

Three

When the rain started that afternoon, everyone in the village ran out to greet it. The farmers danced in the fields, the dyers capered into the streets, the blacksmith lifted his face to the sky – but Sabryna wasn't celebrating.

Pa said, "See, Sabryna? You've done some good."

But Sabryna, already packing, shook her head. The image of the land devastated by floods haunted her thoughts. "Something terrible is coming, Pa."

As the rain fell harder and harder, Sabryna took the last silver coin from the nook above the fire and grabbed the old travelling coat.

"I'll return when I can," she said and kissed her father goodbye.

Before she had reached the first village, her cloak was soaked through.

She marched to factories, which now stood complete. "Dia has sent a terrible curse. You must stop, or we'll all suffer."

But the factory owners laughed. "Stop? But we're making so much money!"

Sabryna hurried to the town, where fishermen flocked on the quays. The river was rising rapidly up the bank.

"What you're doing is hurting the river. Stop, or there will be terrible consequences," she pleaded.

The men and women in the fishing boats scoffed. "Hurting the river? It's full again, isn't it?"

As Sabryna hurried to the city, the river rose and rose until it threatened to break its banks.

Sabryna and the River Spirit

“Stop, stop, before we all pay the price!” she said to anyone who would listen, but the city folk shook their heads and went on their way.

Sabryna spent one night in the smallest room of the dingiest inn. She shivered and wept in her sleep – a sleep full of dreams of water and flopping fish and chirping beaklings.

When she woke and looked out of her window next morning, she saw that the river’s banks had burst. The streets were canals. Wardrobes and bedsteads floated by; people rowed in little boats, clutching what few possessions they could. A dog leapt from a window and paddled to a patch of high ground. An old man had climbed onto the roof of his house. He waved his arms and shouted for help.

Shaking, Sabryna pulled on her cloak and ran downstairs. Her face felt hot and her limbs trembled. She didn’t know whether she was afraid or angry. Downstairs, water sloshed knee deep, brown and whirling with debris. It pushed against her legs and cold seeped into her bones.

Sabryna stomped outside. She had to speak to Dia, right now.

“Dia! *Dia!* You have to stop! Haven’t you done enough damage?”

The waters swirled and, with each enormous wave, the pier vanished and reappeared. Out to sea, the water bubbled and churned as if something was happening beneath the surface. All along the shoreline, citizens gathered to watch and point. Some sat huddled in rowing boats; some leaned out of upstairs balconies and windows; some crouched on rooftops.

The urgent water tugged sharply at Sabryna’s legs, forcing her towards the pier. As she stepped onto the sodden boardwalk, the whirling circle of water at its end grew faster and higher.

“Dia!” Sabryna shouted. “I know that’s you.”

The water burst in a roiling wave of seawater which swept towards Sabryna, soaking her to the waist. Sabryna fumbled to keep her footing



Sabryna and the River Spirit

on the slimy pier. Before her, a mighty figure rose from the sea – a woman who towered high above the glass dome on the end of the pier.

Dia no longer looked frail and sickly. Now, she seethed with the rage of storms and the inexorability of the tide. Her eyes were like infinite pools. Sabryna had never seen Dia look so powerful and so terrifying.

Sabryna held out her shaking hands. “Dia, all my life I’ve prayed to you, I’ve given you gifts, I’ve asked you to watch over us and now” – she paused, her face flooding with angry heat – “now this! You’ve got to stop the flood. Please.”

“This is what happens when humans take too much,” said Dia, her voice echoing like thunder. For the first time, it struck Sabryna that, though Dia took the form of a woman, she was not human. She was a natural force, impossible to control or reason with.

“But what will happen to us?”

The whirling in Dia’s chest slowed. Her foaming eyes grew calm and grey. The waves batting at Sabryna’s legs shrunk to a gentle lapping. As Dia looked down at Sabryna, water streamed from her eyes and splashed into the sea.

“Oh, Sabryna. That is up to you, now.” The spirit held out her blue hands, and Sabryna was surprised to find Dia standing beside her on the pier, no taller than Sabryna herself. “Come, I’ll take you home.”

Out of the seawater, Dia fashioned a boat with a swirling hull and sails like oversized soap bubbles.

Sabryna looked at the translucent side of the boat that was made of water. Tentatively, she held out her hands to Dia, who grasped her wrists. Dia’s grip felt like a burbling stream on a summer’s day. Sabryna lifted her foot and stepped over the side of the boat. It felt firm beneath her feet and the sails billowed as the boat carried them upstream.

EXTREME EARTH COLLECTION

The pair travelled for a long time. It was hard to tell when they left the city and passed the town and the village, because so little remained. Sabryna saw toppled buildings, stranded animals, uprooted trees and debris floating away down to the sea. She gaped at the gleaming machinery bobbing downstream and gasped at two fisherfolk who were clinging to the hull of a capsized boat.

“Can’t we help them?”

“I help humans every day,” Dia said wearily. “I give them water, I give them fish, I give them a rolling road from the mountains to the sea. Now, I am helping by showing humans that they cannot take me for granted.”

Sabryna frowned and watched as the fisherfolk splashed and struggled.

“But what if they die?”

“Creatures are always dying,” said Dia. “Horses and humans, bees and beaklings. Death is part of the cycle of life. It keeps the balance. When something disrupts the balance, it is the spirits’ job to restore it.”

Sabryna nodded. Her throat felt tight. In the distance, the fisherfolk had made it to the shallow water and began wading to higher ground. Sabryna swallowed.

“How can I stop this from ever happening again?”

“You told them. I have shown them. Now, it is time for them to change.” Dia smiled, and Sabryna found that she could not look away from the spirit’s face. Her deep grey eyes filled Sabryna’s vision.

With those words, Dia’s eyes seemed to turn to great crashing waves, which rushed into Sabryna’s brain and filled it with images: visions of the river teeming with life, of peaceful watermills and silent sailing boats, of people bathing in a bright, clear sea. For a moment, Sabryna felt as if she was drowning. She blinked her eyes open and found herself lying on the wet ground outside her own cottage.

Sabryna and the River Spirit

Sabryna stared at the flooded valley. Much of the village was underwater. Dia and her magic boat had vanished and, sitting high on the hillside, her own shabby home seemed to be the only building untouched by the water. How she hoped that Pa and the little ones were safe.

As she sped through the cottage door, Sabryna saw half the village gathered by their hearth, sharing food and telling tales, all watched over by the tiny clay figures of Sana, Barl and Dia in their shrine.

"Sabryna is here!" shouted the familiar voice of Mrs Strongarm. Suddenly, Sabryna was engulfed by a crowd of villagers, each desperate to tell the news and get the gossip.

"The rains flooded the village!"

"We should have listened!"

"Is it true that you travelled to the city?"

"Is it true that you spoke to the river spirit?"

Sabryna gulped, not sure where to begin. How could she explain, and how could she transform the valley so that it teemed with life again?

Before she could say a word, the crowd was pushed aside by a few sharp taps from a stout walking stick.

"Pa!" said Sabryna, in relief.

"My brave daughter," said Pa, wrapping her in a firm embrace.