

December 1695 – Start of War

Sun low in the sky, the holler of your crew at your back, the creaks and groans of Sainte-Anne's docks are a familiar and welcome sensation underfoot as you return – finally – to dry land.

It should be a relief. Should be.

However, it takes no keen sense of smell to pick up on the foul turn of the wind; nor taste to identify the bitter underlying dry that seeps into your mouth, permeating every breath. Where the salt and brine of the ocean breeze may once have been a welcoming sigh; it is a cruel layer of violence that now smothers. Suffocates. It scrapes in your throat, settles like an iron weight in your stomach.

You've not known Sainte-Anne's docks for their silence, and yet in this moment, it is only the rough tone of a rogue, clad in Scurlock's colours, that breaches an otherwise quietened trepidation,

“Do ye smell that, lads?”

There is no jibe to be had here; no cheer on your latest victories. Hesitation, instead. The man in question is perched on old, stolen crates, still bearing the washed-out insignia of, as Scurlock so politely dubbed, two fucking perfumed fops.

One eye, one leg, a visage as fearsome as it is large. The man overshadows the surrounding gathering in size as he continues. “Ash and brimstone,” he rumbles. Several adjacent eyes of washed-up hecklers are focused on him with interest, even as the skies begin to darken.

“War.” His tone is softer as he continues, as if uttering the very word is like to bring the MegaCorporations' ire.

An inevitable change in tides, and not one unforeseen. Tensions have been mounting steadily between the Compagnie and the Dutch Merchant Company in recent weeks. Not least with Commodore Vanderkill's seizure of the previously occupied French Megafort. Successful provision blockades from Château Loire earned the DMC the chance they needed to strike. The wine-starved French stood no chance. The fort now boasts as the height of Dutch power, renamed and reflagged -- Wolvenhol

The Wolf-Hunter has ripped -- **torn** -- into the heart of Compagnie territory, placing the threat of inevitable escalation on Sainte-Anne's doorstep. And despite attempts of failed reclamation, his torched iron grasp remains firmly in place. He will not so easily relinquish his prize. Not least, when it serves to restore his ever-growing loss of reputation.

Conflict only escalated from there. Skirmishes up and down the continent; much to the pleasure of those seeking to delve the wrecks.

With Megafort Wolvenhol no longer a feasible asset to reclaim, the Compagnie have set their sights on Fort Harimau. Yet to send those forces has left them open, and Vanderkill's retaliation on Grand-Fort has been swift – creating the beginnings of the war on two fronts.

Behind it all, an agent of chaos pulling the strings; leaving the factions naught but puppets; goaded into war.

The rogue's gaze remains fixed on you as he smirks, "There's profit in war. For you, for I... For Scurlock."

Greed is evident in his tone, "So what'll it be? Fucking the French, or damning the Dutch?"

The unsettled moment has passed; for laughter breaks the tension as the hecklers resume their former nature. A gaggle of overlapping voices ring out,

"Cor, Kingpin like tha'? He'll blow 'em both up, 'e will!"

"Sink 'em right to the sharks!"

"No chance in hell they'll have!"

These jibes and barks howl at your back even as you continue down the gangway; filtering into nothing more than background noise as you reach the heart of the settlement.

The rogue is not wrong. Where there's war, there's opportunity. Both factions continue to amass unnerving artillery, weapons of pure destruction that decimate those they are turned against. Weapons that you could take for yourself. Firepower to turn the tide of this unavoidable war in your favour – into your profits.

Compagnie, or Dutch Merchant Company. Better to hoist a colour, than be caught between the maws of not one, but two unrelenting powers.

The only question remains,

What side will you choose, Captain?



Perilous Storms

Tensions escalated to a crescendo following the Dutch Merchant Company's capture of Megafort Wolvenhol, and subsequent smaller scale frays that followed. Both sides were swift to put their plans to action.

In the East Indies, the Compagnie Royale spared no time in laying siege to Fort Harimau, north of Telok Penjarah. Simultaneously, the DMC launched a very similar assault on Grand-Fort in Africa. Two conflicts. Two continents. Yet, mysteriously, executed within a matter of days of one another. Fate? Unlikely so.

After a considerably long escalation of terror, the Dutch Merchant Company have successfully claimed the regions surrounding Grand-Fort, despite the Compagnie Royale's attempts to reclaim that which was theirs.

The growing presence of Dutch ships has not gone unnoticed by the Confederation of Ungwana.

Queen Halisi cares not for sides in this war. The destruction of Compagnie fleets has brought a sense of justice, however. Revenge, even. Against those who drove her from Great Ukuta. Those who burned her throne and turned cannons on her people.

Though karma did not come at her hand, it is sweet all the same.

It is the Queen's belief that despite her absence, Great Ukuta stands strong in the face of this new war. Rumours spread in hushed whispers that the Confederation of Ungwana's warrior ships pick at those megacorporation fools unfortunate enough to sail too close to their lands.

Over in the East Indies, Fort Harimau's waters are now held by the Compagnie Royale. Disruption of the DMC's spice lanes has taken its toll on the trade economy; causing further tension between the factions.

Dominion of Rempah forces have increased, preparing a strong defence on their own settlements. The Dutch presence they have relied so heavily on has been pushed east; and they are left without the shield which protects them. No doubt the Orang Kaya already seek to make fresh alliances.

These synchronised strikes on each other's territories have left neither in the lead; both factions now stand at a draw even as the fighting continues to spill out on adjacent waters.

Thankfully, your trade routes remain open, and it is on those, that you continue to deliver your goods, Captain. Goods, and war assets alike. Such as the ones in your hold. You have loaned your aid to a faction in return for influence, power and wealth. Yet such infamy is likely to gain the unwanted attention of those looking to pilfer that for themselves. The seas are ever dangerous, and even the Rogues are keen to take advantage of this opportunity.

“Brace!”

Asnah’s sudden shout breaks through the oppressive roar of the storm and you instinctively duck. Your grip is tight on the sodden, soaked-through spurs of the wheel, as your frigate wrestles herself to and fro; caught in the unrelenting strength of thrashing wave. They threaten to climb up and over her hull. Angry claws of the abyss seeking fresh victims for the Locker.

You are under fire.

The latest haul in your hold is the sought prize. A collection of weaponry akin to Phillippe La Peste’s own. Ascended cannons, mortars and torpedoes that choke the life from your opponents’ lungs. Each round carefully concentrated in a deadly toxin that resembles the very same rotting plague that curses the man who wields it.

The latest broadside to connect is true-to-aim, drawing curses from your lips as the banister to your right explodes. Hailing deadly sharpened splinters across the deck. For a moment, it is naught but the ringing of your ears, and a nauseating twist of vision that assails you. There’s a sharp heat on your face. The feeling of more than just rain cascading down your cheeks. Warm.

Sickeningly wrenched back to reality, shouts and screams erupt from further down the deck, curdled with agony. Through the thrashing rain, the crumpled mess of crewmen – your crewmen – is visible towards the forward cannons. Mangled, twisted; having suffered much the same fate of the decorative wood.

This back-and-forth that you’ve unwittingly sailed into is drawn out and long. Below deck, the carpenter works in panic to secure fresh wood to breached hull, the powder-boy – barely twenty summers of age – is but a blur of movement as he sprints deftly between the crew, fresh ammunition in blackened hands for the cannons.

Starboard side, a darkened frigate clad in Rogue colours, semi-obscured by rough waves, moves to reload.

Thankfully, you've put as many holes in her, as she's put in you.

"Captain!" It's only by some small miracle, a break in the crack of thunder, that Asnah's second shout also reaches your ears. With some effort she hauls herself up the fractured remains of the upper-deck stairs. "She's coming around!"

You've done well to survive this far. Your ship is weighed enough in the water by crates in her hull that she's in no state to outrun a fellow frigate; in this case, she must fight.

Sharply, you wrestle the wheel to set her course to the right. Towards the frigate that hides behind sky-high waves. She groans under the redirection; cutting heavily through the raging waters to adjust. The cannons are primed, straining on their ropes as the ship ascends waves. The crew, soaked through, are ducked down low, holding whatever purchase they can find with waters lashing at their feet. To your side, Asnah raises a hand to signal hold-fire.

Ascending and breaching the final wave with heavy grace, your foe is brought back into sight. You've still a small number of seconds remaining before another broadside is to be unleashed, giving you time to close the space between your ships.

"Hold!" Asnah's gaze is sharp and entirely focused on you; and at the first dip of a nod -
"FIRE!"

The chorus of fifteen cannons is deafening from the deck; returning the ringing to your ears as each one goes off in succession. Recoiling and bucking backwards on discharge, as the crew scurry to rinse the residue from the guns. Powder and shot, and then ready to go again in minutes.

Those very same plagued cannons in your hull are also those that arm your deck. Even from this distance, you can hear the choked screams, see the suffocating toxic residue sweeping over the enemy ship; like death's whisper, stealing the last pleas of the crew that remain and condemning them to eternal silence.

With spyglass in hand, it's plain to see that your foe suffers, riding low in the water, sails torn and tattered. She's taken on flooding, and a lot of it.

Already, your crew move to reload. No break. No pause. Not until she's down. This battle will not lose you your goods. You will not be hunted like prey.

For you are the predator.



Midnight Massacre

Where one would have thought the conflict might have ceased with Fort Harimau and Grand-Fort, that has not been the case. For the spark has been nurtured, coerced into the full-fledged flames of war, with no mind nor care for the death that follows.

Over the past period of conflict, both factions have continued to decimate their opposition's territories. In the East Indies, the Compagnie Royale has successfully pushed the DMC to further retreat from waters around Rangnok Cove and beyond. Whether it be through luck or careful strategy, they are now splintered into two regions, divided. It is a loss that continues to leave the Dominion of Rempah without its ally and shield in full strength as French vessels roam free and fierce in their waters, hot on the trail of the retreating Dutch.

In the Coast of Africa, the Dutch Merchant Company has laid claim to the region surrounding La Colonie. Rumours spread that the escalation of this conflict came with heavy losses for the French: Dutch ships emerging and assaulting the French settlement in the dead-of-night; claiming lives of both soldier and civilian.

Needless and questionable acts of aggression that fall outside the DMC's usual mandate. The faction denies any responsibility for the attack, yet it has since secured hold of the region overall. The occupation of the settlement came at such advantageous timing, that it leaves any claim of innocence difficult to believe.

La Colonie, known for its abundant trade, lies subdued and quiet in the wake of war.

It is, ordinarily, not without faith, for a nearby church stands proud on a secluded island but a short distance away by sail. Yet the pews now sit empty, the bells silent – for God has abandoned the townsfolk here to their misery and defeat.

The occupied settlement may still fly French flags on its walls to appease the remaining civilians, yet in each corner stands a Dutch soldier, and the stench of lingering death is still strong in the air.

It is a smell that leaves your breath shallow, throat tight. Pungent and sharp. An amalgamation of decay that scratches as it permeates your lungs.

You have docked in La Colonie a mere week after the supposed massacre. Dutch Merchant Company presence is high even as the conflict has already been driven north. Here, they resupply and rejoin the fray. Whether you feel a sense of victory or concern in the presence of these soldiers lies solely on the side you have chosen.

The nauseating bite in the air has a source: bodies piled high adjacent to where you stand, obscured by only the flimsiest layer of cloth sheeting.

Your eyes are drawn beneath, where a lone hand reaches out -- cold, grey, and still. In death, faction loyalty is but a line of an obituary, a needless fact. On both sides, lives have been lost and names will be forgotten.

In whispers and accusations, people have spoken to you of the destruction that took place, unaware of which allegiance you have claimed, but eager to share their pain nonetheless to any ear willing to listen:

Ships hoisting Dutch colours and pennants descended on the unsuspecting town as the bells chimed midnight on that fateful day. They tore through the populace with malice. Broadships from the harbour wrought devastation on the watchtowers and fortifications alike. Ascended weaponry is a cruel enough fate at sea, and an even worse one when turned on brick and mortar. Quick and precise, the attacks were coordinated, executed, and concluded.

La Colonie now lies bruised and battered in the wake of this. By the looks of the soldiers you pass by at the docks, both sides are equally worse for wear. Splints, bandages, limbs blown off; now wrapped and caked in blood.

“Now that’s a face I didn’t expect to see.” Your attention is broken from recollection as a voice breaches the deathly silence of the streets. “I’ll be damned, Captain, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

The man who approaches you is as familiar as all those of his trade are. A liaison to the Helm, a friend to The Abyss. He is a stocky man, clad in French fancies, rounded cheeks and wide eyes. Yet his gaze is tired, his gait stiff, and the smile you have grown accustomed to doesn’t quite stretch as far as it once had. There is, however, a sense of relief in seeing your presence. You’ve a hold full of supplies to trade -- supplies La Colonie is in desperate need of.

Sixteen crates, ranging from medical kits, gin and dried meats to sugar cane and rum. Your crew already busies itself in offloading the crates from the hull to shore. Though these are common supplies that may have once provided sustenance for a month, considering the current situation, they are but short-term aid for the people here. For you, it is nothing but coin to further your enterprise and efforts in this war.

The liaison lets out a held sigh as he passes you, eyeing the crates being stacked high. “Wonderful, *merci, merci, mon ami(e)*. (Thank you, thank you, my friend.)”

His gaze lingers on the supplies longer than needed, before clearing his throat and returning his gaze to you. “Booze’ll do the folks good. Lift some spirits, drown some sorrows. There’s a lot of them to douse, you see. I suppose you’ve heard the tales?”

You nod.

“As I thought. I saw it first hand,” He frowns, “Came out of the dark like shadows. Cut down everything in their path. The cannon fire too... Those blasted weapons, worse than any artillery I’ve seen. Saw a shot hit the marketplace. Folks were choking and wheezing, as if the Plague King himself were waltzing through it.”

His words are quiet, careful not to catch the attention of nearby ears, “If you ask me, it’s a little too convenient. Dutch dogs aren’t known for being subtle. They bark and bite. They’ve got their prize now though. Nothing left to fight back when the rest of their damned fleet arrived come daybreak.”

As the liaison speaks, further up the docks your eyes are drawn to a small group of DMC soldiers making their way towards an adjacent Frigate in the harbour. In between ranks of armed men, walk battered bodies of French prisoners. From this distance you can see that they are clad in soot and dirt, their eyes downcast. A march devoid of life in the direction they are being led.

“...Taking them to Grand-Fort.” The liaison muses dismally, having followed your gaze. “Lads’ll be nothing but forgotten names once the year’s out.”

Nameless soldiers following orders, defending their people, and facing the consequences of both.

One captive stumbles and falls. The hands of an adjacent artilleryman prevent him from hitting the ground, and rights him before he can do so. It is not clear whether the act was done in pity or in care.

Perhaps they only seek to bring a broken soul so far: down to submission, and not to death.

The answer, however, eludes you. As it eludes historians, who will seek to record these years on parchment; should such a loss of dignity and life be considered significant or noteworthy.



In Quiet Contemplation

Perhaps this war would have ended sooner, but rumours of the DMC's massacre have set old grudges ablaze once more. The Compagnie Royale and the Dutch Merchant Company continue to escalate their efforts on both sides, leaving the Indian Ocean painted crimson in the wake of war.

It is a war you have profited from - one that has continued to fill your ledgers, manufactories, and tankard alike. But it is a war, nonetheless, and with it, comes the weight of reality. Every decision you make can either damn or strengthen the reputation you have garnered, since first embarking from Sainte-Anne, with nothing but a dhow and a letter to your name.

Your crew trust you. Some remain for the coin, others out of loyalty. Yet no crew, no matter how loyal or greedy, can withstand a stray cannonball. Not least when those cannonballs are of a new tier; ascended and destructive. It takes but a stray moment to think back to those you have lost.

They come to you in flashes of memory. In quietened moments. In solitude. In the seconds where your breath has paused, stilled in absence. Your quill hovers just-so over parchment, held in quiet and distracted contemplation as you simply – *remember*. These are the minuscule periods of time where your mind is so easily swayed, captured, and drawn back. No matter how hard you may try to fight it, reminiscence wins out.

The smell of sharp salt air. Piercing rain against your cheeks. Above, in the height of a growing storm, your faction flag billows, snapping to and fro in a relentless surge of wind. As you glance below you see faces so familiar, and yet not. Faces that you have laughed with; raised a glass with, faces that have cracked jokes, that have lit up with eager pride to plunder that which you decide. Faces that are warm – **mangled**, kind, **crushed**...

Faces that paint the deck of your ship crimson, expressions trapped in time and frozen in their last moments of horrific realisation. As cannon fire claims their bodies, and the depths, their souls. Limbs torn asunder, the cries and screams lie silent and dead on their lips, parted just so.

Sons, daughters, husbands, wives. Stories not yet told to their appropriate conclusion, stolen away in the night by war. And not just any war, a war you chose—

“Captain.”

Asnah’s voice, with you so locked in recollection, rings out like a crack of gunfire as you’re pulled back to the present. Sea salt is swiftly replaced by the soft smoke of low-lit candles. The wafting scents of plated meats, forgotten beside you. Your office snaps back into focus sharply and it is too late to pull composure back to your expression.

One steady concealed breath, then another. The silence between you grows, broken only by the distant shouts and cheers from the adjacent bar; celebratory in the recent conclusion of fighting. Or rather, in the spoils that have been picked from it.

Asnah’s concerned gaze is heavy, even as you redirect your attention to the pile of unwritten letters. The paper has suffered from your moment of absence: blackened blots of ink staining the few words you’d managed to pen. Words that cannot convey to the families of the lost, any amount of condolences that would be appropriate.

“There is no good to be found in the chasing of ghosts.” Asnah continues, offering advice that you well know is spoken from experience. “It is a path with no end, and not one worth walking.”

This is not a conversation you wish to delve into, not least to keep those very ghosts at bay.

Thankfully, the ongoing state of war is of far more importance than a momentary lapse in thought and she doesn’t move to push the topic. Instead, she concludes by crossing the room to stand on the other side of the expansive desk, on which sits a large map of the Indian Ocean. In ink, hasty lines have been drawn to mark out rough territories that map the ongoing ebb-and-flow of war. Atop each mapped territory, small wooden flags depict the two warring factions.

“The French have those Dutch dogs on the run.” She starts, moving a hand to deftly knock over the latter’s flags in the East Indies. “Surprised they lasted as long as they did, with their forces in two. The Compagnie snapped at their heels and turned the tide. Those waters are theirs now.”

You suppose the victory was to be expected. Despite the Dutch holding strong in the East Indies for as long as they have, the loss of Fort Harimau, and all waters east to Rangnok Cove and beyond was but a foreshadowing of their latest fall from grace.

“Coast of Africa’s fared no better. Compagnie have seized the inland and continue to push back any resistance from the Confederation of Ungwana.” Asnah topples another DMC flag, in favour of the French one. It hits the map as soundlessly as the first two, in stark opposition

to the roaring cannon-fire that likely preceded the defeat on the seas. “Heard it’s got the Wolf-Hunter spooked.”

You’ve little doubt that Commodore Vanderkill seethes at this loss, given his reputation thus far for enduring so many.

“Both Vanderkill and the Hubac Twins have issued orders for their fleets to converge,” Asnah continues, “With the seas around Poacher’s Cache now Dutch, they will meet to the north.”

It appears the French hold the lead in this war, but only just.

There’s an eager smile on her lips as the First Mate reaches to the side of the map and picks up two carved wooden ships. That alone draws your attention and piques your interest.

“Freeman’s Luck shines upon us now, Captain. Both sides have called for reinforcements. The Opstuwing and Soleil Imperial sail for the Indian Ocean, armed to the brim with Harrow’s artillery.”

She places the two carvings on the map, on their respective paths to join the fray. “They are not to be underestimated. But neither are we.”

Two fresh targets. Each holds a fearsome reputation, and reward, if they are loaded with ascended weaponry as Asnah’s intel suggests.

“With that in mind, our course, Captain?”

The silence that follows Asnah’s question hangs in the air; an oppressive weight to the room. Each potential route could lead to fortune or the depths. Chaos continues to pull at the strings of both fleets, and it is those very deadly skirmishes that offer the most lucrative rewards: either from plunder and board, or from carefully formed allegiances.

The Indian Ocean, once a lawless expanse of piracy, continues to be crept upon by the megacorporations and yet the very activity that they seek to stamp out continues to benefit them.

It’s a difficult choice, each with its own advantages and shortfalls.

This war has slowly but surely eaten its way through the East Indies and the Cost of Africa, leaving only the Red Isle momentarily spared from most of the conflict. As it stands, this is a war on two continents doomed to fail.

If the two sides are to meet, then there’s a clear convergence point for you to lie in wait. With your mind set, you move to place a third carved ship north of the Red Isle. You will sail to the Open Seas and meet the forces head on; your chosen faction at your side, as you continue to profit on this skirmish between giants.



Don't Make Trouble, Galbi

"Galbi. (Friend.)"

Yanita's tone is as welcoming as ever, "My birdies sing tales of your prowess and accomplishments."

The bar around you is bustling with activity. The sound of spoken French and Dutch overpowers the other tongues commonly spoken within these four walls. It's evident - The presence of the two factions has begun to increase in the Red Isle. And where there's war, there's a need for indulgence; especially in the rum and wine that populates the Red Isle's trade routes. Neither the Compagnie nor DMC can resist these temptations. And though their presence is resented by the local captains, it has not dulled the atmosphere of the bar - bets on arm wrestling matches, cards and dice are as frequent as ever. The crack of tankards meeting. The sweet melody of an old shanty, sung drunk, half the words slurred or misspoken entirely. The bar is alive with the stories of women and men who have lived a life of adventure, no matter what side they come from...

Normalcy persists despite the growing oppression in the wake of war.

It is a war that continues to shift in favour of either faction, as if precariously dancing on the head of a pin.

Both sides met with brutal force along the full northern band of war.

The Compagnie Royale had sent for reinforcements from afar; and Soleil Imperial descended on the tumultuous waters of the Indian Ocean. Striking fear in her enemies from distance, she is a corvette not to be underestimated. Meanwhile the Dutch Merchant Company spared no time in commissioning Opstuwing to the front; likewise, a corvette of equal terror and firepower. Both ships, formidable, hunt the waters akin to predators stalking their prey.

As the smoke of cannon-fire settles once more, it is the Compagnie Royale who stand in the lead. Haphazardly shifting tides have turned the war even further in their favour. You've no doubt Jonas Vanderkill seethes at these further losses: for his reputation with the Dutch Merchant Company stands on the line. Under orders from Commodore-General Cornelis Van Kroon, he was to bring the Indian Ocean into the motherland's grasp, and yet this ambition has proven to be all bark -- and no bite.

Now, both sides now look to the Red Isles. The Dutch Merchant Company can yet recoup their losses, should they take the region for themselves.

"But, birdies do not do such tales justice, I'm sure." Yanita continues, drawing your attention back to her. She reaches to uncork a bottle, emptying the dark liquid into a glass. "How goes the hunt, in your own words?"

And so, it is with glass in hand, that you take the time to regale the Helm's proprietor of your latest exploits: facing down ascended elite ships, plundering settlement and forts alike, and the profits you have made thus far off the war effort. You have chosen your side, yet you garner profit from both: assets from those you sink, and a reputation amongst your allies. Though war has not been kind on those who have lost their souls, perhaps compensation is enough to feel it was worth it.

Yanita listens with interest, as she often does. You have much to thank the Helm for; an office to call your own, an empire to build on, connections, reputation, profit. But perhaps above all, it is the mutual respect that cannot so easily be found amongst Kingpins. Though you remain wary of the likelihood of any betrayals or backstabbing, the Helm's investment in your future thus far has come with fewer strings attached. It has been loyal, where others have sought you as tool or bait. You may brush shoulders with the likes of John Scurlock, yet that Caradec business still weighs heavy on you, a reminder that in these lands, selfish intent is as common as the waters you sail on.

As you conclude your tale, Yanita laughs. "Only a fool would stand against you. You've done well, and where you prosper, so do we. The megacorporations are baited into war and yet you keep a level head. It's admirable, Captain. As always, our offer of assistance remains open. Do not forget that you have friends that you can call on."

Friends.

A foreign word, in lands of greed and peril. Though the Helm remains shrouded in mystery, both Houma and Yanita have supported your endeavours with coin, knowledge, and a listening ear. In turn, you've defended the organisation's interests, not least for the rewards they bring you.

You lift the forgotten glass to your lips. It has warmed in the heat of the evening and yet the sweet taste that hits the back of your throat is familiar. Taken from your own reserves, a recipe that is both spiced yet sweet. Touches of fruit and cinnamon, sugar cane and--

Crash!

“Sale chien d’hollandais! (You dirty Dutch dog!)”

Bar fights aren’t rare -- if anything, they’re commonplace. Though perhaps less so under Yanita’s watchful gaze, than compared to other establishments in the den.

Two patrons are standing near the center of the room, unsteady in stance and loud in tone. Between them, a broken stool lies abandoned -- one leg missing, leaving a splintered stub where it ought to be.

On the left, a ragged, scruffy sailor; gruff in appearance. In his hand, the broken remains of the stool’s leg. Face contorted in drunken rage, he sways as he stands, waving the wooden ‘weapon’ haphazardly in front of him. The man’s own *actual* weapon sits as his hip, forgotten in apparent intoxication.

His target stands opposite, dressed in navy-blue Compagnie vestments. A tricorn hat sits atop his head. It speaks of refinement and wealth, not necessarily a visage you’d expect to lay eyes on in La Pont Muet. Much like his attacker, his stance is addled. It is a miracle that either of them are standing.

“What did you just call me?” The scruffy Dutch sailor growls.

The rest of the tavern falls abruptly silent. Dice roll and stall; cards are set down on tables. Hands move instinctively to sheathed weapons, and gazes track the growing tension with intent. Behind you, Yanita exhales a quiet sigh of frustration.

The Compagnie soldier is not inclined to back down from this drunken brawl. Foolishly, he steps forward and closes the distance between them, “I said-”

Crack!

In one smooth motion, the scruffy sailor swings the stool’s leg. It strikes the side of the unsuspecting Frenchman’s head with a resounding crack, and a splash of crimson follows. He lets out what seems to be a cry of victory, but then proceeds to stumble and fall over an adjacent table; sending cards and dice in the air. Much to the shock and displeasure of gamblers awaiting their turn to play, whose winnings are now strewn across the floor.

A moment of silence... And then the room descends into chaos.

Tables are knocked over. Stools are thrown, swung, and smashed. Fists meet faces. Tankards are emptied in one swift swig, then reappropriated as clubs.

Drink in hand, you watch it unfold as you might a theatrical stage comedy. One patron turns in your direction, and you instinctively duck as *something* narrowly flies overhead and misses you, harmlessly bouncing off the wall. It is a soft boot, of all things, that drops down behind the bar. To the right of the impact, Yanita’s cat yowls its disapproval, retreats from its barrel, and seeks cover.

Having missed his shot, the brawler turns his attention on you. Six foot in height, stocky. Opportunistic, or perhaps simply foolish, to be picking a fight with the only seated individual

left in the room. He locks his gaze on you and charges, pushing adjacent brawlers out of the way as he does. He raises a -- *is that a table leg?* -- and swings.

Bang!

The leg is mere inches from your face when the gunshot rings out. Far too close for comfort, you grasp the tankard in your hand tight, ready to make the same use of it as everyone else had.

Your eyes turn towards the raised table leg, whose center now boasts a smouldering bullet hole. The brawler stands shocked, motionless, both eyes wide as his drunken brain slowly but surely registers that near-miss shot. In careful motion, the weapon is lowered to the ground and dropped.

It hits the floor loudly; in stark contrast to the deadly silence that followed the gunshot.

Yanita lowers the pistol, and the tavern watches as its proprietor stares each and every brawler down with intent.

Finally, she *smiles* and sets the pistol back under the bar. "That's enough of that."

Her soft words, and warm demeanor contrast the rather abrupt chill in the room. And then, one by one, stools are set back on their feet, tables re-turned, and bottles carefully placed back on top in silent compliance. The Compagnie soldier, who is yet to recover from the Dutch sailor's repurposed stool battering, is dragged out unceremoniously from the bar. His opponent, battered and bruised, meets a similar fate.

"Now," Yanita's words draw your attention back to her, and she refills your glass as calmly as ever, "Where were we?"



Tides Are Turning, Cully

Inevitably, war reached the Red Isle.

Both the Compagnie Royale and the Dutch Merchant Company saw themselves spread precariously thin in their respective fleet's movements throughout this war.

Successfully goaded into a divided war of unparalleled weaponry, they dance at the behest of one man's chaotic script: Lucian Harrow. An agent of chaos who has profited from both sides flailing to uphold a semblance of strategy throughout. And although the man is conspicuous in his absence, his weapons trade continues to serve its purpose on the battlefield: decimation and destruction.

Not least, with the prior arrival of Opstuwing and Soleil Imperial.

Both ships faced unprecedented odds, with rumours of privateers for the Compagnie Royale going as far as to sabotage their own pledged-to faction. By engaging distracted Dutch forces as they sought to sink Soleil Imperial, these privateers struck blows on both sides and profited from looting both French and Dutch cargo. Unsurprisingly, they have since been issued warrants for their capture by Duke Henri Valois, on behalf of his Majesty.

Following this, with territories shifting to-and-fro between faction control, the favour of battle continued to shift to-and-fro. The Compagnie Royale swiftly captured the northwest regions and tactfully used this foothold to their advantage, moving war cargo fleets through their trade routes to support ongoing efforts in the remainder of the Red Isle, where Dutch presence continued to be a force to be reckoned with.

However, this resistance was not destined to last. As this phase of fighting comes to a close, the Red Isle is now in the hands of the Compagnie Royale. Through a final full-scale strategic overnight assault, the Dutch Merchant Company has successfully been brutally pushed from

the region. Battered and bruised, the remaining Dutch fleet now relocates to the south-eastern regions of the Indian Ocean.

As a result, French forces have increased throughout the Red Isle and now impose on John Scurlock's pirate haven -- much to the Kingpin's continued distaste. Whilst the Compagnie Royale has had an ever-growing foothold in the region since the decimation of Lanitra, it now holds the waters in iron grasp and threatens the rule of piracy within. Despite his displeasure for the influence on his den, there is still profit and knowledge to be had in this war, and Scurlock is ever keen to take advantage of it.

At his behest, hammers strike night and day in effort to understand and re-produce Harrow's artillery for his own benefit. An eerie sound that echoes throughout the haven.

The world has advanced in its cruelty: an additional tier of warfare layered on that which was already a death-sentence to many.

It is an arms race that pirates such as yourself strive to keep up with. Whether that be for profit, survival, or for the thrill of destruction -- that depends on you.

Another day dawns on Sainte-Anne.

Each morning brings an ever-growing number of crates housed outside of The Ink Blot. From Rafferty's experienced hand to Scurlock's discerning eye, these precarious wares make their way to the hulls of ships that are set to depart to who-knows-where. Dockworkers bustle from hull to warehouse, to warehouse to hull, carefully transporting every crate with care. Barely a glance is spared in your direction as they work.

You hear the grumbles though. The quietened notes of discontent that are so commonly heard from any who work under the Kingpin's oppressive scrutiny. Scurlock is as particular about the conduct of his wares as he is about postholes.

These crates are not just limited to weaponry. Resources, metals, linens, wood, ammunition. An expansive selection of procured and crafted industry. All waiting to embark onto wayward journeys to far away destinations. New York being one of them, despite Teuling's growing unease in the outcome of this war and what it could mean for trade at large. Not least, with the Dutch having secured the majority of the Coast of Africa.

None dare look your way as you approach, for fear of the grizzled bark that you can already hear from further down the docks. Your reputation speaks for itself. A growing star under Scurlock's watchful gaze, the symbol of profit in this ongoing war. Tales are tall of the plunders you succeed in, the war assets you pilfer, and the gold you hoard.

Roar and rage grow louder as you near the end of the wooden boards, which creak ever just so underfoot. Up ahead, the Lion of Sainte-Anne himself, John Scurlock, stands to observe the loading of his goods. The Kingpin is a man for many to be feared, though you share no such inclination. His boot rests atop a star-marked crate, an open bottle of wine in one hand, a ledger in the other.

“Bloody oaf!” He barks, as a worker stumbles and struggles to heft a crate onto a nearby stack, “So much as a dent, I’ll be shippin’ your limbs instead. Teuling’s slobbering hounds’ll eat for weeks.”

The frazzled man trips over his own words to apologise. It doesn’t seem to do much to alleviate Scurlock’s ire. However, as the worker’s attention shifts to your approach, it serves as enough distraction for the Lion to take note too. Something changes in the Kingpin’s expression then. It does not soften as such -- you are unsure the lion’s capable of being *soft* -- but the previous anger appears to abate slightly.

“Cully,” a warmer tone than the lashing the now-retreating dockworker had received, “Get over here.”

You approach, coming face to face with the man who not so long ago assisted in your rise in ranks. Once, you may have shrunk under the hardened gaze that turns your way. Now, you stand level to it. Confident in yourself -- in your legacy.

“You’ve been busy. Talk of your deeds is rife. Better job than half my Captains. Those French fucks have them scared. Sitting on their arses. Complaining they’ve got no safe passage!” Scurlock gestures to the surrounding docks, where *Compagnie Royale* colours now dominate the horizon.

“I order them to run the trade routes, and they would rather piss their pants, drink their sorrows! Gutless cowards, the lot of them.” The Kingpin raises the bottle in his hand up, crimson liquid sloshing haphazardly within at the movement.

“But not you.” He laughs, “You’ve got them shaking. Loading that fine hull of yours.”

The Kingpin raises the bottle to his lips and greedily gulps down the contents. His fondness for alcohol is well known throughout *Sainte-Anne*; given his regular pastime of emptying his guts over the docks, according to the workers whose whispers quietly taunt and mock behind closed doors. You’ve seen this indulgence for yourself, too. Memories of absconding with the *Margareta* whilst the captain himself rolled about his office rug, piss-drunk, loud, and waving his flintlock around as if it were a blade.

That night, the fires of *Fort du Lys* could be seen across the *Red Isle*. A Devil’s gambit, indeed. One of which you took no credit in. For all the world need know, John Scurlock pulled off that heist.

“The profits that bastard is turning...” Scurlock growls, pulling you back to the present as he lowers the near-empty bottle and all but glowers at the star-marked crate his boot rests on. “He’s got us running blind -- chasing our pissing tails! All while he’s rolling in coin and peddling arms for blood. Cowering in the shadows like the rat he is.”

“We’re in the fucking dark. It’s pitch black out there and *destiny*, she spits on our efforts.” There’s an anger in the Kingpin’s expression, anger borne of a storm. That very same storm of cannon fire that continues to envelope the *Indian Ocean* at chaos’ behest. “The megacorporations snap at each other like dogs, blind to the one man holding the leash.”

“I need you out there, Cully. Play this war. Sing their praises. Kiss their arses for all I care. But don’t forget who threw you that first scrap.”

He straightens and gives you one last appraising look before leaving, heavy steps retreating as the lion returns to his den, drink in hand.

You are no longer the washed-up remains of the Exeter’s pirate fleet. You are a feared Captain in your own right, with a stake in this war -- for profit or for fame. You have a vast empire at your fingertips and ships aplenty under your command to call your own. Whether Scurlock’s assumptions that you continue to bark at his beck-and-call are correct or not, his concern regarding the outcome of this war, and of the arms dealer who fuels it, is well placed.

It could very well beckon the beginning or end of an era. From outcast, to kingpin, you have made -- *and will continue to make* -- your name.

After all,

You owe your honour to the sea. Not to any crown.

End Of War – Compagnie Royale Victory



An apprehensive silence.

It is an absence of threat, fear -- of fire and destruction. It is naught but quiet.

No longer does the horizon crack with the sound of cannon fire. Nor do the waves bear the cries of countless drowned: the collateral of war.

As the first rays of morning light crest the ocean, it is evident that the fires of the Faction War have diminished.

The Compagnie Royale now holds the majority of the Indian Ocean in its grasp; a retribution for the losses inflicted at the capture of the now-named Megafort Wolvenhol. Vast stretches of the East Indies and the Red Isle are under French patrol.

In the face of ever-increasing odds, the Dutch Merchant Company has signed a ceasefire. An act that may surprise some, given the Wolf-Hunter is not so easily leashed.

Thus follows a pause at the end of a bloody campaign, filled with lives lost and profits gained.

From the start, escalating tensions between the two factions lit the spark of war across two continents. The Compagnie Royale laid siege to Fort Harimau, whilst the Dutch Merchant Company did much the same to Grand-Fort. Each claimed the opposition's territory for its own. These conflicts, so suspiciously timed, served to begin the Faction War which would follow.

Rumours spread of a massacre at La Colonie, which the DMC fervently denied involvement in, despite eye-witness claims of otherwise. Regardless, the faction proceeded to take advantage of the disarray and seized the region for itself. In return, the Compagnie Royale

continued its disruption in the East Indies and expanded its territory eastwards from Fort Harimau, forcing the Dutch Merchant Company to retreat from previously patrolled waters. A loss that left the Orang Kaya concerned in the face of a new megacorporation's might.

With the French hot on its sails, this retreat left the Dutch Merchant Company's fleet split in two. Unfortunately, this put it at a disadvantage, for both the North-Eastern and Eastern East Indies were swiftly snatched up by the Compagnie Royale in pursuit. In the Coast of Africa however, Dutch efforts continued to pay off as the faction secured an additional region, further fortifying an ever-growing foothold to maintain control of the southern regions of the continent.

Then came the orders. Both sides spread too thin. Hurried commands saw the war converge, blanketing the Open Seas in a wide band of destruction that stretched throughout both continents. The Soleil Imperial and Opstuwing arrived to reinforce their respective factions. Two fearsome vessels outfitted with vicious ascended artillery, crafted at Harrow's behest. The Dutch Merchant Company successfully established control of an additional region in the western seas of the East Indies even whilst it continued to retreat from French forces.

For the Compagnie Royale, capture of the remaining regions in Coast of Africa allowed it to secure the northernmost seas to its advantage. This served as a strategic capture to hamper the DMC's efforts in running its trade-routes through the northern coast.

Eventually came the decisive point of war.

The Red Isle. An explosive -- and for a time unpredictable -- battle that played out viciously across the land of liberty. The Dutch Merchant Company held its ground in foreign waters already core to French trade: unleashing an impressive assault that carried on well into the days and nights that followed.

However, it was not to last. The Compagnie Royale successfully turned the tide of battle and annihilated the Dutch in the dead-of-night, forcefully removing its presence from their waters, pushing any remaining fleet to the south-east.

Despite reaching the edges of the Indian Ocean, the Dutch Merchant Company successfully fought back against the pursuing French forces. Reinforcements from the surrounding Dutch settlements served to replenish its ranks, leaving much of the final region in its grasp. It is a small victory on the final eve of battle.

The Faction War has come to a ceasefire. The Compagnie Royale has successfully hounded the Dutch and stands victorious.

Now is the time to resupply, repair, and for respite. Time to take a breath -- and to take stock.

Through the co-operation of the Chorus Fleet, the Hubac Twins have succeeded thus far in the eyes of His Majesty. Though they care not for the fires of megacorporation war, they have orchestrated every note and beat under the assurance that their co-operation is but one step closer to a return to stage. A promise not forgotten and a prize still very much sought.

For the Dutch Merchant Company, this silence is bitter. The wolf's bark may have been louder than its bite, with Commodore Vanderkill temporarily brought to heel. Preceded by his failure in securing Dutch trade-routes on his initial return to the Indian Ocean, the Faction War thus far is another loss in his ongoing descent into disreputation.

Already, rumours spread in hushed words amongst his fleet that his own generals have paid the price for his folly in this war: culled, blamed and quartered.

The Wolf now licks his wounds in pause. This war is not over. For the sake of the Motherland, for his reputation, there will be retribution.

For you, Captain, whether it is a sense of victory you feel, or the loss of defeat, solely falls on the side you chose.

You have profited from this war fought by the nameless: soldiers and privateers both who danced to the result of Lucian Harrow's chaotic script.

In this reprieve you may turn your attention once more to your trade routes. Your empire stands ready. This has been a war forged in another's name. Now your smokestacks are fuming, and it will be your fires to stoke, your profits to stamp, rivet and ship.

The Indian Ocean is vulnerable. It will take time to recover, and in that time, the Compagnie Royale revels in this victory. A bold statement that it is not wise to antagonise the French.

But how long will this ceasefire last?

Only time will tell.



Battle Phase 1 Conclusion

War has come. Simultaneous assaults on Grant-Fort and Fort Harimau have reached their conclusion.

Both assaults were successful in their plans: for The Dutch Merchant Company have lost their hold on the territory surrounding Fort Harimau, and The Compagnie Royale have lost theirs in Africa. However, this leaves both sides in equal conquest, with a territory each to their name.

Conflict now pushes north in Africa, and to the east in the East Indies. Fresh rumours of a massacre in La Colonie have begun to **spread** by word-of-mouth, claiming that the Dutch are to blame. The War continues, Captains.



Battle Phase 2 Conclusion

Early on, rumours of a massacre at La Colonie freshly stoked the flames of war, leaving neither side willing to back down. Strung into battle and armed with brokered weapons, both sides laid siege to their opponent. The Indian Ocean stood no chance against this destructive power.

The Dutch Merchant Company has secured control of territory in Africa, pushing back French resistance, quelling these false tales by force. However, in the East Indies, the Compagnie Royale has taken its own territory, securing their hold in the regions around Rangnok Cove.

Conflict continues to push north in Africa yet becomes a divided force in the East Indies; as three separate territories move into full-scale battle.



Battle Phase 3 Conclusion

Conflict previously crept towards the northern parts of the Coast of Africa and two divided territories in the East Indies.

The **Compagnie Royale** showed fearsome military power during the resulting conflict and succeeded in taking the majority of contested territories. However, the **Dutch Merchant Company** was not to be underestimated and completed a capture of its own singular territory, seeking to resupply and regroup.

War is now moving to the Open Seas and the northern band of the Coast of Africa. Pirates and privateers continue to reap the spoils for their chosen faction, loyal or no.

Fresh adversaries await. Both sides call in the pinnacle of their firepower. The Soleil Imperial and the Opstuwing, two fearsome enemies, enter the fray to inspire fresh terror in those that they turn their cannons against.



Battle Phase 4 Conclusion

Both factions received the same orders: to converge on a central point of conflict. A strategic attempt to avoid further fracturing of forces in a war already spread too thin. Each sought to lay claim to the northernmost reaches of the Indian Ocean, leaving vast expanses of sea to welcome fresh souls to the Locker. Now, only wrecks remain to evidence the wake of war.

The Compagnie Royale laid claim to most of the contested regions and has secured a strong foothold across the Coast of Africa and the Open Seas. However, the Dutch Merchant Company has held its ground despite these odds, and conquered a singular region for its forces to regroup in.

War has inevitably turned towards the Red Isle, spreading a smothering, suffocating rain of cannon fire that claims the lives of loyal men and profiteering privateers. Tensions are growing both on land, and at sea, as the megacorporations continue to tear each other asunder, armed to the brim with Harrow's sold artillery.



Battle Phase 5 Conclusion

Previously, the Red Isle was blanketed in cannon fire and smoke. With both faction forces swarming the region, the devastation that followed was nothing short of catastrophic. Many captains refused to leave port out of fear. Trade routes temporarily came to a standstill. Now, this latest battle has come to its conclusion.

The Compagnie Royale was unrelenting in their capture of the Red Isle's territory, brutally pushing the Dutch Merchant Company to retreat from the region.

The final fight begins. Both sides are now showing signs of slowing with morale and exhaustion at an all-time low. The war nevertheless pushes south-east, towards the furthest reaches of the Indian Ocean.