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Opening extract from

The Ironwood Tree

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Published by

Simon and Schuster

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Chapter One



IN WHICH There Is Both a Fight and a Duel

The engine of the station wagon was already running. Mallory leaned against the door, her everyday sneakers grungy against the bright white of her long fencing socks. Her hair was gelled and pulled back into a ponytail so tight that it made her eyes bulge. Mrs. Grace stood on the driver's side, her hands on her hips.

"I found him!" Jared panted, running up to join them.

"Simon," their mother called. "Where were you? We looked everywhere!"

"The carriage house," Simon said. "Taking care of the . . . uh, a bird I found." Simon looked uncomfortable. He wasn't used to having to lie. That was mostly Jared's job.

Mallory rolled her eyes. "Too bad Mom wouldn't leave without you."

"Mallory," their mother said, shaking her head in disapproval. "All of you—get in the car. We're going to be late already, and I still have to drop something off."

As Mallory turned to put her bag in the trunk, Jared noticed that her chest looked strange. Stiff and weirdly . . . big.

"What are you wearing?" he asked, pointing.

"Shut up," she said.

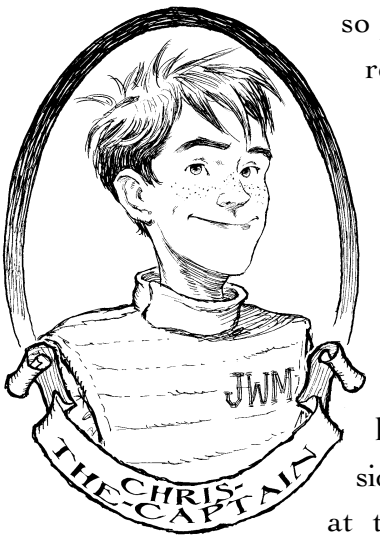
He snickered. "It's just that you look like you've got—"

"Shut up!" she said again, getting into the front seat of the car while the boys climbed in

the back. "It's for protection, and I have to have it on."

Jared smiled against the window and watched the woods go by. There hadn't been any faerie activity in more than two weeks—even Thimbletack had been quiet—and occasionally Jared had to remind himself that it was real. Sometimes it seemed like everything could be explained away. Even the burning water had been dismissed as simply being from a contaminated well. Until the old plumbing could be connected to a central line, they used gallons of supermarket water without Mom thinking it was weird. But there was Simon's griffin, and *that* couldn't be explained by anything but Arthur's field guide.

"Stop chewing on your ponytail," their mother said to Mallory. "What is making you



so jittery? Is this new team really that good?"

"I'm fine," Mallory said.

Back in New York she'd fenced in sweatpants and a team jacket chosen from a pile. There had been a guy who'd hold up his hand on your side if you had scored. But at the new school, fencers wore real uniforms and had electric rapiers wired to a scoring machine that flashed lights when someone got hit. Jared thought that was enough to make anyone jumpy.

Apparently their mother had another explanation. "It's that boy, isn't it? The one

you were talking to on Wednesday when I picked you up."

"What boy?" Simon asked from the backseat, already starting to laugh.

"Be quiet," said their mother, but she answered anyway. "Chris, the fencing captain. He is the captain, isn't he?"

Their sister grunted noncommittally.

"Chris and Mallory sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G," Simon sang. Jared giggled, and Mallory turned toward the backseat, eyes narrowed.

"Want to lose all your baby teeth at once?"

"Don't listen to them," their mother said. "And *don't* worry. You're a smart, pretty girl and a great fencer. I bet he likes you."

"Mom!" Mallory groaned and sank lower in the front seat.

Their mother stopped at the library where she worked, dropped off some paperwork, and



"I bet he likes you."

returned to the idling car, somewhat out of breath.

"Come on! I can't be late," Mallory said, smoothing her hair back unnecessarily. "It's my first match!"

Their mother sighed. "We're almost there."

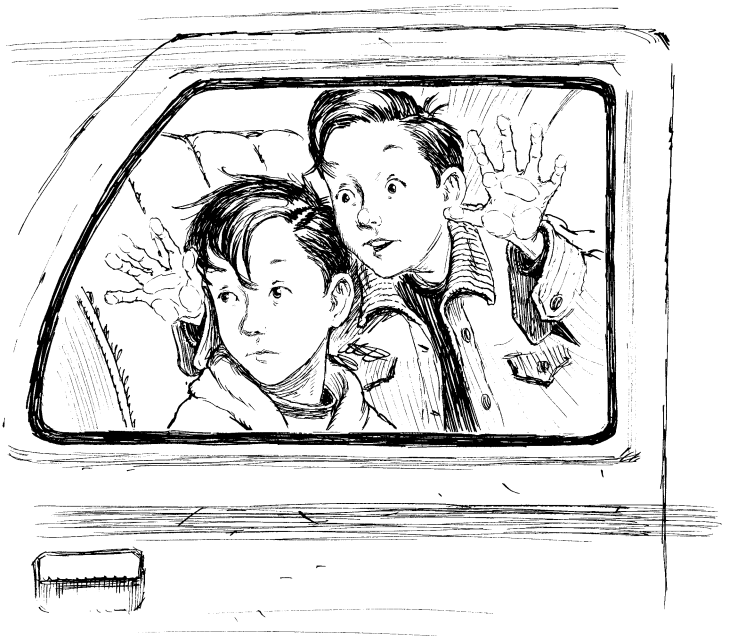
Jared resumed looking out the window in time to see what looked like a deep crater. They were driving over a stone bridge. The school bus never went this way.

"Simon, look! What's that?"

"It's an abandoned quarry," Mallory said impatiently. "Where people used to dig up rocks."

"A *quarry,*" Jared echoed. He remembered something from the map they'd found in their great-uncle Arthur's study.

"Think they found any fossils?" Simon asked, half crawling over Jared to look out the



window. "I wonder what dinosaurs lived in this area."

Their mother was already pulling the car into the school parking lot. She didn't answer.



Jared, Simon, and their mother climbed up onto the gymnasium bleachers while Mallory went to sit with her team. Already seated were a few other families and a smattering of people Jared recognized from school. A rectangular pad was spread out on the floor with lines taped on it. Mallory called it a *piste,* but Jared thought it just looked like a long, black mat. Behind it was a folding table where the scoreboard sat, its large, colored buttons making it look more like a game than something important. The director was fiddling with the wires, connecting them to a foil and testing the force needed to make the buzzer sound and the lights flash.

Mallory sat down on a metal chair at one

end of the *piste* and started unpacking her bag. Chris squatted down to talk with Mallory. The other team milled around the opposite end. All the uniforms were so white, they made Jared's eyes hurt.

Finally the director announced it was time for the first bout. He called two fencers up and made each of them strap a small receiver to the back of their pants, then attached cords to their foils. It all looked so professional. As the fencers began, Jared tried to recall what Mallory had said about the flashing lights, but he couldn't.

"This is stupid. I like fencing better without all this junk," Jared said to no one in particular.

Two matches later Jared had figured out that the colored lights meant that the hit was good, but the white light meant that the hit didn't count. Only hits in the chest counted. Which

was dumb, really, Jared had always thought. Getting hit in the leg hurt plenty, and Jared had practiced with Mallory enough to know.

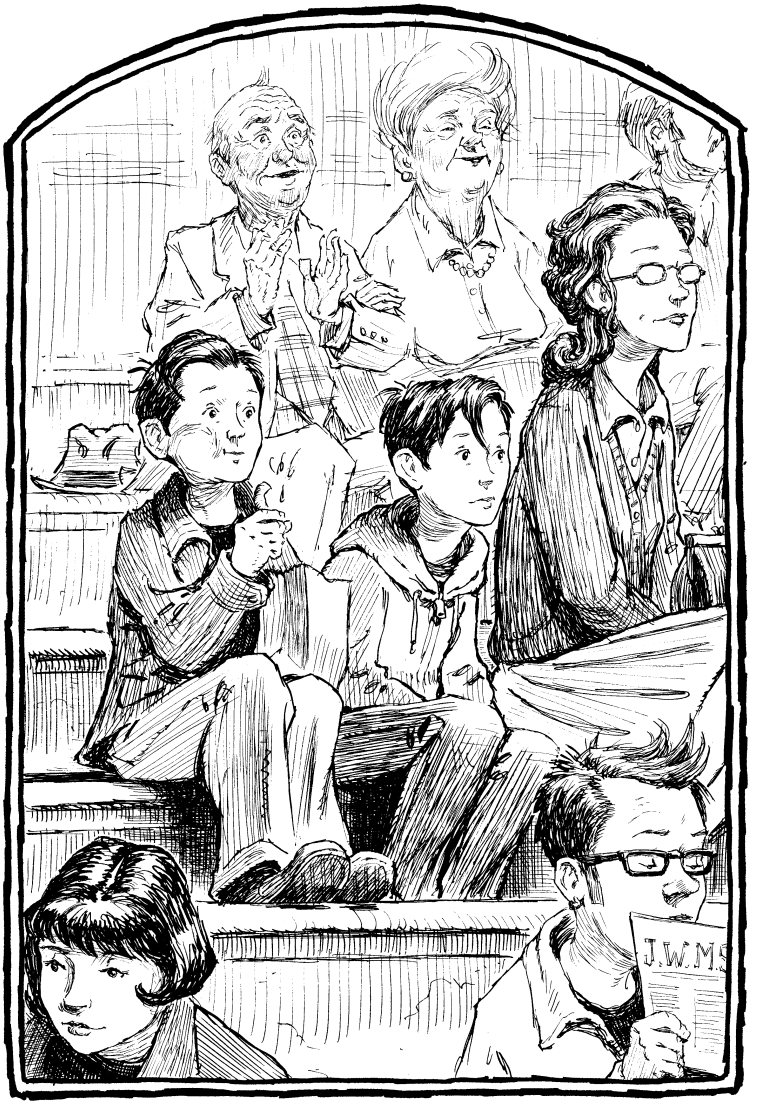
Finally Mallory was called to the mat. Her opponent—a tall boy called Daniel Something-or-Other—snickered as he put on his mask. He obviously had no idea what was coming.

Jared elbowed Simon as his brother put a pretzel into his mouth. "He's going to get it."

"Ow," said Simon. "Cut it out."

Mallory's ponytail bounced as she advanced. Her sword struck Daniel hard in the chest before he could parry. The director raised one hand, and the scoreboard lit up with a point for Mallory. Jared grinned.

Their mother was craning her whole body forward as if there were something to hear other than the clang of thin metal blades locked



"I like fencing better without all this junk."

in the pattern of attack, parry, and riposte. Daniel lunged desperately, too upset to control his advance. Mallory countered, turning her defense into an attack and scoring another point.

Their sister beat Daniel without being touched once. They saluted each other formally, and the boy took off his mask, red-faced and breathing hard. When Mallory's mask came off, she smiled, eyes slitted with satisfaction.

On the way back to the metal chairs the fencing captain gave Mallory a quick awkward hug. Jared couldn't see very well, but he could have sworn that Mallory's face flushed darker than it had been when she stepped off the mat.

The bouts went on, with Mallory's team doing pretty well. When it was the captain's turn to fence, Mallory cheered loudly. Unfortunately it didn't seem to help. He was

defeated by a narrow margin. Slinking back to his seat, he walked past her without a word and shrugged off her attempts to talk to him.

When Mallory was called to the mat again, Chris didn't even look up.

Jared watched from the stands and scowled. His scowl deepened when he noticed a blond-haired girl in white fencing garb rooting through his sister's bag.

"Who's that?" Jared pointed.

Simon shrugged. "I dunno. She hasn't fenced yet."

Could the girl be a friend of his sister? Maybe she was just borrowing something? The furtive way the girl stopped when anyone from the team looked her way made Jared think she was stealing. But what would anyone want in a bag of Mallory's dirty socks and spare foils?



Clang of thin metal blades

Jared stood up. He had to do something. Didn't anyone else notice what was happening?

"Where are you going?" his mother asked.

"Bathroom," he lied automatically, even though his mother would be able to see him walking across the gym. He wished he could tell her the truth, but she would have made up some excuse for the girl. She thought the best of everyone, except him.

Jared climbed down the bleachers and, staying close to the wall, crossed the court to where the girl was still rummaging. But as Jared approached the chairs, the coach stopped him.

The fencing coach was wiry and short, with patchy white stubble on his face. "Sorry, kid, you can't come over here during the meet."



The coach stopped him.

"But that girl's trying to steal my sister's stuff!"

The coach turned. "Who?"

As Jared swung around to point her out, though, he realized that she'd disappeared. He fumbled for an explanation. "I don't know who she is. She hasn't fenced yet."

"Everybody's fenced, kid. I think you'd better go back to your seat."

Jared turned back to the bleachers, embarrassed, then thought better of it. He'd go out to the bathroom so that maybe his mother would ask fewer questions when he returned. Just before he walked through the blue gym doors, he stopped and looked back. Now *Simon* was fumbling through Mallory's bag. But Simon was wearing *his* clothes! Everyone would think it was him. He narrowed his eyes, wishing what he saw made sense.

Then a horrible suspicion formed in his mind. Glancing up into the stands, he caught sight of his brother sitting beside his mother, chewing on pretzels. Whatever that thing was, it wasn't Simon.



"Don't you know me?"