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Davey Tsering opened his eyes and looked up at an unfamiliar, cream-colored ceiling. He'd slept fitfully on a steel-framed canvas cot, and his body felt a little like he'd just fallen down a mountain. He heard his family before he saw them. His dad was snoring loudly and his younger brother was echoing him like a smaller version of the same revving engine. Davey groaned softly and turned to look around the overcrowded hotel room.

He saw his mom and dad, Pamela and Tam, lying next to each other on one of the room's two double beds. His mom's face was turned down in a grim frown as she slept. Davey peered at the alarm clock on the night table between the two beds. He squinted, but it was too far away for him to read the little glowing numbers. He carefully reached down to the floor for his glasses. The little cot was noisy, and the last thing he wanted was to wake someone up and have company.

He put his glasses on and everything in the room became a little clearer. It wasn't an improvement. There was drool at the corner of

his dad's mouth, and his mom was balanced precariously on the edge of the bed.

Davey's younger brother was splayed out in the next bed, the one that was supposed to be Davey's tomorrow night. Davey looked at him for a few moments. He was surprised by how young he looked lying there, and how peaceful. He still looked like the little kid who used to follow Davey around everywhere. But Davey wasn't fooled. He knew that as soon as Brandon woke up, he'd become "Brando." That's what he liked to be called now. Now that he'd turned into a Class-A pain in the neck, now that he'd started arguing with their parents. Like those two didn't argue enough already.

Davey couldn't imagine what that would sound like in this little room. And who needed imagination? He was sure he'd find out before the week was over. He took a deep breath and regretted it immediately. The room was slightly but unmistakably funky. Four people had been in here all night, sleeping, snoring, drooling, and . . . *Oh no*, thought Davey. *Oh Dear Lord . . . Had someone been farting?*

Another breath, this one quick and cautious, confirmed his fear. He assumed it was Brando, but there was no way to be sure. Was it his dad? His *mom*? It was too horrible to think about.

Finally, he remembered why he'd put his glasses on. He looked at the clock: 6:47. *That's it?* he thought. *That's it?* It would be hours until everyone was awake and ready to get moving. He knew what they'd say: "We're on vacation. Let us sleep."

He had to get out. Thirteen and a half was too old to be stuffed into a room with his entire family. One day in, and he already needed a vacation from this vacation.

Slowly, very slowly, he reached down and pulled the thin hotel blanket off his body. His heart started beating faster. If either of his parents woke up, they'd stop him. If his brother woke up, he'd want to come, too. He had to be quiet. Spy quiet, ninja quiet. Ninja-spy quiet.

He pushed his feet slowly over the side and cringed as the cot creaked under his shifting weight. He glanced over at the beds: no movement. He reached out and put his left hand on the windowsill, taking some of the weight off the cot. In one quick, smooth — well, kind of smooth — movement, he stood up.

Davey had slept in a T-shirt and his swim trunks because . . . well, basically because his brother had. If pajamas are too babyish for your younger brother, they are, by extension, too babyish for you. And he had to admit it was a pretty solid plan. His swim trunks were the one thing he could wash himself as the week went on, just by going in the water. They were in the Florida Keys, after all. The Internet described this place as “a sunny tropical paradise with white sand beaches and crystal-blue water.” It didn't seem like paradise so far — and it definitely didn't smell like it — but Davey was 100 percent sure the March weather here was going to be better than it had been in Ohio.

Still, he wasn't really a beach person. He was skinny, and he

wouldn't call himself nerdy, exactly, but he did like his fantasy books. He leaned down and silently pawed through the little pile of paperbacks he'd set up next to the cot. All the books except one were by J. R. R. Tolkien. Davey was such a big fan that he knew what all the initials stood for. And the one book that wasn't by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was by his son.

Davey made his selection: *The Silmarillion*. The bookstore lady had told him it was "for serious Tolkien fans only," and so it was his new favorite. He stuffed a few other essentials in the white-mesh pocket of his swim trunks and surveyed the path ahead. He had to walk right by the beds — why on earth had he set up the cot by the window instead of the door?

He walked carefully, minefield-style. The carpet was thick and easily absorbed his weight. Halfway across the room, he heard someone turn over. He knew it was his brother before he even looked — his parents had no room for such large maneuvers. He looked back slowly and was relieved to see Brando in a slightly different position but still just as asleep. The shifting of his blankets had revealed something else, though. Brando was definitely the one polluting the atmosphere. In a way it was a relief.

Davey saw a sliver of morning sunlight through a gap in the curtains. That was his goal. He needed to reach it. He needed to get to a sunny, warm place that didn't sound like dueling chain saws and wasn't contaminated by the burrito grande his brother had eaten at the airport. He turned back toward the door and kept

going. He was past the beds now. A few more tense steps and he was at the door.

He pressed down on the handle with slow, even pressure. He knew there would be a click. The question was how loud.

Click.

Not too loud. He didn't hear anything behind him and didn't turn to look. He was too close to his goal. He pushed the door open and quickly stepped through.