

THE
TWELVE KEEPERS
CHAMBER OF THE SEVEN CROWNS

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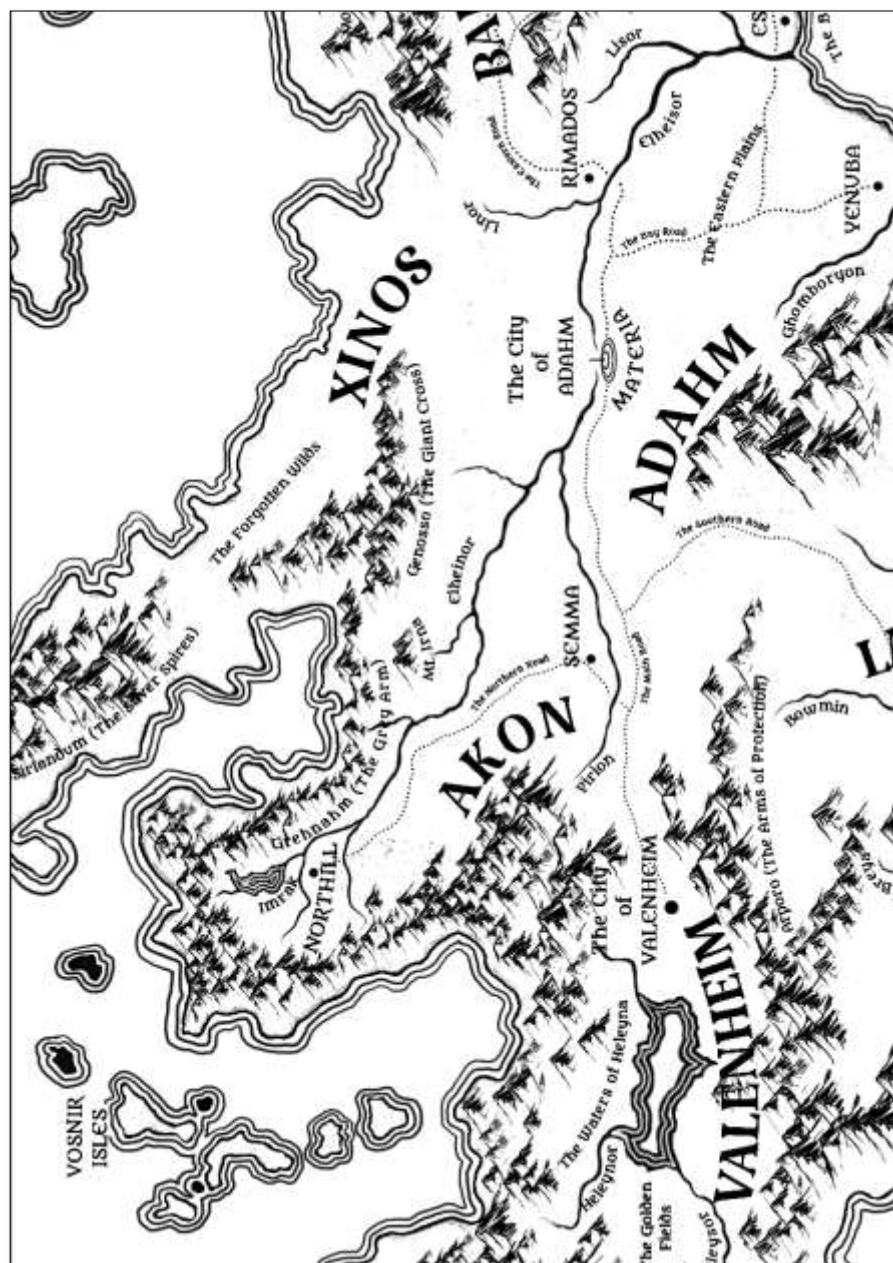
For inquiries, visit www.thetwelvekeepers.com or email
info@thetwelvekeepers.com

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C.J. VAN DYK

MAPS









CHAPTER 1

I. A Father's Dream

Alfred squinted against the rays of the early morning sun. "Where are you?" he wondered as he raised an arm towards the sky, pretending to squash the glowing disk that dwindled far above. Then he released it from his grip and let his arm fall beside him as a cool breeze came by from the east, turning the baking heat into bliss. "Alright, five more minutes," he yawned, rolling over.

He knew however, a time would come wherein he could sleep no more. Soon, his dreams would melt away under the light of a world more beautiful than he could have ever imagined. "I suppose it is time to go. No one's coming," he sighed.

But as he sat up, a presence flooded over him, causing his head to turn. There was a fox sitting far away with a violet coat that blew gently in the wind. There was something peculiar about the creature's gaze, however, for its eyes were like those of a man. It stared at him without fear, as if it knew who Alfred was.

Suddenly, a voice rang out to him from the air. "Come to me!" it thundered, causing the world to shake.

Once he dragged his sights from the creature towards the sky, daylight grew dim, like a flickering candle reaching the end of its string. As he watched the sun without strain, it began to spin around its own axis, eventually breaking into two fiery tails. Each of these comets were then flung from the sky to crash behind the horizon with thunderous booms.

Without the sun, only a golden hue remained in the sky. "Follow me," the fox said before turning to run.

"Wait! What's happening?" he cried before his feet moved under him, teleporting him forwards by a few hundred yards.

Alfred looked around in shock, but the fox was still ahead, running west on a winding road through vineyards and valleys, over rocky hills and under canopies.

He dared to take another step and found himself teleported once more. This time, he ended up at the foot of a mountain range that surrounded the region on all sides but the east. The fox was close now, just a few steps ahead of him. But before continuing, Alfred looked back at a familiar village in the distance, dwarfed by mountain ranges on either side. "Northill..." he uttered, conflicted on whether to return home or proceed.

"This way," the fox's voice echoed in his mind, convincing Alfred to turn away from Northill and follow it up the mountain slopes.

The incline was steep, decked by composting material of all sorts that made each step uncertain. But the fox, however, was light on its feet and scurried up the mountainside with no signs of hesitation. Soon it disappeared into a thicket of fir trees that rooted themselves on the incline, leaving Alfred to find the rest of the way on his own.

After much toil, the treeline gave way to a rocky peak, from which a large stone outcropping shot towards the east. While flat on top, its underside was like that of a ship, hanging over an abyss. Alfred stepped onto it, walking about until he noticed a door where the outcropping grew out from the mountain peak. He could only make out its edges; a rectangular shape, rounded at the top without a handle or keyhole. He reached out to it, ready to feel coldness against his palm, but before his fingers could graze the surface of the door,

something appeared behind him. He spun around, meeting the gaze of the violet fox.

“Who are you?” he squeaked, but the fox strolled past him, moving through the small door as though it were merely a curtain of water. Unwilling to stay behind, Alfred followed curiously, walking through the door in the same fashion.

Beyond it was a tunnel, and as his eyes adjusted to darkness, he beheld the fox ahead, sitting before a circular door made of gold. On either side of it were two dark, unidentifiable figures, like statues guarding a treasure of old. Then he joined the fox at the foot of the door, amazed by the golden swirling patterns that danced upon its surface.

“Please, Mr. Fox. Won’t you tell me who you are?” Alfred pleaded, hoping his journey had not been in vain. But just as it had happened all the previous times they met, the creature turned to mist and swirled away, leaving his question unanswered yet again.

He slumped down against the door, utterly disappointed. “I just want to know who you are...” he thought when suddenly the wall began to bubble and foam. Alfred jumped to his feet just in time to witness water cascading from the golden door. It rushed towards him and left him utterly soaked.

Then the door opened, like a flower unfolding its petals, unveiling a chamber. “This is new...” he said with awe as he approached the entrance.

His little sandals squeaked as he stepped into the chamber, breaking the foreboding silence left behind by rushing water. Inside the room, Alfred found seven pedestals laid out in a semi-circle. Upon each of them rested a single crown fashioned not by the hands of man, but something beyond. These crowns were of pure gemstone, each with seven spines protruding upwards from the band.

He inched closer, noticing that a faint golden light illuminated the chamber. And upon further inspection, he found the crowns to be of different colours. In order, they were of red ruby, sparkling diamond, yellow citrine, green peridot, light-blue aquamarine, purple amethyst and finally, blue sapphire.

“Mr. Fox?” he asked aloud with a racing heart, hoping no one would see what he was about to do. Then he went over to the yellow crown and carefully took it from its tall pedestal, standing on his toes as he grabbed hold of it.

However, the moment he touched the crown, it transformed, turning into an emerald green. Disappointed, he aimed to put it back in search of a crown more alluring than the one he had. But he could not reach them now, for all the crowns had started floating into the air.

Startled, he fell back, wondering what wrong he'd done. Then the crowns descended from their platforms and flew around him. He got to his feet with haste, eager to escape the chamber, but they flew faster and faster, trapping him in a dome that sparkled with all the colours of the rainbow. “Help! Mr. Fox!” he cried out, utterly terrified, for his feet were now floating above the floor. In a panic, he tried to run, but his limbs fluttered helplessly within the sphere of swirling crowns.

Suddenly, they ascended and took him through the ceiling of the chamber, out of the mountain peak and into the air. All Alfred could do was shield himself with his arms as they raced through the clouds, leaving the safety of his world. “I’m sorry!” he cried, hoping to be forgiven for wanting the crown.

Soon, he lost sight of his home as the entire world of Hêros shrunk into disappearance, engulfed by the black mass of space. There was no going back. They had entered the void of the heavens. Ultimately, they approached a dark mass so large it swallowed the light from the stars that surrounded it. Anything trapped in its wake became stretched and curved, forming what seemed to be a colossal eye. Alfred refused to look as the crowns took him towards the centre of the eye. “Papa, help!” he cried one last time, too afraid to go any further.

Alfred waited, expecting either terrible pain or frightening sights, but after a few seconds, a familiar warmth prickled his skin. Then a

sparrow chirped next to his head before a nice, chilly breeze swept through his hair.

To his relief, he found the sun hovering in the air once more.

"I'm back!" he thought, realising his dream had ended. His restless heart became calm as reality settled in. Then he sighed with relief and sat up as the dream evaporated from memory until summoned to return.

On his right, the village of Northill continued as usual, with its people working to ensure an abundant life for generations to come. Alfred remembered where the fox had appeared, but it was no longer there.

Suddenly the cold shadow of a man fell over him while he rubbed his stuffy nose. "Ah, finally. Here you are," the man said as he stood with his back against the sun.

Alfred opened his mouth to reply, but all that came out was a long, winding yawn followed by a growl from his stomach. "I'm hungry," he said.

"Of course, you are. You missed breakfast on today of all days!"

It was Grutan, son of Daltan, his father.

Although he was rough around the edges, he was a kind and sincere man, even appearing arrogant to those who sought to deceive him or to be tricked themselves. He shook his head at Alfred who was the spitting image of his father, even sharing the same greyish-blue eyes that pierced any lie.

He reached down and placed Alfred on his feet. "What do you mean, Papa?" he asked, still half asleep as he clung to his father's legs.

"Hmm," he pondered, combing his fingers through Alfred's curly brown hair. "We are currently in the year 1209 and it is the month of Rafarik... the fourth month..." he eluded, hoping Alfred would catch on. But Alfred looked at him with a knotted face. "It's the twelfth," Grutan stated plainly. Then Alfred's confusion turned to joy as his father uttered the words; "Happy birthday, my son."

"Does this mean I'm a man now?" he asked with utmost seriousness.

"Slow down now. You're only seven. There's still much you need to learn."

"Come on, Papa, I'm almost as tall as you!" he said, measuring himself against the side of Grutan's belt.

"Come here!" Grutan said as he pulled him in for a hug. "Forget about growing up for now. You and I have a quest to embark upon."

Alfred gave one last yawn, inspiring Grutan to yawn along with him. "I completely forgot! We're going fishing!" he cheered enthusiastically.

"Come, we're running late," he said, leading the way home.

"Papa, I'm hungry," Alfred complained as he trudged along his father's giant steps.

"I'm afraid there won't be time. We'll eat at the lake."

"But that's still so far away."

"Well, Alfred, it takes a lot of time to find a little boy who sneaks out before dawn. Time we could have spent on your breakfast."

Alfred struggled to keep up with his father's pace, taking a moment to check whether the sun was still in the sky. "What time is it now?"

"Ten o'clock, which means if we leave soon, we can reach the lake by noon. Which is a terrible time to fish. We'll have to wait for the sun to go down before we start. They won't bite if the water is too hot."

"Noon?" he wondered. "How long was I asleep for?"

"Much too long. Your mother was up in arms again. It really makes us worry, Alfred."

"It does?"

"Please, don't run off again! Why don't you listen like your brothers?"

"Thomas and Jerald?" Alfred asked. "I don't want to be like them, I want to be like you, Papa. You came to find me! But they always leave me out when they play."

"I understand, Alfred, but running away won't make things better. They told me you don't want to play their games, so they stopped

asking you. Have you thought about them? Have you considered how it makes us feel when you disappear?"

"I'm sorry, Papa."

Grutan took his hand. "It's alright. We just want you to be safe."

"I know," he said.

"Are you excited to see the lake?" Grutan asked, just a little too late, for Alfred was staring off again as he always did, deep within his daydreams.

When they came at last to the centre of the village, they saw a statue being lowered from a podium in the square. It was carved out of pure red granite and depicted a cloaked man in grand armour, guarded by a fox that sat at his feet.

"Why are they taking it down, Papa?"

"The year is almost over. It will be the Day of the Twelve soon."

"Isn't today the twelfth? It's my birthday!"

"Yes, you're right, but the Day of the Twelve is a special day for the keepers."

"Like a festival?"

"Exactly, a day to honour the forces that keep our world in order..."

They stopped before the lowered statue while its labourers rested nearby. It was lying on top of wooden logs, waiting to be returned to the underground bunker where the townsfolk housed eleven more granite figures. "This statue represents the keeper that's been looking after us for the past cycle. On the day of the festival, the twelve will fight again and the victor shall claim his spot as our rightful guardian for the coming year."

Alfred noticed the fox depicted in the statue. "Papa, what's this keeper's name?"

"He is Ybara, the messenger."

"Ybara?" Alfred wondered, comparing the fox to the one from his dreams. "Does the fox belong to him?"

"The fox is metaphorical to depict his nature, that's all," his father ensured.

Then they continued on to the southern side of Northill, where the houses stood in rows atop a stony ridge, raised above the rest. They all looked the same; a wooden frame filled in with clay bricks and a shoddy thatched roof supported by a beam that ran down the length of the house. Their home was one of the smallest on the south side, since his father's craft as a leatherworker and his knack for bargaining were just enough to sustain them. During the hot summer months, they would lie on the cool tiles of their home, exchanging stories of keepers and heroes of the past. Those were the days that shaped Alfred, the days that really mattered. To him, their home felt like a castle, even though in reality, it was far from it.

Grutan ducked as he entered their humble abode. "Greda? Where are you, my love?" he called into the shadows.

Alfred remained by his lonesome in the street, captivated by the grinding of wooden beams as labourers rolled the granite statue across the village to its destination. "Next time, I won't run after you until you've told me who you are," he thought, remembering the fox with its violet coat.

"Watch out!" a boy cried before crashing into him, sending them both plummeting to the ground.

He quickly regained his footing and rushed to Alfred's side. "It's alright, you're a big boy now. Just breathe, you're alright." It was Jerald who squatted next to him as he regained his breath. "I'm sorry, I got tripped! You won't tell Mama, will you?"

Alfred knew Jerald was sincere from the look in his brown eyes. But it wasn't the first time an accident occurred with Alfred as the victim and, frankly, he was growing tired of it. Jerald was two years older than him, and apart from being taller, stronger and having blonde hair, they looked quite similar.

"You're wrong, I'm not a boy. I'm a man!" he rejected.

"Exactly! And men get up when they fall, isn't that right?" Jerald asked, pulling Alfred to his feet. Then, to soothe his conscience, he dusted his brother's tunic and adjusted the belt around his waist before pretending to check his sandals for damage. "Everything looks perfect. Papa won't have to patch you up. The thing is, I was

racing against Thomas and then—" he began, interrupted by the laughter of another boy. "You tripped me!" Jerald accused as the boy approached with his hands wrapped around his stomach.

"Seeing you fall like that was so funny it hurts! Oh, lighten up. It's not my fault you ran so close to me. You tripped yourself!"

"I still beat you, Thomas! I won the race!"

"Did you really?" he laughed until Alfred entered his sights. "Are you alright?" he asked with concern.

"What were you playing? Can I play?" Alfred asked.

"You want to play too?" Jerald asked with a raised brow.

Alfred nodded.

"We were trying to see which of us are the fastest. I was about to win, but you know Jerald, he always has to be the best."

"I won the race!"

"Alright, alright," Thomas said, strolling over to offer Jerald a handshake. "You're getting faster. Keep it up."

At ten years of age, Thomas was the eldest among the three, with brown eyes like Jerald. He was the stubborn one, always refusing to tie up his hair as his mother instructed.

Jerald finally humbled himself and shook his brother's hand, ending the feud temporarily. "How about we play a different game?" he asked.

"We'll have to play it here," Alfred said. "I'm waiting for Papa to come out. What's taking him so long?"

"I know," Thomas said, "Let's be keepers!"

"What?" Jerald frowned.

"We'll be any keeper we want to be! We only have to pick which of the twelve we are and then we do battle! I'll go first. I pick... Nenhir!" Thomas roared, holding an invisible sword up high.

"Hey, that's not fair. I was going to pick him!" Jerald objected.

"That's too bad, I already picked."

"But he's too strong! I say no one should get to pick him!" Jerald insisted.

"What do you think, Alfred?" Thomas sighed.

"Oh, alright, but can we be anyone else then?" he asked.

"Sure," Thomas smiled.

"Then I'll be... Ybara!" Alfred proclaimed enthusiastically.

"Ybara?" his brothers questioned.

"He doesn't fight. He's just a messenger." But Alfred shrugged, clearly happy with his decision. "Jerald, who's your pick?"

"Cerak, the wave!"

"Isn't Dara the wave?" Alfred asked.

"No, Dara is the mountain," Jerald acknowledged. "Cerak controls all the seas of Hêros. There's no way anyone can withstand my wrath!"

"Oh? Then I'll be Veron, keeper of the skies!" Thomas announced boldly. "A clear winner against Cerak and Ybara. There's no way you can get to me. I'll simply fly over your attacks!" Then Thomas dashed towards Alfred, and with a whooshing sound, landed a pretend strike of air upon his arm. Alfred did little to retaliate, taking the blow once it came. "You're supposed to fight back," Thomas advised.

Out of nowhere, Jerald struck Thomas from the side with a mighty wave. "Taste my fury!" he bellowed.

But Thomas quickly sprang to his feet and fought back, quickly turning things serious. Alfred retreated as they went on, each imaginary attack supposedly more powerful than the last. He was tired of getting hurt and decided that spectating would be more akin to Ybara's nature.

Meanwhile, Grutan had been attending to his wife inside their home. "Not a cloud in sight, my love. I'm sure everything will be fine," he assured, retreating from a window to sit next to her.

"Then I don't know. I still have a bad feeling about this," Greda said, "Perhaps wait till tomorrow at least?"

Then he took her hands and gently turned them over to compare a deep scar on her left palm to one on his own. "On that day, I vowed never to leave your side. I intend to keep it. We'll be fine, my love. I told Alfred we'd go today and I don't want to break that promise either."

Greda's beauty hid any signs of motherhood, for she was still untouched by the wheel of time. Her hazel eyes caught Grutan's heart many years before, and were most enchanting when struck by the sun.

"Yes, you did, but my heart is warning me of an imminent danger. I still dream of her... That woman with hair like fire who barges into our home to take our sons away. Her face refuses to part from me, Grutan. She has the eyes of a lion."

He pulled her in for a hug.

"Sometimes dreams feel more real than life itself, but we must take heart and keep hold of the truth." Then he guided her to the window where he showed her clear blue sky. "There's no chance of a storm on a day like this."

Greda sat down beside the window, shaking her head at her own delusion. "You're right, with Alfred's nightmares and this dream I've been having, I was afraid the keepers were trying to tell us something."

Grutan gave a look of concern, knowing that a message from the keepers would not be something to brush off. "If any of the keepers try to get to my family, they'll need to go through me first," he smiled tenderly.

"That's what worries me," she replied, wiping her face. "Alright, it's time I let you go."

End of Preview.