

The World Of Dormia

Chapter 2: The Great Tree of Somnos

As the seaplane gained altitude, Alfonso looked out the window and saw the frozen landscape of Minnesota expand beneath him, all those ice-covered lakes and snowy fields. From this height everything looked so peaceful, like a soft white carpet lit up by the moon. Inside the cockpit of the plane, however, things were far less calm. The noise was deafening. It sounded as if someone was banging two frying pans directly in Alfonso's ear, and it seemed to be coming from the plane's rickety propellers. Plus, everything rattled – the floor, the seats, even the steering wheel. The vibrations worked their way through Alfonso's feet, up his legs, along his spine, and into his jaw. The scariest thing, however, was the fact that the wings of the plane appeared to vibrate most of all. As they bended into strange angles, Alfonso was sure they were about to crack.

"Don't worry about the wings," wheezed Hill, who was still fast asleep. "We'll be fine unless they decide to snap off. And that is a rare event."

"Oh, this old girl should fly okay," added Pappy optimistically. "I saw old Mr. Edlund flying her I'd say, maybe, err... well, actually, I don't remember him ever taking her up. Talked about it a lot, though."

As it turns out, there was little cause for worry. The plane was in decent enough shape and – more importantly – Hill was an old hand at flying in his sleep. He was, after all, a former captain in the U.S. Air Force. When he was still a very young man, Hill had actually set a world record for flying a transport plane – 56.8 hours straight – on a voyage from Los Angeles to Miami. There was just one problem: He had gone the wrong way. He had, of course, intended to take the direct route of flying across the United States from Los Angeles to Miami, but he had fallen asleep at the wheel and had gone the other way around the world instead. He flew over the Pacific Ocean, Asia, Europe, and then over the Atlantic Ocean to Miami. The following day the *Miami Herald* ran the following banner headline: MAN TRAVELS AROUND THE GLOBE BACKWARDS IN HIS SLEEP: AIR FORCE IS ANNOYED BUT PROUD. A week later, after being severely scolded, Hill was promoted to captain and he was soon flying the Air Force's fastest planes in his sleep.

The highlight of Hill's career came when he and a Russian pilot named Yuri Napinoff, who was also famous for flying in his sleep, were asked to do a joint mission together in the early 1970s, to show that the U.S. and Russia could get along. When the two pilots finally met in Moscow, Hill discovered that Yuri was actually a quarter Dormian on his mother's side. Hill wasn't entirely surprised. The globe was sprinkled with men and women like Hill and Yuri who had some kind of connection to Dormia and who yearned to go "home," but could never find the way. During their joint mission together, Hill and Yuri were supposed to practice dropping bombs into the Caspian Sea, but instead, they flew over the Ural Mountains – for 82 hours straight – in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Dormia. They found nothing. Ever since then, Hill had rather sadly given up hope that he would ever go home again. In time, he quit the Air Force and repeatedly turned down opportunities to become the spokesman for countless sleep-related products such as night caps, pajamas, earplugs, and of course, sleeping pills. Instead, he became a watch repairman. His would be a quiet, lonely, and uneventful life. Or so he thought. And then came the day when Hill saw the photo of the Dormian Bloom in the pages of *American Botanist* and everything changed.

Hill flew old Mr. Edlund's seaplane with great ease; and, as the aircraft made its way across the night sky, Pappy and Judy gradually relaxed and even dozed off. Alfonso, for his part, was too excited to sleep. He stared out the window of the plane for hours on end, wondering where his uncle was taking them. Eventually, he too became tired, and drifted off into the kind of sleep that he enjoyed best – the sort where he did nothing but rest and snore.

Some time later, Alfonso, Pappy and Judy woke to the sound of an enormous splash. The plane had landed on water. A forest of skyscrapers shone in the distance. Thick cakes of ice floated in the water nearby, but Hill had expertly put the plane down in between them. "Oh," mumbled Hill. "It looks like we've landed near Chicago."

"Chicago?" inquired Judy. "What on earth are we doing here?"

"This is where I live," answered Hill with a yawn. He rubbed his eyes vigorously and then smacked his lips. Apparently, he was waking up. "We should be safe here, at least for a while. Besides," he added. "I have something I want to show Alfonso – something from Dormia – and I think he may be able to make sense of it."

"What is it?" asked Alfonso excitedly.

"Oh, you'll see," said Hill. "It involves the Great Tree of Somnos."



Hill navigated the seaplane along the choppy waters of Lake Michigan until they came to a long dock covered with snow and ice that jutted out about fifty feet from shore. Hill cut off the engine and opened the doors. Alfonso glanced out the window. The dock led to a rocky bit of land occupied by a thin, tall tower made of red bricks, which looked to be about six stories tall. In the upper half of the tower was a large clock that pointed out toward the lake. The area around the tower was filled with snow-covered wild grass. The nearest buildings – several giant warehouses – were at least a half-mile away.

“That clock tower is my home,” said Hill casually, as the arctic air swept through the tiny plane. “The city of Chicago lets me live in it, rent-free, on the condition that I maintain it. It was built so that the captains of the Great Lakes freighters could tell the time without leaving their ships. It’s also a lighthouse in stormy weather. Because I repair old clocks, the city asked if I wouldn’t mind looking after the place. I’ve made myself a nice little home here. You’ll see.”

Hill looked at Pappy and said: “We’re here. Are you ready?”

“For what?” Pappy asked suspiciously.

Hill jumped down onto the dock, grabbed Pappy from the plane and carried him like a giant sack of potting soil toward the clock tower. Judy and Alfonso followed a few steps behind. It was terribly cold, and the steady wind coming off Lake Michigan tore through their jackets. Alfonso wondered how anyone could be comfortable in a tower battered nonstop by the wind. The clock tower looked old and weathered, and about as substantial as a toothpick stuck in the ground.

They stopped in front of a small wooden signboard covered with snow that stood about four feet in front of the clock tower. The signboard read:

HOME OF HILL PERSPLEXY: CLOCK-TUNER, WATCH REPAIR MAN, LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER, AVIATOR, HERMIT & BELOVED CITIZEN OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO.

“MAY HE SLEEP SOUNDLY AND KEEP WATCH OVER OUR FAIR CITY.”

- Mayor Richard J. Daley

P.S. VISITORS: BEWARE OF THE SECOND HAND!

“Beware of the second hand?” Alfonso repeated.

“Stand back,” replied Hill.

They heard a giant swooshing sound coming from above. Everyone looked up as a massive steel rod with an arrow at the tip swung down like a pendulum in front of them, just behind the sign.

“Ahhhh!” Alfonso yelled and jumped back, even though the steel rod wasn’t close enough to hit them. Still, it was close enough to startle.

Alfonso glanced skyward and realized that the rod was connected to the middle of the tower and rotating rapidly like a blade on a windmill. What was it? He looked at the sign again and then he realized that the rod was the “second hand” on the clock. The minute hand and the hour hand on the clock were pretty large, but the second hand was huge – so huge that when it pointed downward it spanned three stories and almost touched the ground.

“What’s with that crazy second hand on your clock?” asked Alfonso. “Why is it so big?”

“You like that do you?” asked Hill with a laugh. “It scares people enough so that I don’t get too many curious visitors. Plus, that’s how I get up to my apartment. Come, I’ll show you.” With Pappy still slung over his shoulder, Hill walked over to a nearby set of bushes and lugged out a large wicker basket, which was big enough to hold several people.

“It’s an old basket that used to be connected to a hot air balloon,” Hill explained. “I picked it up at a garage sale.” Hill dragged the basket over to where the second hand had just brushed the ground. He swept away loose snow with his foot and uncovered a patch of bare ground painted red. Carefully he placed the basket directly above the red-splotched ground. He then instructed everyone to hop into the basket with him. Reluctantly, they agreed.

“Hurry now!” Hill shouted. “We don’t have much time.” Judy was the last one to climb into the basket. They heard the same swooshing noise as the second hand drew near. Then came another noise: CLANK! Something had just locked into place. An instant later, the second hand had scooped up the wicker basket and was raising it upward as if it were a car on a giant, super-fast Ferris wheel. Alfonso looked up and saw that the basket was dangling from the arrow at the tip of the “second hand.”

“Isn’t that just marvelous?” yelled Hill.

“Yes!” gasped Alfonso.

Judy and Pappy were too afraid to move or speak but nodded their heads like frozen robots.

The basket rose upward rapidly past eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock, and eleven o'clock. When the second hand reached the top of the clock – where the giant numerals 12 were – they heard another CLANK as the basket fell off the arrow and dropped a few inches before coming to an abrupt stop. “Oh my!” said Judy. The second hand continued onward, toward one o'clock and then two o'clock, but the basket rested on a narrow platform just behind the oversize “12”. The platform stuck out from the top of the clock tower like a diving board. It led directly to a small glass door that opened up into Hill’s penthouse.

“Come on,” said Hill as he stepped out of the basket and strode toward the glass door. “Right this way – it’s quite comfortable inside. Just don’t look down.”

Judy did exactly that and gasped. Several hundred feet below them was the frozen ground, and they were standing on a creaky, narrow wooden platform with no rope or sides to prevent them from falling. She froze and glared at Hill.

“Nothing to it!” said Hill. “Come – it’s just a few steps to a very warm and comfortable place.” He smiled, opened the door and vanished inside. Judy and Alfonso quickly followed.

It was indeed warm and comfortable inside Hill’s apartment at the top of the clock tower. The door opened into a large living room filled with overstuffed leather chairs, piles of plush pillows, old Oriental carpets, enormous piles of dusty books, and tubs of yellowing newspapers. Two large windows on opposite sides of the room showed the tower’s unique position: one faced into the snowy ice of the Lake Michigan coast and the other looked out on the hundreds of twinkling skyscrapers that made up downtown Chicago. Wooden artifacts – a few ferocious-looking masks and a wildly painted totem pole – hung on the walls. Soft reading lights shone from above the chairs and couches, giving the room a cozy feel. Hill immediately set to work building a fire in the apartment’s old brick fireplace and, in no time at all, they were all enjoying the heat of a crackling blaze.

Eventually, they settled into their comfortable surroundings and looked out the windows. Hill found some aspirin for Pappy to ease the pain in his leg. Tomorrow he would have to go to a hospital, but for the time being, he would just have to sit tight.

On a table next to where he was sitting, Alfonso found an old album with yellowed newspaper clippings sticking out of it. It creaked dustily as he pried it open. Inside were many articles and pictures from Hill’s military career as a transport pilot. Alfonso soon came upon the article from the *Miami Herald* detailing the events of Hill’s famous “backwards” trip from LA to Miami. Alfonso looked up at Hill with wonder. “You flew 56.8 hours straight?” he asked.

“Just a bout of young foolishness,” Hill replied. “I don’t need to tell you that I developed a certain amount of fame in the transport pilot community. But you see, Alfonso, fame isn’t what it’s cracked up to be. All that smiling and picture taking and people trying to comb your hair... I wouldn’t stand for it! I was just doing my job. Of course, as I got older, it got easier to do all manner of things in my sleep. I just told myself what I wanted to do and then, when I fell asleep, I just took care of business!”

“Wait a minute,” said Alfonso. “You can actually control what you do in your sleep?”

“Why of course my boy,” replied Hill with a chuckle. “That’s what it means to be Dormian. After all, what good would our sleeping powers be if we could never control them? You see, the lifelong goal of all Dormians is the mastery of sleep. In our sleep we are indeed powerful, but the power means very little if we cannot control it. Sure, it was a neat trick for me to fly in my sleep from Los Angeles to Miami, but it did me little good when I went the wrong way. Power and ability are useless unless they are exercised with control. That, my young nephew, is what you must learn.”

“Can you help me?” asked Alfonso eagerly.

“Perhaps,” said Hill thoughtfully. “But I left Dormia when I was a very young boy and most of what I know I learned on my own.”

“I still want to learn whatever you can teach me,” said Alfonso.

Hill nodded. “If you are to do what I suspect you *must* do,” he said, “you will need to learn everything you can from me and then a great deal more on your own. But enough of this for now. It’s been a difficult evening. Let us get some sleep and hope that it is both deep and restful.”



Everyone prepared quickly for bed. Judy slept in a small guest bedroom at the back of the apartment. Pappy slept in Hill’s antique, king-sized feather bed. Alfonso and Hill slept on couches in the living room right beside the crackling fire. Alfonso was so tired that he even forgot to worry whether he would be an active sleeper that night. For many hours, he slept deeply and soundly but then as the first hint of morning appeared at the bottom of the night sky, Alfonso did something he’d never done before: He dreamt.

It started off peacefully enough with an early evening walk along a mountain path. A thick forest of pine trees crowded him on both sides. He carried the Dormian Bloom in both hands. In the distance, he could see glimpses of snowy peaks through the trees. The musical calls of birds rang out as they flew among the trees. Slowly, the sun began to set and Alfonso hurried to reach the mountain summit before dark. As he scurried along, he heard the sound of a branch snapping behind him. He spun around and there in the shadows was the man with the white eyes from the Forest of the Towers.

“You lied to me,” said the man with the white eyes. His voice was remarkably calm. “Why?”

“I’m sorry,” said Alfonso. “But I couldn’t give up my plant.”

“The Dormian Bloom,” the man intoned. “It is the rarest plant in the world. People search all over the globe for it – and they will stop at nothing to find it.”

“I see,” said Alfonso nervously. “Well, err, I grew it and it belongs to me.”

“Indeed?” said the man. “And where, may I ask, are you taking it?”

“I don’t know,” said Alfonso. “My uncle Hill hasn’t told me.”

“And this uncle that you speak of – he is a Dormian?”

Alfonso swallowed hard, but did not reply. He had already said too much.

“You are going to Dormia then,” said the man. “You realize that of course?”

“I-I’ve got to be g-going now,” stammered Alfonso. “I’ve got to make it to the top of this mountain by nightfall.”

“Very well,” said the man with the white eyes. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Alfonso spun around, broke into a run, and began sprinting up the mountain path as quickly as he could. Above him, sunset turned to dusk and then night. The black sky filled with stars. Alfonso could sense that the man with the white eyes was just behind him. Alfonso tried to speed up, but he was too tired and cold to run any faster. He hobbled his way up the final climb to the summit. From here he had a splendid view down onto a snow-covered valley. In the middle of this valley was an enormous tree, perhaps a thousand feet tall, with giant leaves that flapped like sails in the wind. The top of the tree was completely green, but the bottom-half was snowy-white. Alfonso saw that fingers of ice were creeping their way up the trunk of the tree. A moment later, he heard footsteps behind him. “Stay away from me,” yelled Alfonso. “Stay away!” As he yelled, he felt cold fingertips graze his neck.

A moment later, Alfonso woke up. His eyes blinked wildly. He soon realized it was a nightmare and that his own screaming had woken him up. His face was sweating and his fingers and toes were tingling. He was lying on the couch in his uncle's apartment and his uncle was peering down at him with his kindly brown eyes. "You had a nightmare," explained Hill. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," mumbled Alfonso. Suddenly he shivered. He felt quite cold as if the snow from his dream had been real. "I just had the weirdest dream."

"Hmm," said Hill as he furrowed his brow. "Do you dream often?"

"Never," said Alfonso. He considered this for a second. "That was my first."

"Hmm," said Hill again. "I've never had a dream either. As far as I know, Dormians don't dream. This is most curious. Most curious indeed. What was the dream about?"

Alfonso began describing his early morning dream. When he first mentioned the man with the white eyes, Hill sat upright and a look of grave concern spread across his face.

"White eyes?" he said. "Are you sure? Totally white eyes?"

Alfonso nodded. "I'm positive," he replied.

"Describe everything you can remember about this person," said Hill.

Alfonso shook his head. "I really can't," he said. "He was too far away and then, by the time he drew closer, it was too dark. All I remember were his eyes."

"Tell me," said Hill. "Did this man seem old, even though he moved with the speed of a young man?"

Alfonso nodded. "I guess so. Yes."

"And he wore a dark cloak?"

Alfonso nodded again.

"But you've never seen him before?" Hill asked hopefully.

"Actually, I did," replied Alfonso. "He was in the woods near our house. He wanted to know if I was any good at growing plants."

"Goodness gracious," Hill gasped. "When did this happen?"

"Yesterday," replied Alfonso.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," muttered Hill. "The situation is worse than I feared. He's in America and appears to be right on our tail."

This conversation was momentarily interrupted by Judy and Pappy, who entered the living room.

“How are you feeling Pappy?” asked Hill politely.

“Fine,” said Pappy. “Don’t worry about me and my leg. I’ve been through worse. What are the two of you fussing about? What’s all this business about the ‘situation being worse than you feared’?”

As quickly as he could, Alfonso recounted his dream.

“Why that’s just a nightmare,” said Pappy. “Nothing to fret about.”

“Perhaps,” said Hill. “That would indeed be welcome news. But I want Alfonso to look at something.” Hill stood up and fished a small, well-worn pocket watch from his corduroy pants. “This is Dormian,” he said. “Take a look – open it.”

Alfonso pressed down on a thick knob at the top and the cover of the smooth metal watch swung open, revealing a beautifully engraved tree on the inside of the cover. Alfonso looked at Hill in amazement. “That’s it!” he said. “It’s the tree from my dream – the one that was being covered in ice!”

Judy leaned over. “You mean that tree is exactly what you saw in your dream?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Alfonso replied. “It was in the middle of a field of snow and it was enormous – as big as the tallest skyscrapers here in Chicago.”

“What you saw was the Great Tree of Somnos,” explained Hill. “I remember seeing it as a boy when I lived there. It was a wondrous thing – every bit as tall as you described it. The tree brought life to the city. Its roots, which stretched out for miles and miles, turned the hard, rocky, frozen earth, into rich fertile soil. You see, the seven cities of Dormia were all built high in the Ural Mountains, in secret valleys that were safe, but where nothing could grow. The Great Trees, like this one, brought life into these remote places and allowed the Dormians to flourish. *Everything* depended on the Great Trees. And in your dream, ice was climbing the tree, which suggests to me that it may be sick or dying.”

He looked fondly at the watch as Alfonso turned it over and over in his hand. “That timepiece has been with me since I left Dormia,” explained Hill. “Keeps perfect time, too, although it makes a strange noise while doing so that I’ve never been able to figure out.”

“What do you mean?” Alfonso asked. He brought the watch to his ear. Hill was right – it did sound strange:

tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-TOCK tick-tick-tick-tick-TOCK TOCK-TOCK

tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-TOCK tick-tick-TOCK TOCK-TOCK

Alfonso looked at Hill. “It sounds like it’s broken,” he said.

“True enough,” replied Hill. “And yet, as I said, it keeps perfect time.”

“Let me see,” coughed Pappy. Alfonso reluctantly handed it over. Pappy raised the watch to an ear, nodded thoughtfully, and then proceeded to closely examine the watch face. “Well, will you look at this!” he said. “The flowers on the Great Tree of Somnos look exactly like the flowers on Alfonso’s plant.”

Hill’s eyes lit up with excitement.

“Yes,” said Hill. “That’s most curious isn’t it?”

“Do you think there’s a connection between my plant and the Great Trees of Dormia?” asked Alfonso.

“That’s the key question,” said Hill. “And there’s only one way to find out.” Hill walked across the room and picked up the Dormian Bloom from the table where it had been sitting. He walked over to a nearby window and opened it. Cold air blasted into the apartment and made everyone shiver. Carefully, Hill removed the sapling from its ceramic pot and pushed it out the window.

“What are you doing?” asked Alfonso nervously. He sprang to his feet and ran over to the window. Judy followed. Even Pappy limped over.

“You’ll see,” said Hill. He placed the Dormian Bloom into a planting container that hung from the ledge directly outside the window. The soil in this container was frozen solid and in places it was covered with snow and ice. A dead sunflower hung over the edge of the container. It was, all in all, a rather sad sight. Yet as soon as Hill placed the Dormian Bloom into the container, something miraculous happened: the snow melted, the ice liquefied, and the soil turned moist and black. Most incredibly of all, the stem of the dead sunflower regained its greenish color, the flower itself grew new bright-yellow petals, and the entire plant rose upward and angled itself toward the sun. All this happened over a twenty-second period as everyone stared in amazement.

“Oh my word,” mumbled Judy. “I don’t believe it.”

Alfonso smiled but said nothing. He picked up the Dormian Bloom, took it inside, and carefully placed it back inside its pot.



“So,” said Hill with a wide toothy smile. “What do you make of that?”

“Darndest thing I’ve ever seen,” said Pappy. “And trust me, I’ve seen many strange things in my time.” He clapped his grandson on the shoulder vigorously. “Well my boy,” he said. “It looks like you’ve grown a Great Tree of Dormia. Don’t know what that means, but congratulations just the same!”

“What *does* that mean?” Alfonso asked Hill.

“Well,” replied Hill. “I’m not exactly sure. But here, let me show you something else. I think it will help.” Hill rushed over to an old roll top desk standing in a corner of the living room, took an antique-looking key from a rope around his neck, and inserted it into the keyhole of a small drawer. He withdrew from the drawer a flat object wrapped in well-creased wax paper.

Alfonso, Pappy and Judy gathered around a coffee table and watched Hill unwrap the layers of wax paper to reveal a cracked but still intact rectangular piece of wood. Two ornately carved wooden panels lay on top of it and covered what looked to be a painting. The panels were attached to the main piece with rusty hinges. “It’s called a triptych,” said Hill, “a set of three panels with paintings – and the side panels are folded over the central one. It’s Dormian. Go ahead, open it.”

Suddenly nervous, Alfonso rubbed his fingertips down the sides of his pants. He carefully opened both panels and stared at the three scenes before him. On the left panel was a painting of a man walking along a forest path and holding in his outstretched hand a small Dormian Bloom. The middle panel was a battle scene, fought along a towering city wall between two armies of knights. The attacking knights were armed with crossbows, catapults, battering rams, and strange looking creatures that strongly resembled the Dragoonya Plants of War that Alfonso had seen back in World’s End. The final panel, the one on the right, showed the same man planting his Dormian Bloom in a grassy courtyard in the middle of a palace.

Alfonso stared at the panels in open-mouthed amazement.

“This belonged to my great-great-great-grandmother and, other than the watch, it’s the only Dormian thing I have,” explained Hill. “The triptych tells a story I think, though I never knew exactly what the story meant.”

“Well,” said Alfonso, “This first panel reminds me of my dream. I was walking along a path just like this with my plant in my hand and...” Alfonso stopped mid-sentence. He suddenly saw something he hadn’t noticed before. In the background of this particular panel, he saw a faint image. It was a tall man, dressed in a dark cloak, with blank eyes that had no pupils.

“It’s the man from my nightmare,” Alfonso said. “I’m sure of it.”

Hill nodded.

“Yes, I thought so,” said Hill with a heavy sigh. “We call him the Old Blind Man.”

“Why he doesn’t sound so scary,” said Pappy. “No need to fret over an old, stumbling fellow like that.”

“He’s no ordinary old man,” replied Hill gravely. “He’s a king.”

“A king?” inquired Judy. “What kind of king?”

“Well,” said Hill, “According to legend, he is the king of the ancient order of the Dragoonya – the age-old enemies of Dormia. As his name suggests, he is both old and unable to see, but supposedly he has a way of knowing the future. They say that he knows which way you’ll run before you even move, and when you finally do move, there he is – blocking your way.”

Alfonso looked at Judy and saw that she looked worried. Alfonso returned his gaze to the triptych and began to study the middle panel, which depicted the battle scene. In this scene, the Dragoonya Knights were a fearsome sight: their metal helmets were pointed and beaklike and it made them look like crazed hawks. Their armor glistened with metal studs and chain mail.

Hill pointed at the Dragoonya Knights. “You see those feathers on their armor?” he asked. “Supposedly, when they ride together, the Dragoonya sound like thousands of eagles screaming and diving in for the kill. And you can see their Plants of War climbing up the walls of the city.” Hill looked at Pappy, whose face had turned pale. “Those are the same wretched creatures that we encountered back in World’s End.”

Finally, Hill pointed to the panel on the right. “But I think this last panel is a happy one,” said Hill. “It shows that the Dragoonya have been defeated and that the man carrying the Dormian Bloom has arrived in Dormia and is now planting it in some kind of palace.”

“So the Dormian Bloom has to be brought back to Dormia?” Alfonso asked.

“I believe so,” said Hill.

Alfonso looked at his plant and then turned to look at Hill. “Why don’t you bring the Bloom to Dormia?” Alfonso said. “The person carrying it in the painting even looks a little like you.”

Hill shook his head. “No, the person carrying the Bloom is the person who grew it. I’m sure of that.”

“What are you saying?” asked Alfonso. “Do you expect me to do this?”

Hill stared solemnly at Alfonso. “Just a few weeks ago, around the same time my sleeping-self kept buying copies of *American Botanist*, I suddenly remembered an old Dormian nursery rhyme. I don’t think it’s just a coincidence.” Hill recited the rhyme:

*Over the mountains, across the sea,
Comes the Sleeper
Holding the tree.
Many a dangerous road he will cross
He must succeed, for life is the cost.
Where he will come from, none can surmise
Neither the worldly, neither the wise
But there is one truth ever so clear
When he's most needed, he will appear.*

Hill leaned back into his seat. The morning light shone through the windows and made the room feel stuffy. “I think you’re that Sleeper,” Hill told Alfonso in a simple, matter-of-fact tone, as if he had been thinking about this for a while. “Don’t you see? Everything fits. You grew a Dormian Bloom, the rarest plant in the world. Then you had a dream in which a Great Tree of Dormia was dying and you were arriving in Dormia with its replacement. Finally, and most worrisome of all, it seems as if you are being chased by the Dragoonya king himself. It all fits! You are the Sleeper from that old nursery rhyme!”

“You mean he has to carry this plant of his to some place half a world away?” Judy asked. “That’s crazy – he’s just a kid!”

Hill said nothing.

“So,” said Pappy as he cleared his throat. “Where exactly is this city of Somnos that you speak of?”

“Well that’s the problem,” said Hill. “I’m not exactly sure.”



They all just sat there, thinking. Eventually, Judy stood up and walked to the window. She looked at the transformed sunflower – its petals were still brilliantly yellow and it appeared to be in excellent health, despite the thick flakes of snow drifting down. Chicago’s downtown was barely visible in the distance.

“There’s always been something about you, Alfonso, that was deeply mysterious to me,” Judy said, almost to herself, as she continued to stare out the window. “Even more than what you did in your sleep. Your dad would hold you in his arms when you were very young, and he’d sing a strange and haunting song. I guess it was Dormian, though he never talked about it. You would stare at him with a look of such intelligence. You’d smile and reach out a tiny hand, as if grabbing the words as they came out of his mouth. He always used to say how *alert* you looked, as if you knew things about life that no one else did. I laughed and thought it was just a father’s pride...”

Finally, Judy turned around and looked at Hill with the most serious expression that Alfonso had ever seen her muster. “Tell me the truth, Hill,” she said. “Will it be dangerous? Will any harm come to Alfonso on this journey that you propose?”

Hill smiled in a sad sort of way. “I wish I could say ‘no,’” he said. “But I just don’t know enough about where we are going. What I can tell you are three things. The first is that I don’t think he would be any safer sitting around here. He is being followed and you have caught a glimpse of the kind of things that are following him. The second is that he is my nephew, the only relative I have, and I will protect him with my life. Lastly, you’ve seen Alfonso and his sleeping gifts. He may need far less protection than any of us realize.”

“And what about us?” asked Judy. “What should Pappy and I do while you two are away?”

“Well,” said Hill, “I would be most pleased if you’d stay here in the clock tower until we got back. I’ll show you how to use the basket if you need to leave, and there’s a storage cellar with lots of provisions. Plus, there’s a boat you can use and I’ve got a decent amount of money saved up that you can dip into while we’re gone.”

“What do you want to do, Alfonso?” asked Judy. “I can’t make this decision for you.”

Everyone looked at Alfonso.

“I guess we should deliver the Dormian Bloom,” he said, a little reluctantly. He wanted to feel more excitement but, at that moment, doubt and fear had the upper hand.

Hill stood up, approached Alfonso, and wrapped his nephew in a massive bear hug. “We’ll do fine,” he declared. “I’ve been waiting for this moment my entire life. Dormia! We’re finally going home!”



The following morning, before the sun had even peeked above the horizon, Alfonso and Hill were in Mr. Edlund’s seaplane heading due west across the wide-open sky of the North American prairie. After they had been flying for a few hours, Hill woke up, set the controls on autopilot, and laid out the lunch Judy had prepared for them. As they ate salami sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs, Hill talked about where they were headed – a small island off the western coast of Canada, known as Fort Krasnik.

According to Hill, Fort Krasnik operated as its own small nation. It was founded by a group of surly Russian sailors who rebelled against their captain during the infamous “Long Voyage of 1703.” After eating all of the biscuits aboard their ship and throwing their captain into the icy waters of the North Pacific, the sailors landed on a small rocky island which they named Fort Krasnik – after the Krasnik Bakery in St. Petersburg, which made a particularly tough, jaw-breaking biscuit. These sailors vowed never to return to the high seas. Instead, they built docks and shops along the shore and dubbed themselves “along-the-shore-men” or simply “longshoremen.”

The longshoremen of Fort Krasnik, who never had much regard for rules or regulations, soon developed a reputation as masters of the black market. They bought, sold, and traded stolen goods of all kinds. As a result, smuggling boats from all over the world came to this little island to do business. All kinds of strange, sketchy, and unlikely characters arrived at this port. In fact, one of the few things that Hill could recall from his early childhood was that he and his brother had actually passed through Fort Krasnik on their way to North America.

In general, Hill’s memory was quite hazy, but he did recall bits and pieces. For example: he vaguely remembered that, when he was nine and Leif was seven, they somehow got lost in the mountains outside of Somnos and ended up alone in a very deep and dark forest. For several

days they huddled there – cold, starving, and alone. Then, his very next memory was of being aboard a ship bound for North America. The details of how he got onto this ship were still a complete mystery to him. In any case, the ship’s captain was an old woman, and a smuggler too, who was en route to the port town that all smugglers love best: Fort Krasnik. When the *Success Story* finally laid anchor in Fort Krasnik, the old sea captain – who never had any interest in children – handed Hill and Leif over to an old friend of hers who was a longshoreman by the name of Dusty Magrewski. Unlike the old sea captain, Dusty had always wanted children of his own, but over the years he had been too busy with his work. “Dusty took us in,” recalled Hill, “And he became almost like a father to us – that is – until we left...”

“Wait a minute,” said Alfonso suddenly, interrupting his uncle’s story. “If this Dusty guy was like a father to you why did you leave him? And why are we going back there now?”

Yet before Hill could answer this question, the plane jolted violently. Seconds later, there were several loud cracks that sounded as if rocks were banging against the outside of the plane. Both Hill and Alfonso glanced out the front windshield.

“Dash it all,” Hill yelled. “We’ve blundered right into a hailstorm!”

Sure enough, Alfonso could make out thick pellets of ice bouncing off the aluminum skin of the wings.

“Buckle up tight!” Hill ordered. “Otherwise, if we have another one of these bounces, you could go through the roof.”

At that moment, the radio crackled: “Unidentified seaplane, this is Vancouver flight control. I repeat, unidentified seaplane, this is Vancouver flight control. What kind of crazy fool is flying that plane? There’s a hailstorm going on, if you didn’t notice, and all flights are grounded.”

Furious, Hill grabbed the radio microphone. “This is Captain Hill Persplexy, U.S. Air Force, *retired*. I’m the pilot of this seaplane and am fully aware of the dangers of a hailstorm. Let me assure you, I’ve got experience in these matters, and if you just let me get back to sleep we’ll be through this storm in no time.”

“Hill Persplexy?” crackled the response from Vancouver control. “Is this the same Captain Persplexy who flew the trans-Pole supply route?”

“Of course,” Hill replied.

“Oh,” said the air traffic controller, his voice crackling with static. “Back to your old crazy antics? Well good luck and *sleep well* sir!”