

A World Apart, Excerpt

“Run! As fast as you can. Faster, April! Hide somewhere, anywhere. Quickly!” The voice telling her what to do was her own, as if she didn’t already know. “I am, I am,” she cried impatiently and ran, as fast as she could, searching the forest for somewhere to hide. Anywhere. There was certainly no time to stand and argue with herself. Unless she had a strong desire to be eaten alive. Some days, she wasn’t sure. Some days, she might have welcomed such a fate. But not this day.

Her feet flew as though they had wings, barely touching the ground before launching into space again. But dusk was falling too fast, she could barely see. Dark shadows loomed up to block her path. How was she going to find somewhere to hide – before it was too late?

The owl circling overhead had the advantage, it could see just fine in the night. It couldn’t wait to snatch her up for supper as if she was a common field mouse. She might be small for an elf, but she was no mouse. Maybe the scrap of fur she wore to prevent from freezing to death was misleading the bird. Or maybe the bird didn’t care either way. A meal was a meal.

There! April spied a stark silhouette, lit by the white froth of a fast rushing creek. The final rays of daylight glinted off the water and reflected straight through the center of the hollow log. Shelter. If she could make it inside!

Ducking and changing direction abruptly, she made a wild lunge for the wood. And not a moment too soon. The owl dove sharply as April tumbled headfirst into the middle of the log. It was immediately apparent that it wasn’t the cleanest, driest hollow log. It was actually kind of slimy and smelly, but it had just saved her life so she wasn’t going to complain.

April burrowed deeper and strained her pointed ears. Nothing. The next minute felt like an hour. Still nothing. Surely the owl had not given up so easily? “Of course not,” April muttered wearily, as a loud flapping signaled the bird’s return. The log lurched forward and April was thrown against the rotted wood. There was less wood than she would have expected, or hoped. The whole cavity was crawling with movement. Her sanctuary was completely infested by something creepy. Hundreds of them!

April didn’t have time to do more than shriek and launch herself backwards before the owl tried again. This time the log didn’t merely lurch forward, it rolled. And it kept on rolling - downhill and towards the creek, if April wasn’t mistaken. It crunched over the last bits of winter ice and picked up speed. She was spun in violent circles as her haven became a trap.

When the log stopped moving abruptly, she again hit the wall of slime. “Gross, gross, gross,” April yelled, trying to push away without sticking her hands into it. She might have leapt right out of the log of horrors, except it started to move again, in a different way – more like a boat. An icy splash of water confirmed it. She was taking a trip down the swollen creek, whether she wanted to or not. “And I don’t,” she sighed, just to be clear with herself.

Hoping it wasn’t going to be a long trip, April explored the rest of the log. Finding somewhere to rest that wasn’t pooled with ice water or crawling beneath her proved impossible. There wasn’t anywhere. “Sit down and shut up. It’s better than being bird food,” she muttered and decided on the ice water. She couldn’t get any wetter or colder. April slumped down and sneezed.

How had she gotten into such a predicament? Things like this were happening all too often lately. She was obviously becoming careless. Five years alone in the forest was five years too long. If she didn’t find other elves soon, she probably would get eaten. At least it would put her out of her misery. And the longer she traveled through the forest alone, the more miserable she became. Some days she couldn’t even stand her own company. If she could have left herself behind, she would have done it in a second.

Maybe the myth she had been told as a child, about other elves living in the west, was simply that – a myth. Maybe she had spent five years walking west for nothing. It was entirely

possible that there were no more elves left in the world, only her. "The last elf," April tried the words. They were sad words.

More discouraged than ever, she hugged her knees against the chill and leaned her head into the rot. Clamping onto the gold tag around her neck, she ran her finger lightly over the engraved letters. It helped her to remember who she was. April-May June, Fourteen - her name and age.

She would turn fifteen soon, if she lasted that long. The number on the tag magically increased by one each year, always on the same day in early spring. She assumed it was her birthday, since it always changed on April first. It helped to explain one part of her ridiculous name.

She'd never known her parents to ask about her name. They had been gone before she was old enough to converse intelligently or wonder about things like being named after not merely one month, but three. And she had spent her last five birthdays alone. The way things were going, this year would be no different.

As the log continued to speed through the darkness, April tried to relax. The ride was smooth enough, except for the occasional lurch or bang that ensured she did not drift into slumber. That was probably a good thing. If she had fallen asleep, she might have tipped face first into the living mush.

After she had been in the log for what felt like a long and boring week, the ride became undeniably rougher. April picked some of the more adventurous larvae off her legs and leaned out to have a look around. It was barely morning, the sun was starting to rise and the creek had grown choppy, plunging and capping as it stirred itself into a frenzy.

She pulled back inside and tried to look on the bright side, at least she was still floating and not sinking. And at least it was too dark inside the log to actually see her lodging. And since she hadn't eaten in two or three days, the motion of the water hadn't made her sick. "Lots of bright sides. Don't think about food," she ordered sternly.

April was used to almost starving. It was hard to find food in the forest by the end of the winter and a lot of what she was forced to eat, simply to survive, couldn't even be called food. Sometimes, she had to close her eyes because she couldn't stand to see what she was putting in her mouth. If she was stuck in this log for days, she might consider eating some of her logmates. Her eyes would definitely be squeezed shut for that meal.

She was thinking about her logmates and trying to decide exactly how hungry she was, when the bottom fell out of her world, so to speak. She was still in the log but it was plunging through space as the sound of the water turned to thunder. April closed her eyes and grabbed the walls - she was inside one monster of a waterfall. "Hang on," she shouted as she hurtled straight hung on anyway.

Everything was tolerable until the log reached the bottom. Then a torrent of rushing ice water surged through the center hole, trying to flush it clean. April hung on for dear life by anchoring herself to the opposite sides of the wall and pressing with all the strength in her arms and legs. It felt like she was lodged in the belly of a giant fish that was determined to spew her out.

When the log finally bobbed free from the bottom of the waterfall and drained, April was long out of breath. She was seeing shooting stars and black spots that weren't really there. It was the last thing she remembered before blackness pressed around her like a thick, wet blanket.

The log wasn't moving when April woke up. It felt like hours had passed, but it might have been minutes. "The log isn't moving," she observed faintly. "Good, that's good," she decided. It was good, wasn't it?

April struggled to her knees and peeked cautiously out to see where on earth she was now. She blinked twice and pulled back inside, like a turtle retreating into its shell. She counted to ten, pinched herself, then stuck her head out a second time.

“Hmmm.” April returned to her log and sat down to think. Okay, something was different, something was wrong, something wasn’t right. Maybe she was dreaming—that would explain everything.

The log was lodged against the shore in a tangle of branches. The river was calm and it was still daylight, as it should be. But it wasn’t winter anymore—it was summer. The trees were fully dressed in leaves and they looked smaller than normal somehow, as if they had shrunk. Colourful flowers decorated the shore and everything was green and warm and shouted ‘summer’.

Deciding the situation required further investigation, April wrapped her dripping scrap of fur tightly around her shoulders and scampered across the branches to the shore. The world didn’t just look warm, it felt warm. April dug her toes into the mud. It felt so real - real and warm and squishy. Had she slept for months and woken up in a different season?

In a daze, April explored farther. An hour later, it was still summer. The sky was as blue as it could possibly be. Chirping, buzzing insects serenaded her ears. A soft, fragrant breeze wove through the trees and dried her skin. She became so warm that she abandoned her clammy fur.

“You must be having the best dream in the world,” April remarked, when she stumbled into a field of strawberries. The whole meadow was overflowing with ripe, sweet, juicy berries. They were so plentiful that she could stand still and eat her fill. She must have eaten five whole strawberries before her stomach protested. It was not used to so much food at one time.

“What now?” April stood in the middle of the berries, unsure what to do next. “Keep going.” It was good advice. She crossed the field and ducked into the thicker undergrowth, trying a new direction. The vegetation thinned again almost immediately and there was another meadow on the opposite side, and more than that. So much more!

April fell back into the shrubbery and hid, while her heart tried to escape from her chest. Was this part of her lovely dream?

Directly ahead, stood a solid, square structure built from stones. It was enormous, while still elf-sized, judging by the doors and windows. But it was a permanent dwelling; elves never built permanent dwellings. The structure was surrounded by an inviting carpet of moss and edged on one side by a small, sparkling lake.

April gasped in air when her lungs reminded her to breathe. She studied the dwelling closely and observed flickers of movement at the windows. Something alive must be inside. Maybe elves were inside. Should she chance approaching the structure? As if to answer the question in her head, a resounding gong echoed across the meadow. April jumped at least an inch.

It was some sort of signal. The largest door flew open and a flood of real, live elves poured out. April automatically took another step back into the weeds and crouched low when her knees failed to continue supporting her. “Elves,” she whispered in awe. “I can see elves. Elves.” She wanted to keep saying it.

The whole meadow filled up with energetic elves, beautifully dressed in all the colours of the rainbow. Their hair and teeth gleamed in the sunlight, as if they brushed them vigorously each and every day. They were all within several years of April’s own age, as if this place was populated by only young elves. They settled onto the grass and opened various sacks of food. It looked like eating time. April blinked hard and tried to count them but there were too many bodies and they didn’t sit still. She guessed that there were more than three hundred elves, many more elves than had ever existed in her world, even before it was destroyed. “Elves,” April savoured softly, one more time.

After they ate, they ran around in the meadow making a tremendous amount of noise, yelling and laughing. They looked so happy. There was no attempt to hide, it was as if they feared nothing. In April’s world, the elves had perfected the art of never being seen or heard. It was the only way to survive and all too often, it had not been enough. Why did these elves behave so recklessly? April could have been a forest cat, crouched in the shrubbery, stalking them, plotting to pounce.

A second gong sounded and every last elf picked up their pack and filed back inside the structure. April closed her eyes because the meadow suddenly seemed so empty. She felt hollow inside now that the elves were gone, as if they had never existed.

Overwhelmed with the need to follow them, April rose stiffly and took one step forward, but not a second. She could not introduce herself in her present state, she didn't even have any clothes. April had sort of forgotten about clothes after five years alone in the forest, she only wore fur or leaves when it was cold. "You are a mess, you need to clean up," she advised herself in a shaky voice. She was right.

That's what she would do, run back and find her fur, tidy up as best she could. And she'd better fix her hair, it was hanging down to her knees in a tangled curtain, thanks to the waterfall. From what she had just witnessed, these elves took very good care of their hair, and every other part of themselves. Yes, she would clean up and introduce herself properly. That would be best.

It was a good plan. It might have worked if she hadn't been careless because she was so excited about finally finding other elves. April stepped confidently out of the undergrowth, on the side hidden from the stone structure. She had assumed that all the elves were inside the building. She had assumed wrong.

"Aargh!" everyone yelled at once. It was hard to tell who was more shocked, April or the three elves that almost ran her over. They stopped dead and stared, as if their eyes were about to fall out of their faces. April was at something of a disadvantage as she blinked up at the tall, beautifully dressed, spotlessly clean elves. She felt small and grubby, like a worm. Thank goodness for her curtain of hair, it was kind of like clothes.