

An underwater scene with a blue-green tint. Several sharks are swimming in the water. In the foreground, a shark's head is visible, looking upwards. In the background, a diver is seen swimming. The text "SURROUNDED BY SHARKS" is overlaid in the center.

SURROUNDED BY
SHARKS

A NOVEL BY
MICHAEL NORTHROP
AUTHOR OF *TRAPPED*

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Summary: On the first day of vacation thirteen-year-old Davey Tsering wakes up early, slips out of his family's hotel room without telling anyone, and heads for the beach and a swim in the warm Floridian waters — and a fateful meeting with a shark.

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PART ONE

CARRIED AWAY

1

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.

2

In open ocean approximately four miles to the southwest, a very different individual was also up early. Although “up early” wasn’t exactly accurate in this case. It had been up all night. It had been up all of its life. But now, in the fresh light of morning, it was on the hunt.

Galeocerdo cuvier. The tiger shark. The distinctive stripes that earned the species its name had faded as this one reached adulthood, but there was a second reason for the name. The sea tiger was at least as fearsome a predator as a tiger on land. It was a massive, muscular brute of a fish. It was sometimes called the man-eater shark, but that wasn’t entirely accurate, either. It would eat anything, from sea snakes to sick whales to discarded lunch boxes.

As the sun speared through the warm top layer of the ocean, all of the shark’s senses were alive. Its eyes scanned the water as its ears listened for rhythms. It smelled the water constantly with powerful nostrils that had nothing to do with breathing, had no other job. If you were in the water a thousand yards away, it could taste you already. It could tell if you had a sunburn. But it was doing something else, as well.

Small jelly-filled pores along the shark's head were alive to any electrical charges in the water. With them, the shark could sense the tiny charge given off by the muscles of a fish as it flicked its tail. It could sense the vast humming of an ocean current. With a threshold of around five one-billionths of a volt, it could sense nearly anything that moved down here. And that's how it knew it was close.

It had been on the trail all night, gliding patiently through the water. It wasn't sure at first: a faint smell, and far off. And even when it knew — *blood* — it still wasn't willing to expend much energy. The sea was vast and hungry. Food was often gone by the time the shark arrived. The body would be gone, even the scraps, leaving it with nothing but the smell and the knowledge that it was once again too late.

But not today. Its prey was just up ahead. The broken rhythm of an injured animal swimming rang through its senses like a church bell:

Whump-whump-wahamp-whump . . .

Whump-whump-wahamp-whump . . .

Whump-whump-wahamp-whump . . .

The shark could see it up ahead now. It was a loggerhead sea turtle, a rich feast of fat and muscle if the shark could catch it. And there was something wrong with it. One of its flippers was injured. Yes, the shark could see that now. It could see it and smell it and feel it and sense it and taste it.

It could've been hurt by a fishing net or another shark. It could've been anything out here, but it didn't matter now. After all those miles of slow, patient swimming, the shark had closed to within a few dozen yards. The turtle knew it was there now and swam harder.

Whump-whump-wahamp-whump-whump-whump-wahamp-whump

The effort came to nothing. The tiger shark exploded through the water, closing the distance almost instantly with an impressive burst of speed. And then it was on the turtle and feeding. Its powerful jaws clamped down on the injured flipper. Dozens of broad, backward-curved teeth, serrated like kitchen knives, found their marks. And again. And again.

The turtle weighed close to 250 pounds. The shark was five times that, but the turtle would still have been enough to fill its stomach — if it weren't for the others. The tiger shark swam by itself for hundreds of miles, but when there was food, it was never alone.

As it circled around for another bite, a second shark flashed up from below. It was smaller and faster and just as hungry. It tore chunks of its own. And then another one appeared. With it came a cloud of the little scavenger fish that frustrated the big shark. They were too small and quick to catch, but big enough to snap up some of its kill.

The turtle was torn to pieces and devoured in a storm of blood.