

**Chapter 1: Duty, Purpose, Freedom, Adventure**

Of all of the islands of the New World, Last Drop was definitely not the most famous, nor the most important. It was an insignificant tropical island: surrounded by bright clear shallow waters, with glorious sandy beaches that lead around the north and east sides. Towards the southwest, these sands slowly blended into the island's namesake, an underwater slate cliff; its top shallow enough to walk on, with water only ever up to your knees. A small mountain, although most would deem it a hill, stood nearer the north than the south, with large bulbous circae trees decorating its surface in a crescent formation. A cool clear stream flowed from these woods, heading south through the small village that inhabited the island, eventually meeting the dark ocean water that indicated the true start of The Frontier.

Sat comfortably atop a large boulder, close to the local divers, but far enough not to warrant conversation, Alara sat watching. The sun had only just started to wipe away the early morning mist and already the village was active, collecting fish and pearls from the ever-giving cliff. The divers, dressed in their skin-tight wetsuits, dove down deep, aggravating the jet clams that lined the underwater cliff. Amidst the blasts of water, shot out against their aggressors, pearls would fly, and the water above would bubble. The fishing folk, ready with their nets, would snatch at any foolish fish caught in the streams, dropping them swiftly into their prepared tanks. The conscripted children and apprentices would then sort the fish, throwing back the small to be caught another day. It was a routine, unique only to this time of year, and one she had grown to enjoy spectating.

With the clean salty air in her lungs, and her tangled, shoulder-length, brown, bedhead smoothed out by the wind, Alara rose to her feet, before looking longingly towards the south. She shook her head and spread her arms wide, following up with a large yawn, before leaping off the rock to the grass beneath. Her scabbard and holster jangled as she landed dully, and she quickly checked behind to see if she had left anything. She followed up by checking her trouser and coat pockets, counting off her keys, her money pouch, and the various other random items she had forgotten to take out from the night before. Satisfied, she set off back towards the village, although she took the long route out of idle curiosity.

Heading up along the gurgling stream, she neared the crown of the hill, yells and grunts getting ever louder as she got closer. In the small clearing, surrounding the mountain spring, a young man stood swinging a long sabre. He had short

black hair; recently cut, and looking surprisingly good, for her own handiwork. Sweat dripped from his pointy nose, and his eyes matched the darkened morning sky. "Morning Alara," he said casually, as he rounded an imaginary target, before sidestepping and lunging with his sword. "Morning Jayce," she replied, with an upbeat tone. "You're up early!" she added, taking off her coat and laying it down, next to the spring, in the centre of the clearing.

"It's an important day ahead, I figured I'd make it count," he smirked, sheaving his blade, and locking it in its scabbard, before turning to face her. "What's happening today, what have I forgotten?" Alara asked quickly, panicked confusion spreading across her face as her olive skin blushed a deep red. "You'll figure it out. Anyway... bring it!" he declared, pointing his sheaved blade at her, with one hand behind his back. Alara nodded and took her pose, with her heels perpendicular to each other and holding her own large sheaved blade, a dromon, with both hands. Jayce initiated the duel, pushing hard with a series of quick and simple strikes, eager to close the distance that Alara's longer sword controlled. Alara matched him strike for strike, her brown, almond-shaped, eyes watching his wrist, rather than the blade, as she prepared for his tricks.

He upped the tempo, stepping boldly towards her and using his spare hand to add more force behind his strikes. He pushed her back, forcing her to either match him or retreat; she chose the latter, unaware of his trap. He used a quick feint, aiming a quick slash towards her right arm, before slipping into her guard as she swung to block the now gone blade. She rushed to meet him - only to receive a smack on the hand from his weapon; her sword dropped from her grip and bounced away in the grass. "Ow, ow!" she yelled, as he stepped back, following with a bow.

"I win!" he said smugly, his fair skin flushed and awfully sweaty from the morning workout. Alara gritted her teeth and bowed her head. "Well fought. I yield," she said. Jayce picked up her sword and handed it back to her, with an annoying grin. "So, what's happening today?" Alara asked, taking back her blade, before flicking his ear with her finger. "They're back," he said, pointing off to a single ship in the distance, as it circled quickly around the west side of the island, towards the dock. Alara picked up her coat and the pair of them left, following the stream back to their village.

Crafted from the large circae trees found at the top of the island, the village of Last Drop housed only a few more than a hundred people, and of the thirty or so buildings in the village, Alara's home sat at the top. The stream ran straight

through the village with small water wheels located at each significant decline, and curved wooden bridges allowing for easy crossing. As Alara and Jayce followed the waters, chatting casually to each other as they walked, they eventually paused outside of Alara's cottage. It was a small wooden house, freshly varnished, with a dull blue slate roof and a slightly more colourful, small blue door.

Alara opened her door with her keys and dropped off her coat in its usual place, before closing the door, and ensuring that she relocked the house. Jayce rolled his eyes, and with her satisfied, they continued a little ways down the path to the next house along. It was a larger wooden house, with a red slate roof instead and a small balcony looking out towards the dock. Jayce walked up to the door and walked straight in, wiping his feet on the entrance mat inside. He held the door open for Alara and took off his shoes before planting himself at the bottom of his staircase, located nearby. He cupped his hands to his mouth, glancing over at Alara, who was already protecting her ears, before bellowing out to the sole other occupant of the house.

"Damian! Get out of bed, now!" he roared, afterwards mouthing a three second countdown as he looked at Alara. She uncovered her ears and rolled her eyes. A crash, followed by a door being slammed open, and finally the sounds of rapid footsteps echoed from the upstairs landing. A young boy thundered down the stairs, launching himself from about midway onto his older brother at the bottom. They collided and rolled away from each other in a flurry of limbs. "You could wake me up in a nicer way, you know," grumbled the younger clone of Jayce, as he stood up with his right foot on Jayce's face. The elder of the pair threw off the younger before getting to his feet. "Yeah... well, better me than Mum," Jayce retorted. Both boys shuddered, prompting a small smile from Alara.

Of the pair, Jayce was significantly taller, and much more muscular than his smaller, skinnier brother, but outside of the body proportions they both looked very similar. Black short hair, fair skin, taken from their father's side, and a small pointy nose from their mother's. Although, as Alara analysed the boys, the subtle difference in eye colours stood out. Jayce's were blue, Damian's were green. "What are you staring at, Alara?" interceded Damian, cutting into her thought process. "Ah nothing. Want some breakfast?" she asked, rolling up the sleeves of her navy fleece and stepping into their kitchen. Both of the boys trailed behind like ducklings as Alara settled in, reaching to the several cupboards that decorated the open room. "Where do you want us?" Jayce asked, already aware

of the answer. "It's fine, just make yourselves useful somehow," Damian mimicked, before Alara could answer. She blushed and instead grabbed a cloth and bucket. "For that you can go clean the windowsills before- "

A knock came from the door. "Ah never mind, go let Corina in," she ordered. Damian stuck his tongue out at her, and she swore at him, before throwing the now wet cloth at his head. As the pair squabbled, Jayce went to open the front door. "Corina Liu herself, come in," Jayce said, amidst the background chaos. "Anarchy as always I see. I'll tend to it," smiled Corina, her imperial accent coming through especially heavy this morning. She had her work uniform on already, a simple white shirt, with a pair of suspenders attached to smart trousers and a black tie. Her long, dark brown hair was tied up in a bun, with her signature silver and pearl hairpin holding it in place. She winked at him with her soft brown eyes as she stepped past, the faintest trace of wrinkles lining her face; her orchid scent flowed through him as she silenced the chaos with a glance.

"Morning Corina!" clamoured the pair, as they quickly settled down. She folded her arms and looked back over her shoulder at Jayce. "See, easy," she added smugly. Corina slung her backpack off her shoulder onto the dining room table with a thud, reaching in and pulling out a stack of heavy tomes. They slammed down in front of Damian, to his horror, and she glowered at the early teenager. "Homework, get reading. You have till the end of the week before I test you," she declared, before walking up to the stove and shooing Alara out of the kitchen.

"More! You've got to be kidding me!" moaned Damian, as he flicked through the smallest of the books thicker than his hand. Both Jayce and Alara couldn't help but giggle a little, as they reminisced over their own days of Corina's lessons. "Whilst your parents are deployed, I'm in charge of your education. Don't like it, I'll take you to them and you can explain it to your mother," she threatened casually. Damian immediately muted his whining and waited till her back was turned to make any physical complaints.

"You're about thirty years too early to get away with that sort of attitude with me, Damian. You're doing the dishes after breakfast," she declared with a cold steel tone, not even turning around to see his shock. Worried about getting caught out next, Alara and Jayce started to set the table before taking their seats. Corina served them pancakes, accompanied with several berries and jams, before she headed over towards the door, leaving behind the dirty pans and bowls in the sink. "When you three have tidied up - and have said your hellos, hurry over to the pub. Today's going to be busy, so don't get carried away - Jayce," she

added, before heading out of the door. Both Alara and Damian looked at Jayce with a smug smirk, he retaliated by pulling a face at Alara and kicking Damian in the shins.

They finished their breakfast and started their chores - Damian with the dishes and Jayce with the windowsills, whilst Alara flicked through Damian's books. They were mostly on sailing and weapon theory, a staple of every child's education in the wider imperial world, but snuck in-between were a few books on pre-modern history that Alara hadn't seen before - dating no further than six-hundred years ago, the day the dungeons opened. Alara scolded herself shaking her head, of course there would be no earlier books than before the apocalypse - she thought. With her curiosity satisfied, she stood up and made her way out to the hallway.

Lining the walls of their home were photographs of Jayce and Damian, with some containing her, but mostly containing their parents. She followed her usual path, Damian as a baby, Jayce as a toddler, Jayce and Alara by the sea with Damian in a pram... until finally she paused at the same photo she always did. A picture of four smiling adults at Corina's bar, her parents and Jayce's. Her heart twisted as it always did and she leant back against the opposing wall, one hand resting on her forehead, the other on the wall. "You okay?" asked Damian, looking up at her as he walked out of the dining room. She rested her hand on his head and nodded. "They'll come back," he offered, as he hugged her. She shook her head.

They put their shoes on, after Alara had sent the boys to brush their teeth, and stepped out into the morning sun. The fishers and divers had returned, and the village had awoken like a cat demanding breakfast, loudly and everywhere. From Jayce's front door, they could see the village all hurriedly heading towards the dock, all rushing to greet the visitors to their island. Damian's eyes widened and without hesitation he charged down the path, leaving the pair behind. "Damian!" called Alara after him, not expecting an answer, but at least a look. "Was I like that at his age?" Jayce asked, as he locked up his house. "Worse," she laughed. "Go after him, make sure he doesn't pull a 'you' and try to flee home," she mocked, with an edge of sincerity, as she poked his chest, "I'm going straight to Corina's." Jayce feigned offence, rolling his eyes at her. "That was one time, and I was fine on my own for a while!" he stated in defence. Alara shook her head and walked off, waving behind her.

Jayce followed Damian, at a more casual pace than the excited thirteen year-old, taking in the sight of the busy village. His neighbours greeted him as he passed,

most observing the already busy dock, and he gave a gentle nod back in their direction. He continued down the central village path, the previous stone steps changing to cobblestone as he passed Holli's general store, marking the decrease in decline as the island hill smoothed out. Her grandparents, both wrinkled like prunes and resting on walking sticks stood outside the shop, no doubt tending to it as she went to trade with the visitors. They waved kindly at Jayce, her grandfather smiling broadly with a rather toothless grin, and he waved back. "Has the mail come yet?" Jayce asked them casually, as he passed. "Not yet, the delivery bird only left a week ago," answered Holli's grandmother, pointing to the empty perch above the entrance. "It'll be another few weeks," she added. Jayce nodded and continued onwards towards the dock, stepping through the countless villagers to get to the front of the crowd.

Among the various docked fishing boats, as well as Corina's Voyager yacht, sat the ship Eros. The triple-decked merchant sailing ship dwarfed the other ships in the dock, despite remaining some ways out on the pier. Its hull was a soft eggshell colour, with swirls of red decorating the ship from bow to stern. The ship had three masts, each containing three sets of red sails, with the mainsail of the forward mast displaying the title of the vessel's crew - The Valentinos. As Jayce looked up at the ship from the pier, he spotted a familiar face, the captain's first mate. He stood tall, towering over the ragtag crew as he commanded them to prepare their goods for disembarkation. His colourful fur stood out, shining brightly in the light; then again a giant humanoid tiger would stand out regardless.

"Oi Tanare!" yelled Jayce. The giant tiger's ears perked up and he looked overboard, with what constituted for a grin, at the small man beneath him. "Jayce! Good to see you!" he called out, before turning back to his underlings and roaring some more orders. "The captain is waiting for you; your brother is already on board!" he yelled down, over the sounds of the crowd. Jayce gave a thumbs up and rushed over to the main gangplank, hurrying up it to get on board. The various crew disembarking stepped aside to let him past, each greeting him as he continued forwards.

He stood at the top and looked across the wooden deck, spotting his brother near the middle, stood talking to a man dressed in a fine red jacket with a stupid looking feathery hat on his head. "Permission to come aboard, captain?" Jayce asked excitedly. "Granted," said Captain Richard Valentine, with an equally wide grin on his face. Jayce leapt aboard and he hugged the older man tightly. "You've gotten taller, or have I gotten smaller? Ah doesn't matter, as long as I'm

taller than one of you two boys," he said, smirking at Damian. He stroked his silver goatee and looked Jayce once over. "You've grown into a fine young man Jayce. Nearly as fine as myself... less handsome of course," he joked.

Jayce rolled his eyes and looked around at the stacks of cargo they were offloading. "Big haul? Where have you been?" he probed. Valentine dismissed his question with a wave. "I'll recount tales of our adventure later at Corina's. For now, however, I must ensure everything is in order - we leave again in a few hours on our greatest voyage yet!" he proclaimed, to the cheers of his crew. He stepped past the boys, turning around as he walked away. "Wait here, just a second!" he instructed, with a wink.

With the captain wandering his ship looking for crew to annoy, Tanare made his way over to the pair, the planks of the ship rumbling slightly with each of his giant steps. The tiger-man looked down at the boys, easily over a foot and half taller than the already tall Jayce, his muscles straining against the white shirt he had on. The cursed man held himself strongly and neither Jayce nor Damian held his situation against him, it wasn't his fault and by no account did they feel he was a bane. A deep scar cut across his mouth and it was clear to see where one of his large teeth had been forcefully pulled out in his younger years.

Jayce met his orange eyes and extended his fist to the giant tiger; Tanare made a fist of his own, folding his human-like hand over and retracting his claws. It was almost twice the size of Jayce's and he tapped it in mutual respect. "The captain has something he wants to talk to you about, Jayce; I'd advise you grab him and head to Corina's sooner rather than later. I've got the crew," he suggested, picking up a crate the size of Jayce and walking towards the gangplank. "Give Corina and Alara my best!" he added, with a wink, before stepping out of sight. The two boys grinned at each other and went to grab the captain.

Forcing Valentine to leave his stupid hat behind, Jayce and Damian dragged him off the ship and through the crowd. They took one of the main paths away from the dock, heading back up the hill towards a large tavern on the west side of the village. As always 'The Emperor's Rest' was a welcoming sight, its windows glowed from the inside and the smell of food flowed out of its door. The trio stepped through the large doorway and walked straight up to the bar. Jayce slid smoothly over the seat, sitting on it without an issue. Valentine performed a small jump to position himself neatly on the stool to his left. Damian had to use the step to sit on the stool to the right.

Alara smirked at the three boys from the other side of the bar. "How may I help you?" she asked Jayce and Valentine, filling a glass with water, and handing it to Damian without even asking. "Rum. Two glasses, please," requested the captain. Alara nodded and poured them their drinks, and then leant across the back of the bar. "It's good to see you are doing well, Alara. Have you applied for the marines yet?" he inquired, downing his drink, whilst Jayce nursed his. "I'm waiting on my references to come back, and I still need to find a way up to the capital. Are you heading that way?" she asked, refilling his glass from the bottle.

The stool to the captain's left shifted as a dark skinned woman sat down. She took off her dark green peaked cap and rubbed her shaved head, before turning to the captain with a smile, her green navy uniform immaculate as always. A double breasted tailcoat over a white shirt, a matching ascot around her neck, and large baggy trousers tucked into a pair of shiny black boots that came up to the knee. Alara poured an identical drink and passed it over. "Hello Sara," greeted Valentine. She smirked and leant on her elbow. "Hello Dick. Not here to cause more trouble are you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow and swirling her glass. "No, of course not, Lieutenant. Not here anyway," he joked... somewhat.

Corina poked her head out from the kitchen, followed by another head, much larger and higher up. "Is that Richard Valentine I hear?" she asked, stepping out into the bar. Another body followed behind, dwarfing the woman as Ottar, another baned, but a humanoid otter instead, brought out some food for the other patrons. "It is indeed, how are you dear?" he asked, tapping Ottar on his chunky rear as he passed by. Ottar ignored the captain with a grunt and wandered over to the other tables. "I'm good, things are good here. I heard you're departing this afternoon, where are you rushing off to this time?" Corina asked curiously, as she leant forwards across the bar.

Alara picked up the captain's glass and went to refill it again, as he took a deep breath before smiling. "We are going to The Frontier!" he declared. The glass fell from Alara's otherwise steady hands as the bar silenced, hitting the floor with a crash. He maintained his smile, as the faces of everyone around him darkened. Jayce, as well as the other patrons in earshot all looked towards Alara. Her shoulders shook softly, and her hair hid her face. "Are you an idiot?" Alara asked quietly, as she leant over the bar towards the captain, the shattered glass crunching under her shoes. Valentine held his tongue, aware exactly of what he had just triggered.



"No one comes back from there. No one!" she snapped, pacing back and forth angrily. "Are you so willing to just throw away your life, the lives of your crew?" she demanded. Sara looked at Alara and then at the captain next to her. "Captain, what you just admitted to this entire bar is a crime. You knew that right?" she asked him, standing up. He nodded and looked at her. "Are you going to arrest me?" he asked softly, turning on his seat to face her. Sara sighed and put her cap back on. "Officially, by all rights, I should. However, it is your choice to risk your lives and I can't stop you," she stated. Alara went to speak, but Sara halted her with a look. Desperately, Alara looked towards Jayce, waiting for him to say something... anything. Instead, he finished his drink and looked down at his lap. Valentine tapped Jayce on the shoulder. "Mind if we talk outside, briefly?" he asked, pulling from his pocket a few circular nacre coins, and placing them on the bar. Jayce nodded and the pair stepped outside.

Alara looked at Sara, silently demanding an explanation, but she simply shook her head before reaching behind the counter for the bottle of rum. Slowly the other patrons started to chatter again, and the deafening silence faded. She wondered what they were talking about, as she looked out the door, but resigned herself to tidying up her mess. Damian sat quietly in his seat, unsure of what to say, as he saw Alara's eyes grow more and more panicked as their conversation continued outside. She resumed pacing, muttering under her breath. She grasped both thumbs in her palms and bit her lip, until finally, she stepped out from behind the bar, with Damian following closely behind in pursuit, as they rushed to the door.

Outside, Valentine nodded. "I understand," he confirmed, resting a hand on Jayce's shoulder. "We'll be waiting for you, when you're ready," he added, just as Alara stepped out of the door. Her heart dropped, and the colour faded from her face as she looked at the pair. Jayce turned to look at her, his face unusually serious. As he opened his mouth to speak, far off in the distance, the sound of three soft thumps rang out, followed by a strange whistling. Their eyes widened as just down the path a house collapsed, wood and stone flying into the air before a fiery blast followed. "Cannon fire!" yelled Jayce, grabbing Damian and putting him behind him, as he scanned the horizon for the aggressor.

"There!" called Alara, as she pointed at a large warship sailing towards the dock. "It's the Navy!" she declared, as she noticed the blue and gold imperial colours. Jayce followed her gaze and spotted the ship, immediately noticing the flags it was flying. "They're here, shit. I thought we had longer," muttered Valentine, as the enemy ship fired another volley against the island, fires spreading quickly

and screams filling the air. He turned to face Jayce, only to freeze as he looked past them. "Captain Richard Valentine, you're under arrest! What the hell did you do to incite the Church against you? Why are inquisitors here?" Sara demanded, pointing her pistol at him. She stepped past Alara, and Jayce immediately moved Damian, and himself, out of the line of fire.

"Sara, you don't have to do this," Valentine said calmly, his hand hovering by his side. "The sooner we leave, the less the island will be in danger. Let me go. We didn't start this," he asked, his soft, casual demeanour replaced with a stern and serious glare. "I can't believe you, Dick. By the gods, I knew this would happen. You just kept sticking your nose deeper into places you shouldn't have." Alara stared at Valentine, whilst Jayce watched the inquisitors set fire to the island. "There is more to this world than what we are told by them. I refuse to ignore it and you should too," he said calmly. Sara shook her head. "You broke the rules, all of this is on you," she refuted. "Surrender. Now!" The captain bent his knees slightly and hovered his hand over the holster on his belt. "I can't do that, old friend." Sara gritted her teeth and tensed her shoulders, pulling the trigger.

The bullet missed as Valentine twisted his body, simultaneously drawing his own pistol and retaliating by shooting her in her bicep. Her weapon fell to the floor, and she fell backwards, reeling in pain. The pistol landed at Alara's feet, and without hesitation, she picked it up, but by the time she aimed it at the captain, Jayce had already stepped between them. "Alara! Put it down!" he told her, spreading his arms. "He's a criminal Jayce, and he just shot a navy officer. Step aside!" she ordered, her arms shaking and her vision blurry. Jayce maintained his eyes on her and stepped towards her, until the end of the pistol hovered less than an inch away from his heart. "Captain, get out of here! Survive!" he yelled backwards. Valentine nodded, looking towards them, unable to meet Alara's gaze as tears streamed down her face. "Thank you Jayce... I'm sorry."

Jayce took the pistol from her and threw it away into the grass, before hugging her tightly. Alara opened her mouth to say something, only to squeak as she buried her face in his shoulder. She shoved him backwards angrily, only hard enough to push him back a step, before turning to Sara and applying pressure to the wound, ripping off her sleeve to use as a bandage. "Dammit!" yelled Sara, as she lay back on the ground clutching her arm and breathing deeply. "I'm okay," she affirmed, to herself more than to Alara. Jayce grit his teeth, before he looked

towards his brother sitting quietly to the side. Damian wasn't paying any attention to them, instead he looked towards the waters.

Jayce followed his gaze and turned to see. The Eros had departed, sailing quickly out of the dock, every sail on the ship taut in a perfect wind as it accelerated away from the island. Bolts of light flew between the two ships and the cannonballs fired from the navy ship seemed to fly wide, even from the close distance. The Valentinos sailed straight past their enemy, continuing quickly south. By the time the inquisitor vessel had come about, it was too late; the Eros sailed past Lone Rock, marking a point of no return as they sailed into unknown waters. The pursuing ship turned around once more, abandoning its prey, as Dick Valentine, and his crew, sailed off towards the giant wall of trees, reaching beyond the heavens, known as The Frontier.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: A Choice Made**

Aboard the Eros, the Valentinos breathed a sigh of relief as the inquisitors turned away. "All crew to their prepared stations!" ordered Tanare, as he stood behind the ship's wheel. The crew immediately set to work, rushing to their official stations as The Frontier grew ever closer. Valentine sat down next him, holding his head in hands as he leant against the railings of the aft deck, breathing heavily. "So," asked Tanare, handing the captain his overly large hat. "Do you still think we shouldn't have brought Jayce along?" Valentine looked up, and let out a long sigh before chuckling to himself. "Funny enough, Jayce said he wasn't ready," he answered. Tanare let out a long hearty laugh, helping his captain to his feet. "Well that solves that. Probably for the best..." he said, as a shadow fell across the entire ship.