

EXTREME EARTH COLLECTION

One

The day began as usual. The little ones scampered about while Pa complained of the aches in his back and the tingles in his toes. Sabryna heated bread and pottage over the fire in their old iron pot. The family didn't have the money for a new alchemical stove like other families in the village, but Sabryna didn't mind. She liked the smell of a real fire better. It smelt honest.

Before the family ate breakfast, they stood before the shrine. Three clay figures were nestled in the nook above the fireplace. Their paint was flaky and their limbs cracked but, since Pa had injured his back and lost his job on Strongarm's farm, there was no money for repairs. Sabryna nudged the little ones to remind them to bow their heads as Pa cleared his throat.

"Thank you, Barl, for the grain and the beans. Thank you, Sana, for light to bless the leaves. Thank you, Dia, for water to bless the roots."

Sabryna broke off breadcrumbs to give to each of the figurines: stout Barl, tall Sana and dainty Dia with her long, flowing hair.

"We are only a poor family – a lowly family," Pa went on. "We try our best but we are always cold and hungry and our bellies always rumble. Please bless us, spirits. Send us barrels of grain, baskets of fruit and lots and lots of fish." Recently, Pa's pleas had become more and more desperate, and Sabryna had become more and more certain that the spirits weren't listening.

After breakfast, Sabryna tied on her apron and filled her pocket with salt for a day's luck. "Time for school," she said, leading the little ones outside.

"Have a good day," said Pa, "and don't run off with a passing merchant!"

"I won't," Sabryna promised. Sabryna had never travelled further than the next village but she knew that the merchants came from towns

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and cities far away. They brought tales of temples and domes, mighty machines and magic shows. Sabryna would love to see all that they described, but she knew that it was impossible. Her family depended on her.

The village school only cost a penny each for the morning and taught sums and letters. Alongside this, the children were taught about alchemy; lessons involved mixing simple formulas and drawing diagrams of alchemical contraptions. It was only the basics, but it was a start. Sabryna hoped that her brothers and sisters would achieve great things one day.

It was a long walk from their cottage, high on the hillside, to the schoolhouse in the valley below. As usual, they were the last to arrive and Sabryna, who was already fourteen, hurried her siblings through the gate as the bell rang.

“Work hard – and don’t upset the teacher!” she called, before heading into the village to collect the day’s laundry work.

The village bustled. Farmhands jostled and gossiped as they headed to the fields. Apparently, the river was low, but the farmhands said that there was no need to worry because Mr Strongarm had bought a new alchemical fertiliser and it made the grain pop up like a rabbit from a hole.

The farmhands might not have been worried about the low river but Sabryna was – she could hardly make a living as a laundress without water.

In the village square, the blacksmith’s iron hissed as he plunged hot metal into a liquid that turned the outside bright gold. A cart bounced down the street, delivering wool to the dyers. In the alley stood great vats of dye in every colour the alchemists could dream up.

More and more people were moving to the village. Some came to work on the farms, which grew bigger each year, while others came to profit from passing merchant trade as ever more alchemical wares were

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transported up and down the land by boat.

Sabryna bowed her head to disguise her gaze as the merchants' daughters bustled past in their jewel-bright gowns, showing off the latest fashions. Sabryna wished that she could afford a colourful gown, too, but all she had to wear was a beige smock. Every new alchemist invention seemed like magic – Sabryna just wished that she had a little more magic in her own life.

She knocked on the door of the low, thatched building that belonged to the Strongarms. Mr and Mrs Strongarm ran the biggest farm in the village.

"Oh, Sabryna! There you are," said Mrs Strongarm in the doorway. Her necklace hung with expensive wards against hardship and hunger. "How is your Pa? Is his leg still troubling him?"

"It's his back, really," said Sabryna, holding out her arms for Mrs Strongarm's basket of laundry. "It troubles him worse each winter." Even from the doorway, Sabryna could see that the Strongarms' shrine was five times as elaborate as the one that Sabryna's family had at home. There had to be at least twenty statuettes of every colour and shape: some human, some animal, some dressed in jewels or fur or flames.

"Oh, the poor man. He always worked so hard and he's had such bad luck. Still, good thing he's got you to help look after the family. Here you go." Mrs Strongarm deposited a large pile of dyed cloth into Sabryna's basket.

As Sabryna thanked her and turned to leave, Mrs Strongarm caught her elbow. "One moment, Sabryna. Don't use that old soap; you'll spoil the colours. Here." She held out a bar of alchemical soap, indigo-coloured and dotted with glittering green and black specks.

"Thank you," gasped Sabryna as Mrs Strongarm plonked the soap on top of the laundry. Sabryna couldn't stop staring. It looked more like a precious stone than something you used to wash clothes. "I've never

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used alchemical soap before. I can't wait to try it."

"And if your Pa ever needs anything..." said Mrs Strongarm, waving Sabryna goodbye.

As Sabryna set off down towards the river with the Strongarms' washing, she passed villagers climbing the hill with buckets of water. There were no wells in the village so they depended on the river for every drop of water used for drinking, cooking or cleaning. The village sat at the bottom of the valley, with the river running around it. Upstream, mountains rose from the morning mist. Downstream, the Strongarms' farm occupied the undulating slopes beyond the village.

When she reached the meandering river, Sabryna saw that what the farm workers had said was true: the water was lower than she'd ever seen it. She had to climb right down the slippery bank, and the riverbed was covered by only a few inches of water, weeds exposed and drying in the spring sunshine. Sabryna loved to watch the birds and creatures that lived on the river, but today there was no sign of any. Perhaps the river was too low.

Cheep, cheep! Cheep, cheep, cheep!

Sabryna jumped. Upstream, a little beakling was trapped in the weeds clumped in the low water. Beaklings were colourfully feathered creatures with webbed flippers. This one was so young, it didn't even have its iridescent head plumes yet. From further downstream came the soft honking sounds of the adult beaklings looking for their chick.



Sabryna kicked off her sandals and plunged into the ankle-deep river.

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The cool water swirled gently around her feet and splashed against her shins as she waded across.

“Don’t worry, little one,” she said. She untangled the panicking chick from the weeds, clutching its downy body between her palms. “Here,” she said as an adult raced upstream towards her. The beakling leapt from Sabryna’s hand and dropped into the water. Moments later, the two beaklings paddled away, tail plumes wiggling happily.

Sabryna laid out her washboard and paddle, knelt beside the river and dipped a golden gown into the water. As she scrubbed, purple and green bubbles grew as big as her head. Her new alchemical soap was much better than the lye soap that she normally used – stains disappeared almost instantly and the colours came out brighter than they went in. She beat the gown against her board, then pinned it down on the riverbed with heavy stones.

Sabryna watched as multicoloured soap bubbles drifted gently away on the trickling water. She strained her ears for the splashes of the fish in the river and the chirrups of birds but, if there were any to be heard, they were drowned out by the calls of the labourers in the fields. As she gazed at the cloudless sky, the spring buds in the trees and the blue mountains in the distance, her thoughts began to drift...

Her mind wandered up the mountain, where the river spilled from a spring at its source and began its journey. She knew that she must keep climbing higher – it was important. Loose stones slid beneath her sandals and clouds swirled around the peak. Near the path trickled the clear stream.

Soon, she reached a jagged crack in the side of a mountain, less than a handspan wide. Impossibly, a woman was walking out of the fissure towards Sabryna.

Her skin was blue and her hair bubbled like river rapids. Her eyes glimmered like wet stones and her gown was striped silver and grey, the colours of mackerel scales. She was beautiful – but Sabryna could tell, by the limp way in which she held herself and by the thinness of

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her cheeks, that something was wrong.

"I am Dia," said the figure.

The river spirit! She was much more imposing in real life than the little chipped figure that stood on the family shrine. Sabryna dropped to her knees and bowed her head.

"I didn't ask you here to bow to me," snapped the spirit. "I need your help. I am being poisoned." Even as she said it, Dia seemed to grow paler and more flimsy. "The humans who live along the riverbank are growing too many and are taking too much. They fill me with vile alchemicals."

Sabryna looked guiltily at the green and purple soap bubbles still clinging to her fingers.

"My fish are dwindling," Dia continued. "My birds are seeking new rivers. My waters have grown so sluggish, I can hardly make it to the sea."

Sabryna found her voice. "But how can I help?"

"I need a messenger," said Dia. "You must travel the length of the river and tell them this: that they are making it sick and that they must stop, or else their river will be nothing more than a stinking trail of sludge; that if they continue to treat the river this way, I will be very, very angry, and they will be very, very sorry."

Sabryna tried to imagine life without the river. There would be no water to drink or to wash clothes. The crop would fail and the village would surely starve.

"Why me?"

"So many people come to the river, but you are different. You care for the river creatures and you don't fill my water with poisons."

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Sabryna furtively wiped her soapy hands on her apron.

"You're devoted to your family, though you long for adventures," Dia continued. "You choose to do the right thing, even when it's hard. You alone heard my call. Please," she begged. "You're my only hope."

Sabryna nodded and, as she did so, the mountaintop lurched away and she found herself waking on the grass beside the riverbank. The sun was low in the sky already. She rescued the gowns from the river and wrung them dry, all the while thinking about what she had seen. Had her vision been real?

Suddenly, a little silver fish jumped from the river and said, "Hurry!"

Sabryna blinked. Where the fish had splashed back into the river, a glinting shape danced beneath the water. She waded in, reached down and pulled out a handful of silver coins – it was more money than her family had ever possessed at once.

Heart pounding, Sabryna fetched a little salt from her pocket and threw it over her shoulder for luck.

