

EXTREME EARTH COLLECTION

Two

Sabryna delivered the Strongarms' washing and hurried home, her head spinning. Pa was beside himself when she told him.

"The spirits! They heard my plea! They have blessed this house and my marvellous daughter!" Sabryna tried to calm him, but he kept hooting with delight. He hooted as she served dinner and he hooted as he thanked the gods and he hooted as the family climbed into their beds in the cottage loft.

In the morning, Pa hobbled to Mrs Strongarm's home and asked her to watch the little ones. "We've got a long journey ahead of us, see," he said. "We're travelling down the river and wherever we see people causing harm, Sabryna's going to tell them to stop." That was the first Sabryna heard that her frail old Pa, with his crooked back, was planning to accompany her. "Sabryna, tell Mrs Strongarm what Dia told you."

"Oh!" Sabryna found herself flushing. "Only, she said that the river is getting too polluted, you see, and, uh, that everyone should stop polluting it with alchemicals, or the plants will die and the animals will have to find somewhere else to live. So thank you for the alchemical soap, but I won't be using it." She handed the sparkling bar back. "Also, Mr Strongarm ought to stop putting that fertiliser in his fields. It runs through the soil into the river, you know."

"Nonsense. He couldn't do that, dear," said Mrs Strongarm. "The crops wouldn't grow half so well. But I'll look after the littlies, if that's what you're after," she said, flapping the children in from the doorstep. The door shut before Sabryna had time to point out that the farm had always thrived before they started using alchemicals.

At home, packing her few possessions, Sabryna tried to persuade her father not to come.

"Of course I'm coming!" said Pa, digging out two old travelling cloaks.

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“You’re only young. I will be your guide and your guard. You, my daughter, are the voice of the spirits. Now, will these do, do you think?”

Sabryna inspected the cloaks. They were musty and ragged but warm enough. She gave the better one to Pa, and they set off that very day.

As they left the village, Sabryna stopped to speak with each person they passed. She told the blacksmith and the dyers, the merchants and their daughters all about the river. The blacksmith smiled as his iron turned to gold. The dyers nodded and dipped their gowns into their dye vats. The merchants’ daughters giggled as their fathers hurried them away. It was an unpromising start.

Sabryna and Pa followed the road beside the meandering river to the next village. The river was so low that it was bordered on either side by sloping beaches of red clay, dotted with grey pebbles which had been carried by the river down from the mountains. Sabryna tucked one into her pocket as a talisman.

Sabryna had visited the next village before, on market days, but there was no market today. By the riverbank sat three water mills. Usually, the wooden wheels of the mills creaked in circles as the river raced past, turning the millstones inside, but not any more. The river was too low and the mills stood still and silent.



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Pa and Sabryna found the millers on the common, along with some grand-looking people in richly coloured cloaks. They were surrounded by logs and bricks and strange, shining contraptions. There was lots of activity: sawing and mixing and piling.

“What are you doing?” Sabryna asked.

“Building factories,” the millers replied.

“Factories? But what about your mills?”

“The river is too low. The mill wheels aren’t turning.”

“That’s just why we’re here!” said Pa. “Tell them, Sabryna.”

Sabryna took a deep breath and began. She told the millers all about Dia’s warning and the sickness of the river. As she spoke, the millers put down their tools and other villagers gathered to listen.

“Well, that’s all right,” said one of the millers when she’d finished. “We won’t be bothering about the river any more – these alchemists have devised a new way to generate power with their newfangled machinery. Uses alchemicals.”

“Where will the alchemicals go, once you’re finished with them?”

The miller frowned. “Into the river, I suppose.”

“Please, don’t,” begged Sabryna. “Please, don’t make it worse. If you help the river thrive, it will rise and your mills will start turning again but, if you build these factories, the river might be harmed beyond repair.”

“Then how do you expect us to survive?” asked the miller. “We have to keep working or we won’t have the means to live.”

“If the river dries up, *no one* will have the means to live,” Sabryna insisted, but it didn’t matter. They wouldn’t change their minds.

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That night at their inn, Pa said, "Don't fret, Sabryna. The towns and the cities down the river are full of wiser people than these. They'll hear reason."

But when they set off at dawn, Sabryna couldn't hide her worry.

Pa did his best to raise her spirits. "The next town sits on a lake famed for its wildlife. I went there once as a young man. I saw scarlet eagles wheeling overhead and beaklings paddling in the shallows. The banks teemed with whitefurze and greenlace, bees and butterflies. The lake was so full of fish that it sparkled and, one moonlit night, I thought I caught a glimpse of Dia's legendary serpent."

Sabryna listened, mesmerised. To see Dia's serpent, the ancient creature that dwelt in the deepest, darkest parts of the river, only emerging when the moon was full – that would be quite something!

They passed through a narrow gorge on the way to the town. Where the water should have raced and splashed, instead it crawled. Soon, it gurgled over a short rock fall into a lake that sat in the bowl of a vast valley. The town sprawled across the northern shore.

Pa gasped. "What's happened?"

The lake was not at all as Pa had described. The water was murky, the banks clustered with skeletal trees and rampant weeds. There were no birds, no insects, and Sabryna couldn't imagine Dia's serpent choosing to live in a lake like this.

"Oh, Pa," said Sabryna. She had no words to express how awful it was.

"It just goes to show how urgent Dia's message is," said Pa.

On the outskirts of the town, they passed a temple dedicated to the river spirit and Sabryna felt her courage surge. If there was help to be had, they'd find it here.

"You'll want to speak to the fisherfolk," said the priest after Sabryna

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had explained her mission. "You'll catch them on the docks, bringing in the day's haul." So Sabryna left her father, whose back ached from long hours on the road, and headed for the water.

The bank was not a gentle slope, like at home, but a sheer drop from the dock. On the quayside, tens of fisherfolk dragged nets and boxes on and off shiny, alchemically powered boats. There were enough fishing boats to cover half of the lake and Sabryna wondered how they were all able to catch so many. As their engines chugged, the boats belched purple oils into the lake water, turning it deep black. No wonder the lake was sick.

Sabryna peered into the boxes of tiny, wriggling fish.

"Those are a silver coin each," said a rasping voice in her ear. Sabryna leapt away.

"A whole silver coin?"



"Fish is getting harder to come by," explained a stout fisherwoman. "Supply goes down, prices go up. That's just how it is. Now, are you buying?"

"No, thank you," said Sabryna. "Don't you think that your fishing might be the problem? You're catching too much and too fast. If you stop for a while, the fish will return and there will be plenty for everyone again."

The woman laughed. "Stop? And then what will I live on? My family, and all these others, have been fishing in these waters for generations." She gestured around at her fellow fisherfolk.

"*Exactly*," begged Sabryna. "You're not giving the river time to recover, and all these boats are filling the lake with fuel. There'll be no fish left at all, soon!"

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"What can I do about it?" the woman drawled. "If I give up my engine, I'll be out of a job and the lake will still be full of alchemical boats." She spat on the ground and turned away.

Sabryna returned to the temple, feeling more hopeless than ever, but when she entered, Pa sprung from his bench like a young man. "We'll have a special service here," he said. "The priest has agreed! You will tell everyone your message from Dia."

The service was packed, but Sabryna's voice was steady. She explained that the river was sick and low and full of awful things; that the fisherfolk were making it worse by pumping the lake full of alchemicals and taking too many fish. Everyone listened in rapt silence. At last, Sabryna was being heard.

But as the congregation left, she caught the gossip.

"Load of tosh!"

"Stop fishing? And then what – starve?"

"If we listened to her, there'd be nothing left of the town. What nonsense!"

Sabryna tried to explain. "If the river dries up, there'll be nothing left of the town either," she pleaded with them. "You'll have no fish to trade, no water to drink..." but they brushed her aside.

Sabryna went to the inn that night and cried.

"Never fear, love," said Pa. "Dia is on our side. She won't let us fail. The city folk will listen."

Sabryna sniffed and nodded. Pa was right. He had to be.

By the next morning, Pa was very tired and full of aches and pains. Sabryna used a silver coin to pay for a ride on a cart. Their funds, which had once seemed like riches, were nearly gone. Sabryna hadn't

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realised that a bed to sleep in and a few meals a day could cost so much.

They rode alongside the river, watching trading boats churn up and down, until they reached the city where the river spilled out into the sea. The city was bigger and busier than anywhere Sabryna had ever seen. There were streets full of shops selling shiny wares, ingenious gadgets and pungent potions. Lowly folk in ragged clothes mingled with rich people in silks and jewels.

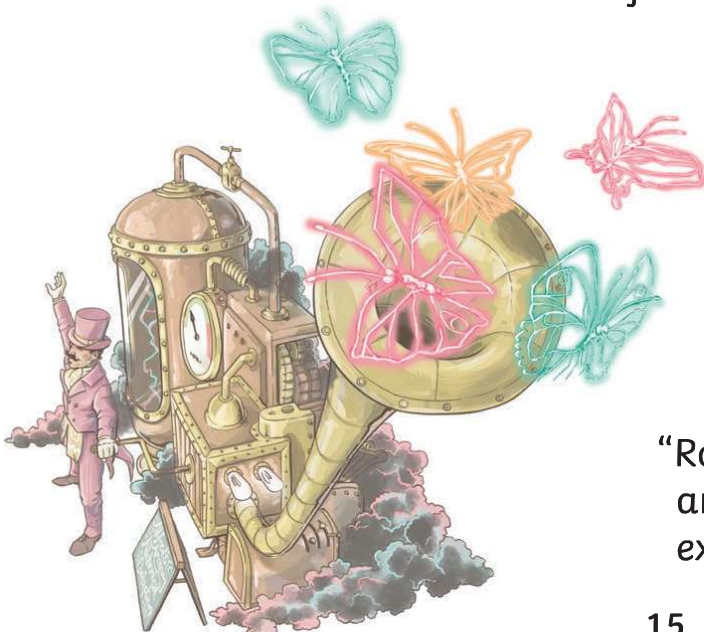
The beach was alive with holidaymakers in their best clothes, flying kites and clutching ice creams. Silver greatgulls swooped over the choppy waves, diving to collect scraps. Sticking out into the bay was a glittering pier, lined with stalls and theatres, with a great glass dome at the end.

“Isn’t it lovely!” exclaimed Sabryna, who had never seen anything so grand. She pulled her father along the bustling pier, past tourists munching on pickled whelks, spice cakes and sherbet, and children waving paper windmills and flags. Sabryna couldn’t take her eyes off the bright tents and lighted stalls, which contained every sort of amusement: fortune tellers and puppet shows, trials of strength and games of luck.

Inside the great dome was a stage. Sabryna and Pa arrived just in time to watch an alchemist in a purple suit wheel an intricate machine through the curtains – a machine with cogs and pipes that gurgled and fizzed.

“Let’s watch for a minute,” said Sabryna, seating her Pa in one of the spindly chairs.

“Roll up, roll up! Get ready to be amazed and astounded by the extraordinary powers of my



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alchemical creation contraption!” The alchemist cranked the handle of his machine. Cogs whirred and pistons hissed. Then, from a golden funnel came a puff of smoke and a fluttering shape – it was a butterfly made of twinkling colour.

“Ooooh!” said the audience, enthralled. “Ahhhh!”

The butterfly flew up into the roof of the dome and faded into nothing.

“It may look like magic, but I assure you that it is not. This, dear friends, is alchemy!”

The alchemist cranked the handle again: out burst a flapping stalk, a stalking sphinx, a paddling beakling. More and more alchemical smoke filled the tent.

Pa began to cough on the fumes. “Let’s leave,” he said.

Out on the pier, he took great, gulping breaths. “That’s the problem with alchemical machines – they look flashy but they pump out poison. Besides which, who wants magical birds and butterflies when we could have real ones?”

Sabryna shivered. She had been entranced by the machine, but Pa was right. Now, as she looked along the pier, it was no longer glittering and magical. Smog hung in the air. Tissue, wrappers and ribbons flew into the bay. The seawater was sludgy and brown. The beachgoers were returning home, leaving the sea to clear up their litter.

Sabryna let out a sob. “Pa, the city is the worst of all.”

Pa looked around, a steely glint in his eye. “Then it’s where we can make the most difference.” And he marched off until they came to the mayor’s residence.



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Sabryna didn't quite know how Pa did it, but after a few words with the mayor about the huge crowd at the temple, and ticket prices and town funds, Sabryna found herself speaking in the town hall to a huge crowd. She threw a pinch of salt for luck and climbed up to the podium. Looking out, Sabryna saw showmen and vendors, fisherfolk and factory owners. She tugged awkwardly at her practical country clothes and felt for the mountain stone in her pocket. Then, with a deep breath, she began.

"Do you remember a time when the river was clear? Do you remember when fish were plentiful? When wildflowers grew along the riverbanks and bushes teemed with birds and insects?"

She spoke for a long time. The citizens listened in rapt silence... but then came the questions.

"People come from all over to see the pier – what will happen to the city?"

"How will the factories export their goods without boats?"

"Tourists are what keep us prosperous! If we tell them off for few dropped papers and loose ribbons, they won't come."

Sabryna tried to answer but, before she could finish, another question came, and another, until the whole crowd was talking and no one was listening.

Pa's face grew red as he limped up to the podium. "Listen to my daughter!" he shouted. "She was visited by the river spirit! If you ignore her, you'll be sorry!" But that only whipped the crowd into a frenzy.

That night, they stayed in a small room in a shabby inn. Their money had nearly run out.

"It's useless," Sabryna said, defeated. "We've been everywhere but no one understands. They're too busy worrying about money to see the

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bigger picture. Without the river, there are no tourists, no merchants, no food or water. Without the river, we'll die."

The journey home was long and exhausting but, at last, Sabryna and her father reached their little cottage. Pa put the last silver coin away safely, 'for a rainy day'.

Life went on as normal. The family ate bread and pottage, the children went to school and Sabryna took baskets of laundry to the river. But, as the days passed, the river sank lower and lower.

Soon, it sank so low that it couldn't be ignored any more. Village folk hardly dared wash for fear of having too little to drink. The Strongarms' crop hadn't come up as well as hoped, even with the new fertiliser, and now, the village was eking out what food it had left.

Meanwhile, Sabryna's work dried up like the vanishing river. It was hopeless. How could she make a living as a laundress without water to wash clothes in? Each day, Sabryna tramped down to the dwindling river in the hope that today it would be a little higher.

One morning, when Sabryna reached the riverbank, what she saw stopped her breath.

There was no water at all.

Dry stones baked in the sun. River weeds lay in crisp, brown clumps. Sabryna sank to the dry ground. How long could a village go without water? What would happen to the beaklings? The butterflies? The fish and the gulls?

Sabryna's ears strained desperately for twitterings in the sky and scuttlings in the bushes – for any sign of life – but the valley was completely still.

Then, with a blink, Sabryna found herself sliding up the loose stones of Dia's mountain. Though she felt the same sense of urgency to climb, the heavy air seemed to weigh her down. The stream was empty.

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Sunbeams beat on the back of her neck and sweat beaded her brow.

Before her stood the narrow crack in the rock. Steam poured from the fissure and Dia billowed impossibly onto the mountainside.

"They haven't listened," Dia hissed. Her hair moved like hot air. Her gown hung in rags. Her skin had turned pale grey.

"I tried to tell them," said Sabryna. "I went all the way to the city but, wherever I went, they whispered and laughed and asked impossible questions. They said that they couldn't stop or they'd have no livelihoods. And now – now..."

"If they don't stop, they will have nothing," said Dia.

Sabryna bit back a sob. "I know! I tried! I don't know what else to do."

"But I do," said Dia. Her face turned stormy grey. "I am the spirit of the river. I give humans life! In return, you treat my gift like a toy, to be used and discarded."

Clouds bloomed above her and swept menacingly down onto the mountaintop. A bitter wind whipped at Sabryna's skirt and pulled her hair. The stone under her feet trembled, the sky roared and Sabryna was engulfed in a great wave of water which rushed down the mountainside. It flooded the villages, inundated the farms, swept away factories, submerged boats and toppled the pier.

Sabryna tingled all over as she found herself waking by the riverbank. Looking around, she saw no flood – only the dry riverbed. Had that been a vision of the future? Would Dia really flood the villages and towns?

Heart pounding, Sabryna set off for home at a run. This time, she would *make* them listen.