

DORMIA

† JAKE HALPERN AND PETER KUJAWINSKI †



"An imaginative quest through strange and exotic lands."

—D. J. MacHale, author of the *New York Times* best-selling series *Pendragon*



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Summary: After learning that he is a descendant of Dormia, a hidden kingdom in the Ural Mountains whose inhabitants possess the ancient power of "wakeful sleeping," twelve-year-old Alfonso sets out on a mission to save the kingdom from destruction, discovering secrets that lurk in his own sleep.

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*To my wife, Kasia Lipska-Bardzo
Ciękocham. —J.H.*

*To my parents, Frank and Jo Kujawinski, who taught me
to read, to love, and to live. —P.K.*

DORMIA

CHAPTER 1

A DANGEROUS PLACE TO WAKE UP

DID YOU EVER go on vacation, wake up in a strange bed, and struggle to remember where *exactly* you were? Well, twelve-year-old Alfonso Perplexon had never gone on a vacation, but he often felt this very sensation. For him, waking up was always an odd experience, and today was no exception.

As he woke up from a late afternoon nap, Alfonso blinked open his eyes and discovered that he was perched at the top of a gigantic pine tree—some two hundred feet above the ground. The view was spectacular. Alfonso could see for miles in every direction, and he could even make out his house in the distant hamlet of World's End, Minnesota. Unfortunately, there was no time to enjoy the view. The small branch that Alfonso stood on was covered with gleaming snow and creaked dangerously

under the pressure of his weight. Icy gusts of wind shook the entire treetop. Alfonso looked down grimly at the ground far below. If he fell, he would most certainly die.

"Oh brother," muttered Alfonso. "Not again."

This wasn't the first time Alfonso had woken up in a tough spot. He was always doing crazy things in his sleep. Of course, there were times when he enjoyed a good night's sleep in bed, just like other people. But often enough, within a few seconds of drifting off, Alfonso's eyes would flutter back open and he would enter a peculiar trance. Although technically asleep, it was the strangest type of sleep anyone had ever seen. While in this trance, he ran, cross-country skied, climbed trees, cooked fantastically delicious pancakes, walked tightropes, read Shakespeare, and shot deadly accurate arrows. These trances had begun a few years back, and lately they were happening more often.

In recent weeks, Alfonso had been waking up from his trances in this particular tree, which was in the middle of an old-growth pine forest known locally as the Forest of the Obitteroos. Very few people had the skill to climb a tree in the Forest of the Obitteroos and no one ever attempted to do so in the depths of winter. No one except Alfonso, and even he wasn't sure how his sleeping-self did it. He simply woke up and there he was at the top of a tree.

Of course, his immediate concern was his own safety. Although his sleeping-self was an expert at climbing the most dangerous of trees, Alfonso's waking-self had no aptitude for it whatsoever. He was quite short and skinny for his age, and when awake, he didn't feel particularly athletic. His large green eyes and thick, dark eyebrows were the only outsized parts of his body. In every other regard, he was very small.



Alfonso stared down at the ground below and felt so dizzy that he almost threw up. A small clump of snow fell off the branch on which he was standing and he watched it plummet down for several long seconds before it finally hit the ground. Cold gusts of air continued to blast fiercely from the north, and the icy branches of the tree swayed and crackled in the wind. Then, rather suddenly, he heard a high-pitched scream. Alfonso glanced to his left and saw a two-foot-wide mass of sticks and mud sitting on a nearby branch. It was a bird's nest, and the current occupant—a brown falcon with white-tipped wings—was staring at him and moving restlessly around her nest. Underneath the falcon Alfonso could see three trembling balls of downy fur. They were baby falcons, no more than two weeks old.

Strangely enough, Alfonso wasn't surprised by this turn of events. His sleeping-self seemed attached to falcons and eagles and, consequently, he often woke up near these fierce predator birds. Very slowly, Alfonso reached into his coat pocket and took out a handful of raisins, leftover from his lunch. He sank into a crouch and whispered, "*Kee-aw, kee-aw, sqrook!*" He was imitating the sound that baby falcons make. It had taken him weeks of practice to do this properly. Basically, whenever he spent time near a falcon's nest, he listened carefully to the noises that the baby falcons made, and then later practiced imitating their cries. He had gotten very good at this. In fact, this was one of the few things that he did very well when he was wide awake.

Alfonso made his cry once again: "*Kee-aw, kee-aw, sqrook!*"

The mother falcon circled nervously around her chicks but soon moved to a branch on the far end of the nest. Alfonso



leaned in closer. Below him, the three baby falcons looked up and opened their tiny beaks. Alfonso tore the raisins in half and carefully dropped them into the three open mouths. Meanwhile, the mother falcon stared unblinkingly at him. As soon as Alfonso had finished feeding the chicks, his thoughts inevitably returned to his own predicament. For Alfonso, the task now at hand was getting down from this tree, and the key was to fall asleep. Unfortunately, it was far too cold and windy for Alfonso to feel the slightest bit tired. He was left with nothing to do but sit and think.

As usual, Alfonso wondered what was wrong with him. It was a question he had pondered a great deal lately. Doctors at the big hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota, claimed that Alfonso suffered from a very rare sleeping disorder known as Morvan's syndrome, which made it impossible to sleep in a normal fashion. Morvan's syndrome was once common during the Middle Ages, but nowadays the disorder was exceedingly rare. Indeed, the doctors in St. Paul claimed that only a handful of people in the entire world had it. One well-known case involved a man from Mongolia named Ulugh Begongh. Apparently, Mr. Begongh had been awake for thirty-eight years, or 13,870 consecutive nights. Yet every evening, between nine P.M. and eleven P.M., Mr. Begongh's eyes closed halfway, his breathing softened, and he appeared to sleep—only during this time Mr. Begongh actually experienced increased amounts of speed and strength. His wife claimed that on one occasion her husband lifted a one-thousand-pound ox cart above his head.

Doctors in Mongolia, and elsewhere, believed that Morvan's syndrome originated from a rare form of cholera, known as the sleeper's cholera, which supposedly swept through Central



Asia sometime during the seventh century. At that time, it was called *quiesco coruscus*, which is Latin for “sleep shaking.” But by the time Alfonso had developed the syndrome, doctors felt Morvan’s syndrome was a genetic disorder. Alfonso’s father had also been prone to sleepwalking.

Of course, the kids at school loved it whenever Alfonso fell asleep. They had taken to calling him the “sleeping ninja” and had been clamoring for him to join the fencing team, the cheer-leading squad, the spelunking club, and the society for amateur tightrope walkers, as long as he agreed to participate while asleep.

For a while, Alfonso was immensely flattered. What twelve-year-old wouldn’t be? There were just two problems. The first was that Alfonso never remembered anything he did in his sleep and, as far as he knew, he had absolutely no control over what his sleeping-self did. As a result, he never felt any pride in his sleeping accomplishments. The second problem was that his sleeping-self appeared to be quite a show-off. Inevitably, every time that he fell asleep, his sleeping-self would do whatever it could to grab the spotlight and impress everyone around him. There was, for instance, the time when he climbed out of the third-story window of his social studies class and tightrope-walked along a set of power lines to the top of a telephone pole where some baby falcons were nesting. This had nearly gotten him expelled from school, but his classmates were still begging him to do it again.

The branch below Alfonso trembled in the wind as his thoughts continued to wander. He began to feel a bit drowsy, especially when he thought about the roaring fire waiting for him back home in World’s End. Alfonso focused on his breathing and



with each exhalation he allowed his eyes to close a little more. His head grew heavy and his mind became cloudy. Then, in what felt like a second later, Alfonso woke up at the foot of the massive pine tree. He was back on the ground! As usual, he had no memory of what he had just done.

Alfonso glanced at his watch. It was almost five P.M. and the forest was filled with the murky glow of winter twilight. Alfonso did not like being caught in the Forest of the Obitterroos at night. Truth be told, no one did. The forest, though peaceful and very beautiful, had a spooky and slightly unnerving quality. The trees themselves had a presence about them. Many were older than the United States and some were alive even before Christopher Columbus sailed to America. And they still stood there, watching and waiting.

Suddenly, Alfonso flinched. A half-second later, he heard a rustling noise behind him. He whirled around but saw nothing.

"Who's there?" he yelled.

Silence.

"Who's there?" he yelled louder. "What do you want?"

Silence again.

Alfonso shrugged, reached down to the ground, and began to pick up his cross-country skis, which he had used to get here. Just then, he heard another rustling noise. This time when he looked up, a tall, gaunt man stood in front of him, about four feet away. He was smiling awkwardly, and dressed in sheepskin boots, a wide-brimmed hat, and a heavy fur cloak, the sort of clothing that Canadian fur trappers wore centuries ago. The man's skin was sickly in color—a pale green—and it looked like it was stretched a bit too tightly around his bony face. His eyes were hidden by the brim of his hat, but his long, angular

chin was visible. A ghastly scar coiled and squiggled along the entire length of his jaw. The skin along the scar was irritated by the cold and had turned a raw pinkish color.

"Well done! That was quite a climb for a young boy," the man with the scar said. His voice sounded ancient and raspy, as if he had not exercised his vocal cords in a very long time.

"Uh, thanks," Alfonso said nervously. He swallowed hard and his heart began to pound.

"Perhaps my eyes deceive me, but you appeared to be sleeping as you climbed," observed the man. "Is this true?"

Alfonso nodded.

"Very impressive," the man said slowly. He coughed. It sounded like the growl of a truck. "*Very impressive.*"

Alfonso wanted to run, but something kept him rooted in place. "All I did was fall asleep," he said.

"Nonsense," replied the man in a friendly manner. "All a runner does is run, yet does he doubt the value of his talents—or hand over his gold medal at the end of a race—because all he did was place one foot in front of the other?"

"Sleeping is different," began Alfonso.

"Yes it is," interrupted the man. He smiled again. As he did, the coiling scar along his jaw twisted awkwardly, like a wounded snake. "Sleeping, or rather the *manner in which you sleep*, is the rarest of gifts and should not be taken lightly. I've seen a few exceptional sleepers in my day, but to climb this massive tree in the dead of winter at the age of . . . How old are you?"

"Tw-twelve," said Alfonso.

"Yes, at the age of twelve, well, that is something most unusual."

"Oh," said Alfonso rather softly, almost to himself.



"I suppose you have other sleeping skills?" asked the man. He took a step closer. Alfonso shivered and took a step back.

"Don't be alarmed," said the man softly. "My name is Kiril. I am a stranger to this area, but rest assured, I mean you no harm. I have nothing but admiration for your sleeping skills. What else can you do?"

"I don't know," stammered Alfonso. "But I really must be going."

"Indeed," replied the man. Neither he nor Alfonso moved. "Just out of curiosity," the man asked, "are you a green thumb? Isn't that the phrase in your country? A skilled gardener?"

"Sir, I'm not sure what you mean," replied Alfonso. "And I really must —"

"Please," interrupted the man again, "let us converse as friends. What I mean to say is this: are you interested in plants? Unusual ones? And have you grown any plants in your sleep? That would be *most* interesting."

Alfonso said nothing.

"Hmm," said Kiril. "You should know that I am a *passionate* collector of unusual plants. Such specimens interest me—and they interest my father as well."

"Your father?" inquired Alfonso. "Who's that?"

"Let's save that discussion for a later time," said Kiril. He smiled. "For now, let us talk—as friends—about the plant that you may have grown in your sleep. Such specimens are of considerable interest to me and I am willing to pay handsomely, though, I should warn you, I will be forced to pay you in gold bars. My resources are vast. You and your family—your mother is Judy, yes?—will never need to work again."



Alfonso stared at Kiril, who was now standing so close that Alfonso could feel the heat of Kiril's foggy breath.

Kiril smiled again. "You have such a plant, don't you?"

"No," said Alfonso. "I never bother with plants or flowers when I'm asleep."

The wind howled through the Forest of the Obitterroos. Snow fell from the tree branches and pattered thickly onto the ground. Kiril nodded. "Well," he said, "I did my best to help you and to give you a fair deal. Be careful. Someone far less trustworthy than I may soon come knocking on your door."

Kiril looked as if he were about to say something else, but at that very moment, the wind gusted violently and lifted Kiril's wide-brimmed hat from his head. Alfonso gasped and an icy tingle of fear crept up his spine. The wind had revealed Kiril's eyes: they were large, vacant, and *entirely* white.

Alfonso stumbled backwards, snatched up his cross-country skis, and ran off in a terrified sprint. In his haste and fear, he never once turned around to see if he was being followed.



CHAPTER 2

A MOST CURIOUS PLANT

IT WAS PITCH-BLACK and bitterly cold when Alfonso arrived at the cluster of small, snow-covered houses that made up World's End, Minnesota. He was wide awake now and therefore his skiing was labored and awkward. Gradually, Alfonso made his way along the shore of a small body of water, known as Lake Witekkon, and then continued up a curving, snow-covered driveway to the ramshackle cottage where his family lived. The windows were coated with frost, but he could still see a roaring fire in the cottage's large stone fireplace. The air was ripe with the scent of burning wood. By the time he made his way into the kitchen, dinner was already on the table and his mother, Judy Perplexon, appeared both worried and annoyed.

Judy was a plain woman with thinning blond hair. She always wore sensible shoes and ankle-length skirts. The only jewelry she owned—besides a plain gold wedding band—was the small, wooden medallion that hung by a copper chain around her neck. Leif, her husband and Alfonso's father, had whittled the medallion for her just before he died. Judy never took it off.

Judy hadn't been the same since Leif passed away. Leif, like Alfonso, had been a very active sleeper and was famous for swimming the local lakes in his sleep. Three years ago, as he was in the middle of the lake taking one of his sleep-swims, a freak lightning storm passed overhead. The storm lit up the lake with blast after blast of lightning and Leif Perplexon was never seen again.

After her husband's death, Judy had given up her job as a librarian at the local public library and stayed close to home. Most days she helped her father, Pappy Eubanks, tend to the flowers and vegetables he grew in the enormous greenhouse nursery next to their cottage. Pappy grew most anything, but he specialized in rare flowers that he then sold all over the world. These flowers were the family's main source of income. Ever since he was a boy, Pappy had a knack for raising flowers that no one else could seem to grow. Over the years he had grown Tanzanian Violets, Weeping Carpathian Clovers, Giant Birds of Paradise, King Leopold Roses, and Manchurian Moonglow Tumblins. These plants didn't make the family rich, but they paid the bills and gave Pappy and Judy something to do.

"Where have you been?" asked Judy as Alfonso walked into the kitchen.



"I fell asleep on the way home from school," Alfonso replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "I ended up climbing that tree and feeding the falcons."

"Again?"

"That's right," said Alfonso. "And then I couldn't get back to sleep, so it took me forever to get home."

For a moment, Alfonso considered telling them about his encounter with Kiril, but he quickly decided against it. His mother was already in a depressed state and Alfonso didn't want to get her all upset about some spooky guy who was lurking in the woods.

"Never mind how slow you went," said Pappy Eubanks, who was already sitting down at the kitchen table, a fork and knife sticking out of each fist. "I'm glad to see you awake on your skis. That is a long journey, a hard journey, and you should be proud of yourself that you made it with your eyes open." For his part, Pappy had absolutely no interest in what Alfonso did in his sleep. Alfonso was quite glad about this, and he always smiled when Pappy griped, "All that sleep craziness is nothing more than tomfoolery." *Tomfoolery*. That's what Pappy called everything that Alfonso did in his sleep.

Pappy smiled approvingly at Alfonso and revealed a set of crooked, jack-o-lantern teeth. Pappy was a small man with a large potbelly framed by a pair of old leather suspenders. His face was dominated by an enormous pair of reading glasses that magnified his pupils to the size of golf balls. Traces of potting soil sat in small clumps on his bald, gleaming head. "Sit down my boy," beckoned Pappy. "Let's have a nice meal, shall we? How were the baby falcons today? Hungry, I bet! It's the dead of winter!"

