgr7/Rog3; CR 14; Large outsider; HD 4d8+28 plus 7d10+49 plus 3d6+21; hp 165; Init +7; Spd 30 ft.; AC 23 (touch 12, flat-footed 23); Atk +19/+14/+9 melee (1d12+10/18–20/x3, +1 *keen greataxe*) and +19 melee (1d8+4/x3, masterwork battleaxe); or +20/+15/+10 melee (2d6+13/x3, Huge long spear); or +13 ranged (1d6+9, javelin); or +20 melee (1d8+9, bite) and +15 melee (1d6+4, 2 claws); SA sneak attack (+2d6), spells, spell-like abilities; SQ acid, cold, electricity, and fire resistance 20, animal companion crocodile,

darkvision 60 ft., evasion, favored enemy (humans and goblinoids), immune to poison, traps, uncanny dodge; AL NE; SV Fort +17, Ref +9, Will +6; Str 28, Dex 17, Con 24, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 8. Height 9' 8".

Skills and Feats: Climb +12, Craft (trapmaking) +14, Disable Device +9, Hide +19, Intuit Direction +6, Jump +10, Knowledge (nature) +7, Listen +12, Move Silently +19, Profession (sailor) +7, Search +9, Spot +12, Swim +12, Use Rope +10, Wilderness Lore +13; Alertness, Combat Reflexes, Improved Critical (greataxe), Improved Initiative, Power Attack, Track.

Animal Companion: Krain has a bad-tempered giant crocodile as a companion.

Favored Enemy: Krain has selected humans as a favored enemy. He gains a +2 bonus on his Bluff, Listen, Sense Motive, Spot, and Wilderness Lore checks when using these skills against this type of creature. He gets the same bonus to melee weapon damage rolls against creatures of this type. He also gets the damage bonus with ranged weapons if the target is within 30 feet. He gains a +1 bonus to similar rolls against goblinoids.

Spell-like Abilities (base DC 12 + spell level): 3/day -- *darkness, poison, unholy aura*; 1/day -- *blasphemy, contagion, desecrate, unhallow, unholy blight*.

Uncanny Dodge (Ex): Krain retains his Dex bonus when flat-footed.

Possessions: +1 *chain shirt of shadow and silent moves*, +1 *keen greataxe*, masterwork battleaxe, 8 javelins, longspear.

Ranger Spells Prepared: (1; base DC = 12 + spell level): 1st -- *alarm*.

Dread, Giant Crocodile: hp 59, see *Monster Manual* page 195.

The Cliffhanger

If you want to lead the characters to further adventures in the area, the contents of Krain's cottage can easily provide clues to more dangers within the swamp's confines. Krain could have a map to some ancient location half submerged in the swamp, or correspondence from a potential employer.