

Despair Station

"Despair Station" is an adventure module for the RPG *The River of Light*. It can be used either for a one-shot game or as part of a campaign; the PCs may or may not know each other already.

The adventure takes place in an area of the River threatened by a terrible menace. If the players do nothing, the Serenity Crusade may destroy the nearby settlements and then go forth to wreak havoc across the River. Even if the players intervene, they may find that stopping the threat is an arduous task indeed...unless they make the right decisions along the way.

Scene 1: The Survivor.

As the player characters travel across the River, they find an injured woman stranded on a rock in the middle of the River. She is conscious and has enough strength to shout for their help, but she'll have trouble standing up on her own or swimming to safety.

If the PCs help her, she will present herself to Jeva and explain how her sept of five travelers were assaulted a few hours earlier by a group of at least ten armed men and women, whose leader was a horribly disfigured young lady. During the fight, Jeva was injured and fell off the boat, while her friends were captured (or at least, so she hopes).

If the PCs *don't* help her, their boats' motors will stop working and you might want to have a talk with them about the kind of game you're running...

While Jeva isn't bleeding to death, her injuries nevertheless need to be treated. Treating her will require a DC 15 Mental roll, with a -2 penalty on the boats (unless the PCs happen to have medical equipment, in which case the penalty is reduced to -1). If they succeed, they will help her heal and alleviate her pain... but,

whether or not they treat her successfully, it will be clear that she needs to be treated at a station. A DC 5 Mental roll will allow any of the characters (including Jeva) to notice a green-hued island in the distance.

If the travelers try to go past the green island they will eventually get close enough to Despair Station to get hit by a fizzling tidal wave. Every boat will have 10% odds of getting capsized; even in boats that don't. Characters will need a DC 15 Physical roll to avoid falling. If the characters do not decide to turn back, Jeva will beg them to stop by the green island rather than keep pushing forward and risk getting killed.

If they reach the green island, scene 2 begins.

Scene 2: Green Point.

The island being rather large, the travelers may choose to enter it by the actual station or by some of the wooded areas. Regardless of their choice, they will very quickly be approached by a squad of men and women who will ask who they are and what they want. These people are some of Green Point's inhabitants; they are cautious due to the dangers in the area, but not outright hostile. Once they make certain that the PCs aren't part of the Serenity Crusade they will be perfectly willing to let them into the station (especially if they realize Jeva needs medical help).

Green Point is a reasonably large station. It will be clear that the population is a bit nervous and practically every adult will be carrying a weapon of varying quality. Soon enough, they will be greeted by an aging woman who will present herself as Somata, the stationmistress. Somata will tell them that the people who attacked Jeva's sept were one of the many raids

launched from Despair Station by the Serenity Crusade, whose leader, Peacebringer, is a madwoman wielding dark powers claiming that all life must be put out of its misery. She will go on to explain how Peacebringer and her crusaders have been plaguing the region for the past three years. From Jeva's description she will identify the raiders' leader as Mei, Peacebringer's daughter.

Somata will make sure that Jeva receives medical care and that the travelers have a place to stay, if they so choose. During their time on the island they will quickly learn that much of its population is comprised of refugees from Peacebringer's rampage. Sooner or later they will be approached by a man called Hatmel who will present himself as the former stationmaster of Needle Point, a station devastated by Peacebringer's tidal waves. He will explain that he and many others are eager to strike back at the Serenity Crusade, and that they have been working on plans to smash both Despair Station and Blackrock Station where Ecson, a dark engineer and Peacebringer's companion, generates the tidal waves with his dams. Hatmel will make no secret that, as Somata provides no support for this plan, he is trying to get as many people on it as possible and is hoping that the PCs will join him.

At the edge of the village the PCs should be able to see a large wooden cage. If they go there they will find one woman and two men in poor condition inside and one armed guard watching over them. The guard, a survivor from Needle Point, will explain, if asked, that the prisoners are members of the Serenity Crusade who have been captured a couple months ago, and whom Hatmel and Somata have been interrogating, with mixed results (the three know about Despair Station's numbers and defenses, but haven't been there long enough to know much about Peacebringer, Mei, or Ecson). The prisoners, for themselves, will not appear to be very well and will beg the guard to fill their water bottle, complaining that they

haven't had anything to drink since the last evening. The guard, clearly unsympathetic toward the three, will angrily reply that they can ask his replacement once his shift ends, as he is in no hurry to fetch water for murderers. Two prisoners (the woman and one of the men) will insist that they were only cooperating with the Crusade out of fear. This will earn them the vocal contempt of the third prisoner who will proudly proclaim his loyalty to Peacebringer and her goal of ending the world's misery.

The PCs may talk to the prisoners. The latter, even if they prove cooperative, don't know anything about Peacebringer that the people of Green Point haven't already learned by now. They may debate with the Crusade loyalist about Peacebringer's philosophy, which he will defend with pride claiming that, given how much misery life is filled with, death is the best thing that can happen to anyone. If anyone points out that he hasn't attempted suicide since his imprisonment he will resort to angrily yelling at them and refusing to debate any further. Regardless, the prisoners will beg the PCs for water; the latter should be effortless to obtain and the guard will not oppose it (though he will dismiss it as a wasted kindness on these three).

Scene 3: War Council.

The next morning, the PCs (and most of Green Point) will be woken by the sound of a tidal wave crashing close to the station. While lacking the power to reach the buildings, it will nevertheless capsize a few boats in the harbor and lightly damage the island's rice farm. This will prompt Hatmel to step up his plans and he will call up a gathering between the island's entire population.

As the people gather, Hatmel will launch into a rousing speech about how it's time to strike back at Peacebringer and put an end to her insane crusade. This will be greeted with enthusiastic cheering by a significant part of the

population. Somata will step in, telling Hatmel he is being hasty and careless, risking people's lives; he will counter that she's being over-cautious and the real risk is just waiting for Peacebringer to destroy them all. She will say that his own grief is blinding him, at which point he will angrily say the conversation is over and tell all who want to follow him to prepare for the strike on Blackrock Station.

Whether or not the PCs choose to join Hatmel's force, Somata will ask to see them in private while the expedition prepares. She will explain that, since they are newcomers to the region, she figures they may be more objective in their judgement. She will tell them that she met Manelia (the one who later became Peacebringer) and Eason back when they were good, well-meaning travelers navigating the River with their two daughters. She will express doubts concerning Hatmel's certainties, ask the PCs to follow the expedition from the back, and make sure Hatmel doesn't do anything stupid or pass up an opportunity to learn more about the situation.

If the PCs refuse and let Hatmel's expedition leave without them, the expedition will return at the end of the day, having (with some difficulty) killed Eason. Skin to scene 5. If they join the expedition, go to Scene 4.

Scene 4: Battle at Blackrock.

As the expedition reaches Blackrock, the PCs can see the dam stretching in front of the rocky island. Hatmel will stand on his ship and shout at the dam, dramatically telling Eason that his wickedness is coming to an end. In response, a part of the dam will shift, unleashing a powerful current that will rapidly drive the boats a good distance further away (without actually endangering them). If, as per Somata's request, the PCs have remained at the back of the expedition, they will not be in the way of the current, and won't be driven away with the rest. Otherwise, the Station Master may decide

that one of the PCs' boats was next to a rock and was merely pressed against it by the current, rather than washed to the distance.

The current will end after a few minutes, with the expedition driven far away. If the PCs are still there, they can easily enter the dam station. Otherwise, they may follow the expedition (Hatmel will be certain to try a second assault, and this time Eason will have no way left to stop him). Regardless, they will see Eason fleeing from the dam into a small house on the island. If they follow him there, they will find him packing. Eason, unarmed, will try to talk and explain the truth of the situation. Hatmel, once he gets there with the rest of the expedition, will want to kill Eason at the first opportunity. Stopping him should take some effort, but remain within the PCs' reach.

If he gets the chance, Eason will tell the story of what happened to his family, and how he's been using the dam system to weaken Peacebringer's tidal waves. If Eason dies and the PCs search his house, his journal will tell the same story - unfortunately, without Eason, no-one knows how to operate the dams. Meaning that, unless the PCs succeed at a DC 25 Mental roll to figure out the system, there is no defense left against Peacebringer's tidal waves, which should soon be powerful enough to destroy Green Point.

With the entire expedition on the island, it will suddenly be discovered that some of Peacebringer's raiders have crept up on the unmanned boats and are now slowly towing them away. If Eason is still alive, he will tell the PCs (who will need by now to have saved him from Hatmel) where to find his personal boat and use the dams to arrange a current with which they will catch the raiders in no time. If Eason has been killed, Hatmel will frantically order everyone to look for a boat with which to catch the raiders; the PCs will be the first to find it, and may pursue.

Either way, catching up to the raiders as they tow dozens of boats should not be hard. There are six crusaders, with their leader being the disfigured Mei. Rather than outright attack the PCs, she will begin to angrily rant at them (with her back turned to them when possible, so as not to show her face) for attacking her father who, in her words, has never harmed a living soul. Mei's men, who are motivated mostly by fear of her and Peacebringer, will stay silent as she rants about how horrible life is, and how her mother is just trying to help as best she can. The PCs may try to talk her out of it, but it will be quite a difficult task. They may find it easier to convince her to go talk to her father.

If the PCs fight Mei, they may be at an advantage, as her men will hesitate to join the fray and will surrender as soon as she is defeated. If they convince her to speak with Ecton, he will be able to turn her away from the madness of the Serenity Crusade, and they may have a touching reunion (which will likely involve her crying in her father's arms, mostly). If Ecton was killed but they convince her to leave the Crusade anyway, she will turn herself and her men in as prisoners.

Scene 5: Assault on Despair Station.

After the battle of Blackrock, the expedition will return to Green Point to prepare for the next phase. If Ecton and/or Mei have joined forces with the group in scene 4, they will be present at the planing session (and warmly welcomed by Somata).

Hatmel will gather dozens of men for this final assault on Despair Station and reveal that he and others have been building long ladders with hooks on their ends which are designed to hold onto the top of Despair Station's outer wall, allowing the expedition to climb the fortress. A risky plan, however, as it will still be difficult getting past the crusaders. If he's alive, Ecton will offer a better plan: Using his dams, he can cause a tidal wave to smash an opening in one

of the walls. The schematics he will show Somata and Hatmel will be enough to convince them of the plan's soundness.

If Hatmel's plan is used, crusaders on the fortress's walls will drop heavy rocks on the people climbing the ladders, gravely endangering many of them on the way up (possibly including the PCs). If Ecton's plan is used, the entire assault force will be able to get inside the fortress with no casualty, actually outnumbering the crusaders.

Regardless, once the expedition force is inside, Peacebringer shows herself (as will Mei, if she hasn't left the Crusade yet). She will launch into a big rant about how she must end suffering by giving everyone the peace of the grave, then begin using her powers to twist the ground beneath the expedition's feet (requiring a DC 15 Physical roll every round just to stand up). One of the tremors' effect will be to cause a big crack to form in the ground not far from the PCs, with one of Peacebringer's men falling through. He will hang on to the ledge, desperately trying not to fall down (if the PCs lean in, they can see the crack goes down over 30 feet) and, panicking, call for help. If the PCs help him (DC 5 Physical roll to keep him from falling on this round, DC 15 to pull him up, remove 5 from the DC for every extra character who helps), he will quickly thank them and try to make himself scarce. Otherwise, he can hang on unassisted for three rounds before losing his grip and plummeting to his death.

The PCs may try to reason with Peacebringer (if Mei is on their side she will help, begging her mother to get over the grief and go back to the happiness they used to share; if Mei is on their side *and* Ecton is still alive, Mei will beg to be a family again). Difficult as it may be to stand up, the PCs should be able to slowly make their way to Peacebringer and kill her. She is too busy shaking the ground to move away. If Mei isn't on their side, she will try to get in their way (but will have the same

difficulty standing up). Several outcomes are possible:

-If the PCs kill Mei before Peacebringer, the latter will look at her dead daughter, erupt in a blood-chilling scream of sorrow, then cause the entire station to sink into the sea before anyone can reach her. Expedition members should be able to swim to their boats, while crusaders will quietly surrender, for the most part, but some witness will say they saw Peacebringer using her powers to ride a wave to get away from the area. Attempts to follow her will fail. Whether she shows up in the future (and what she does) is up to the Station Master.

-If the PCs kill Peacebringer and haven't brought Mei to their side, things will happen in an almost similar manner...except that it will be Mei who sinks the station as she becomes the second Peacebringer.

-If the PCs kill Peacebringer and Mei isn't present, her loyalists will do their best to goad the rest of the Crusade to keep fighting.

-If the PCs manage to bring Peacebringer to her senses (a difficult feat, though not impossible, especially if they have Mei to help and Eason is alive), she will stop twisting the ground and command her crusaders to surrender quietly before falling to the ground, sobbing. Mei, if she is present, will rush to comfort her as best she can. Peacebringer will lose her dark powers becoming Manelia again and will allow herself to be taken in, accepting whatever judgement is passed on her. Hatmel will bring her back to Green Point where her fate will depend on recent events, on the PCs, on Mei and Eason, if they are still alive.

Regardless, once the battle is over, it will be possible to find Jeva's sept members, all of whom were being kept in wooden cages until they either agreed to join the Serenity Crusade or died of starvation and dehydration. While

they are not in good health, their lives are not at risk.

When the expedition gets back to Green Point, the Needle Point refugees decide to leave the station and go rebuild their homes, showing much gratitude to the families that hosted them during that time. Jeva will be happy to be reunited with her sept (and vice-versa). If the PCs were able to treat her wounds before reaching Green Point, she will already be able to walk in order to properly greet them.

Sample file

So, What's This All About?

At its core, this scenario is built on the assumption that the player characters are out to help people. Scene 1 can be used to remind them of this, but it's generally best to make sure they understand that before the game starts - after all, more selfish travelers may prefer to avoid the threat of Despair Station altogether. The question then becomes, who do they help, and how?

Do they relieve the suffering of the prisoners at Green Point, or save the falling crusader in scene 5? All of them are involved with the "bad" side, but some of them may not be entirely bad people. And even if they are, don't they deserve some degree of compassion?

Whether or not the players show them mercy will have little effect on the main plot (though it may have other effects at the stationmaster's discretion. Grateful NPCs may show up in future games, for instance. How they handle Mei and Ecsen, however, will drastically affect the endgame. Hatmel won't mince words about the destruction caused by the Serenity Crusade, and should make the players suspicious of Ecsen (especially if they've encountered dark engineers in the past). Somata, however, should be able to plant a seed of doubt. Do the players try to help Green Point's settlers and refugees by ruthlessly eliminating perceived threats, or do they try to understand their supposed enemies? If they play their cards right, the assistance of Ecsen and Mei can allow them to stop Peacebringer without a single casualty on either side. If they rely too much on force rather than understanding, the circle of suffering may perpetuate itself with Peacebringer (either Manelia or Mei) moving to another part of the River, perhaps fighting the PCs again in the future.

Notable NPCs:

Peacebringer: By her real name, Manelia, the woman who would become Peacebringer began as a kind, gentle traveller. With her companion, Ecsen, and their twin daughters, Mei and Eni, she had many happy years journeying across the River.

Then, one day, the family reached the Roaring Islands. The area had been put at risk for years by poorly-understood seismic activity that caused islands to sink or rise unpredictably, generating deadly waves and maelstroms in the process. The phenomenon was putting both travellers and settlers in the area at risk; the family decided to stay and help. Settling on the station closest to the epicenter, Manelia and her daughters helped victims and refugees, while Ecsen tried to puzzle out the phenomenon in an attempt to find a solution.

Unfortunately, there would be no time for that. The seismic activity picked up, and one fateful day, the entire station sank beneath the water as dangerous rocks sprang up all around it. In the confusion, dozens of settlers, many of whom the family had had time to befriend, died either by drowning or being smashed against the rocks. Ecsen was dragged away by the currents, barely surviving by hanging on to the broken remains of a boat. Little Mei collided with a rock before her mother's eyes, barely surviving and remaining disfigured by the accident. Carrying her injured daughter with her, Manelia tried frantically to find Eni. For several days she searched among the debris finding, on the way, the floating corpses of all too many settlers. Finally, she found Eni - dead and drowned. At that moment, something inside her broke.