

## Mad About Magic, Excerpt

The house was dark and still when they tiptoed downstairs as quietly as two fleas. Peter was already outside. April hadn't heard him at all. He had been very sneaky, or she had been fast asleep.

And then they waited for Salm—until they couldn't wait any longer. They gave up on him when the moon started to lower in the sky. Raina didn't rage about Salm, she simply asked if the three of them should risk going without him. Elder Scarab was in trouble; he needed them. The decision to go was unanimous.

They moved cautiously away from the house, away from safety. April knew they had to help Elder Scarab, but that didn't stop her stomach from feeling like she had swallowed a squirming centipede, whole. They hiked a good distance before daring to light one of the torches.

Raina said breathlessly, "Well, we made it."

"So far, anyway," Peter responded, with less confidence.

"Okay, let's make the most of the time we've got. April, we'll follow you. Start doing whatever you do with your magic." Raina handed over the light and waited, as if she expected April to conjure up Elder Scarab from thin air.

"I'll do what I can." April began to concentrate and walked east, away from New Haven. It was the most logical direction. If Elder Scarab had been hanging around the town, someone would surely have spotted him by now.

They hiked for several hours, weaving between eerie black shapes that pressed too close. Imaginations were working overtime since they expected danger with every single step. April grew so tired of straining her magical senses that she got a thumping headache, and that was all she got. She had yet to discover anything useful.

"Try a different direction," Raina prompted at one point.

April angled left and walked that way for an hour or so. Then she angled right for another hour. No one knew where they were at that point (not even Peter), but they were increasing their distance from town. And they were fast running out of night.

April was almost asleep on her feet when she finally sensed something worth investigating at the very edge of her range. It was too far away to be identifiable, but at least it was *something*. "This way," she murmured and waded through a shallow bit of boggy ground. Soon, she knew it was an elf that she sensed. There was no way to know for sure if it was Elder Scarab, but who else would be alone out here in the dead of night? After several directional adjustments, April raced ahead with purpose. When the elf was just ahead, she slowed and turned to her friends. "Okay, this is it. I think Elder Scarab is on the other side of that tree. But the other thing might be nearby, so stay close."

Raina whimpered and grabbed April's arm, truly frightened now. April felt the exact same way, but she was refusing to acknowledge the clawing fear. If she pretended she wasn't scared, she might not be.

The three friends crept slowly forward, almost joined at the hip, alert for any movement. When they rounded the tree, April could sense the elf strongly, but she couldn't see him or hear him. She should have been able to do so.

Peter whispered, "Where is he?"

April shrugged against his shoulder. They took more cautious steps forward but nothing revealed itself. Was the elf invisible?

“Are you sure he’s here?” Raina whispered next.

“Positive,” April answered at the same moment that something snored and grunted.

As one, they looked up. An elf-sized bundle was wrapped in vines and suspended from the branch above, at least four feet off the ground.

“Oh dear,” Raina breathed. “I guess that’s him.”

“It looks that way, doesn’t it,” Peter said. “Elder Scarab. Elder Scarab!”

The bundle jerked around angrily. “Who’s there? I know you’re down there, whatever you are! You better stay back if you know what’s good for you,” said Elder Scarab’s querulous voice. The bundle swung and twirled, firmly attached to the branch.

“Elder Scarab, it’s us—Raina, April and Peter. We’ve come to rescue you!” Raina called up, trying not to shout too loud.

“About time. Well, look out. Some weird creature keeps coming to check on me. So get me down, fast. We have to get the heck away from here,” he ordered.

Peter sighed and looked way way up. “We could really use Airron and his wings right about now. Or Salm and his muscles.”

“I can burn through the vine from here, magically,” April suggested.

“No, he’s got too much of a drop. He might get hurt. But I can climb up and cut the vine, and try and lower him down,” Peter said thoughtfully.

“You have your pocket blade?” Raina assumed.

He felt his pocket. “Yup.”

“Well use it!” Elder Scarab said crossly. “I’ve been hanging here with no food or water for days and days. Like torture, I tell you.”

“It hasn’t been quite that long, but we’ll get you down,” Raina promised.

“You two stay here. Guard duty.” Peter lit a second torch and started climbing up the bark, a little awkwardly with only one hand. Raina edged closer to April, so close that they could have been one body.

“And watch out for whatever that critter is. Haven’t laid eyes on it yet, but it keeps sneaking around,” Elder Scarab reminded them quite unnecessarily. “April, it seems to have magic kind of like yours. I hate to say it, but I think it has stronger magic. It didn’t wrap me in these blasted vines, it made the vines grow so fast I could barely see them. Vines wrapped me up all by themselves. Never seen a plant do that before. Vines behaved like snakes! So stay alert, keep an eye on the plants!”

Peter scrambled along the branch from which Elder Scarab was suspended and examined the tangle of vines with his light. He traced the supporting vine higher. “I think this is it, seems to be tangled around enough of these branches that his own weight might ease him slowly to the ground, if I cut it through up here.”

“Sounds good. Give it a try.” Raina shifted nervously from one foot to the other, trying to watch all the shadows at once. Peter sawed at the vine. They really could have used Salm’s help in case they needed to catch the Elder. Raina was so upset with her brother that she hadn’t mentioned his name even once. He had left them to risk the woodland alone in the middle of the night. Salm’s behavior was disappointing.

The vine snapped without warning and Elder Scarab came sliding down faster than expected. He hit the ground with a thump and moaned dramatically.

Peter winced. “I forgot to take into account how heavy he is. Sorry about that,” he called down to the lump that was Elder Scarab.

Raina and April worked at ripping apart the tight vines that secured the elf from head to toe. Peter scrambled down to help with his blade. In minutes, the Elder was free.

The first words out of Elder Scarab's mouth were, "Why did you drop me?"

"We weren't trying to. We were trying not to," Raina emphasized. "You could say thank-you. We did save you, you know!"

All their nerves were wearing thin at that point. It had been a long and stressful night, and it wasn't nearly over.

"Harrumph! Didn't save me yet. Let's get out of here, we can talk on the way back to town. And thanks." The Elder started walking with a pronounced limp, which soon disappeared. They were heading home, after all, and the rescue had gone surprisingly smoothly.

Then April started to sense something all too familiar. The creature, whatever it was, must be using magic! That did not bode well for their small defenseless group.

"Uh-oh," April gulped.

"Uh-oh?" Raina echoed. "Why did you say 'uh-oh'?"

In answer, the surrounding trees came alive with sound. The peculiar noise hemmed them in on all sides. There was nowhere to run. They stopped walking and instinctively pressed closer together.

"April? What is it?" Peter asked.

"The thing is using magic, but I don't know what that weird sound is." And it was creeping closer, growing louder—a rustling, crackling, crumpled kind of noise, and underlying that was a sort of squishy gushing. The squishy gushing was the most unsettling of the chorus of sounds.

"April!" Raina cried. "Do something magical to make it stop, please. Please stop it." She covered her ears with her hands.

"But I don't even know what it is." April strained her magical senses. Nothing. Then the noise edged overhead.

"April!" Raina's voice was shrill with panic.

"Cripes, could you at least make more light? So we can see what we're up against," Elder Scarab growled.

"Yes. I can do that." April concentrated hard on the perimeter in front of them. A curved line of fire surged along the ground and flared high. It illuminated a scene of absolute normality.

"I don't see anything weird," Elder Scarab grunted. "Let's move."

And then there was a new noise—a distinct *plop*. Then another and another and another, like rain, but much bigger and gloppier.

"Okay, I don't know what that was, but I don't want to find out." Peter placed a hand on April's back and propelled her forward, fast. Everyone took off running, but it wasn't fast enough. *Plop*.

"Something landed on me!" Raina shrieked. "Get it off!" She brushed frantically at her shoulder. "Yuck, it's sticky. What is it?"

"Hold still." April tried to have a look, but Raina wouldn't stop squirming. Whatever was falling wetly around them was increasing in volume.

"Keep moving, would you," Elder Scarab snapped, right before a large sticky glob landed on his head and oozed slowly down the side of his face. A familiar smell proved what the substance was—a mixture of tree gum and sap. And the ground was fast

becoming coated in the stuff. They tried to run, but it was impossible. The ground had transformed into one big sticky trap.