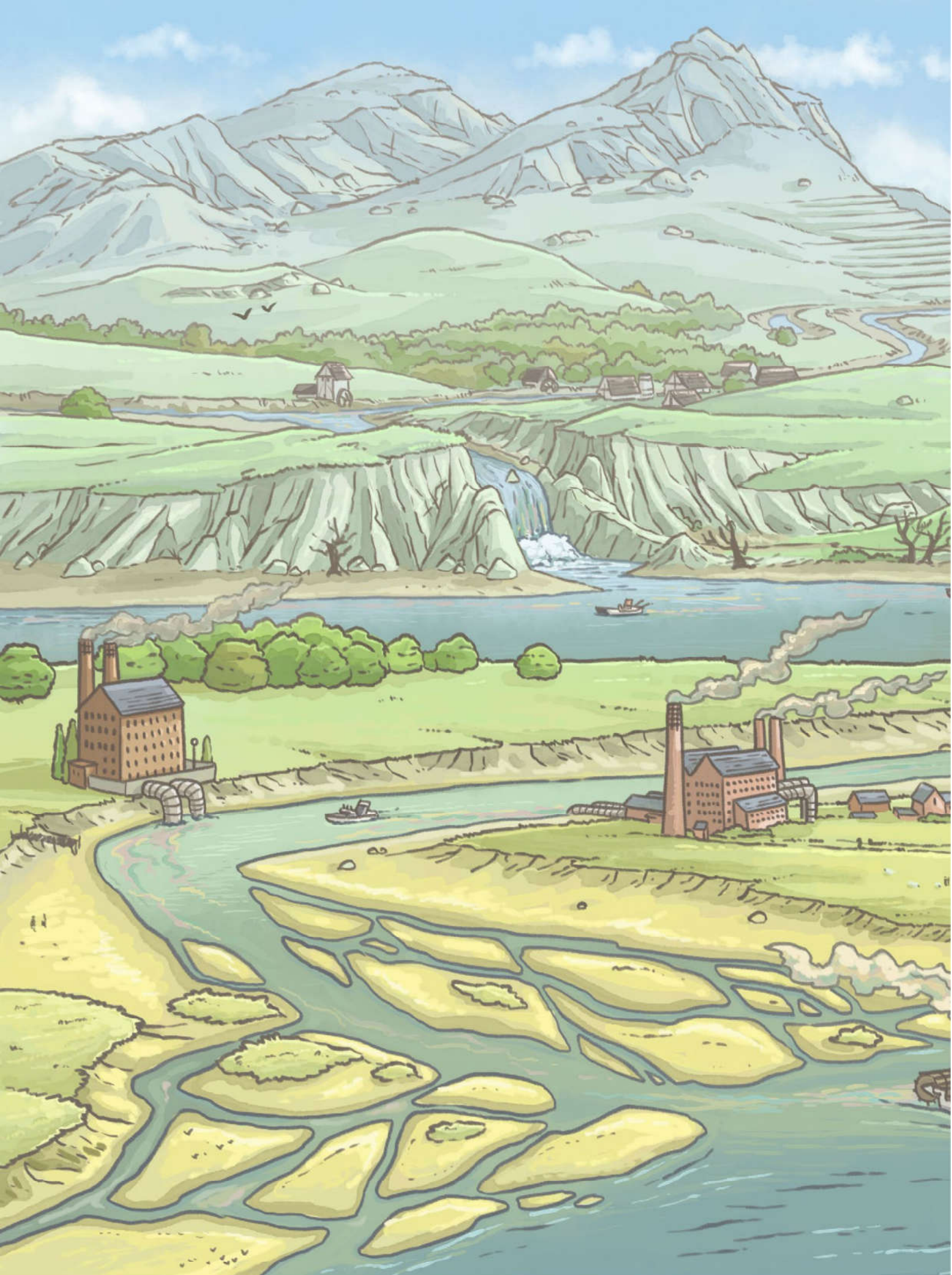


A TWINKL ORIGINAL

SABRYNA
and the

River
Spirit
Story

twinkl





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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.





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.

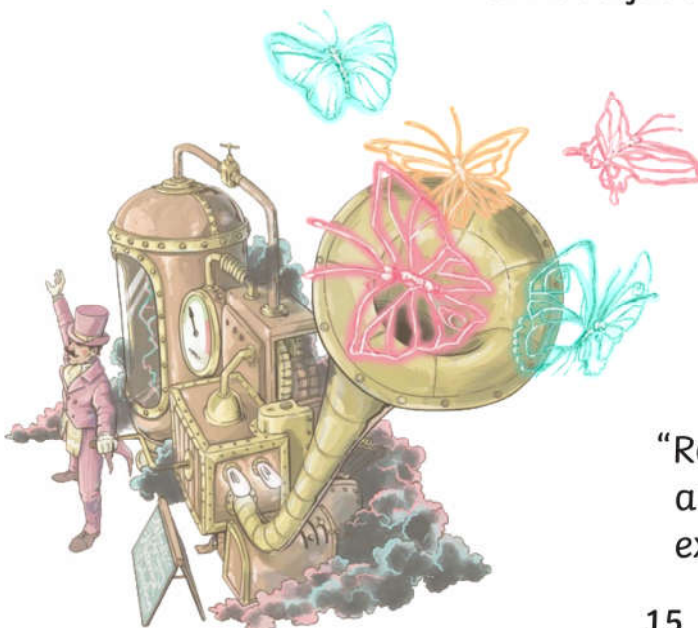
The beach was alive with holidaymakers in their best clothes, flying kites and clutching ice creams. Silver greatgulls swooped over the choppy waves, diving to collect scraps. Sticking out into the bay was a glittering pier, lined with stalls and theatres, with a great glass dome at the end.

“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.



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



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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.

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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.

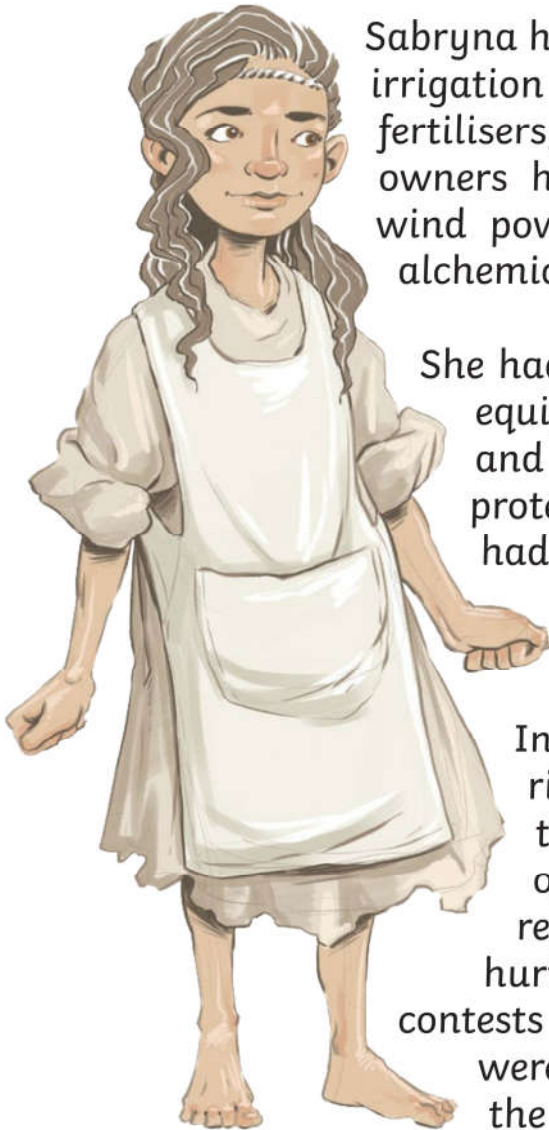
"Pa!" said Sabryna, in relief.

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

Four

Clutching her basket of laundry, Sabryna walked down to the river. She got out her washboard and paddle, then knelt to wash a basket of clothes with a bar of lye soap. The river ran deep, clear and fast; the sun gleamed on the green-coated mountains; birds flocked in the trees and fish splashed in the stream.

Things had changed since the floods that had swept the land one year ago. Since then, Sabryna had journeyed up and down the river bringing old ideas and new, and reminding everyone of the consequences if they didn't change their ways.



Sabryna had been there when the farmers had dug irrigation canals and started to develop natural fertilisers; she had been there when the factory owners had found ways to harvest water and wind power for their new factories, instead of alchemical fuels.

She had been there when the fisherfolk had re-equipped their motorised boats with sails and oars, and built fences and walls around protected parts of the river so that the fish had a chance to thrive.

She had been there in the city as they had begun to change their habits. Instead of throwing their waste into the river, people were starting to reuse what they could. The bright lights and puffs of smoke that wowed the crowds were replaced with amusements that didn't hurt nature: music and art, swimming contests and rowing tournaments. Soon, visitors were arriving to see the natural beauty of the place and bathe in the clean water.

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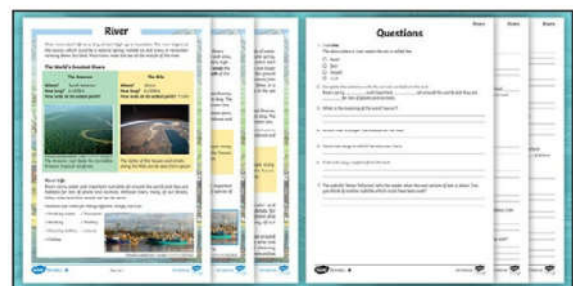
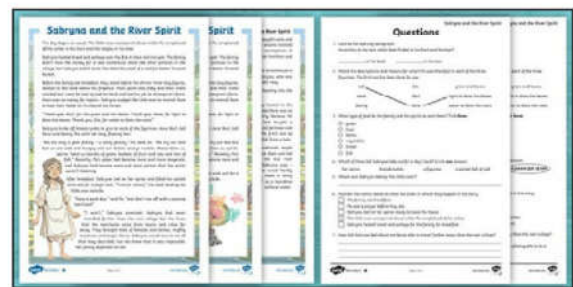
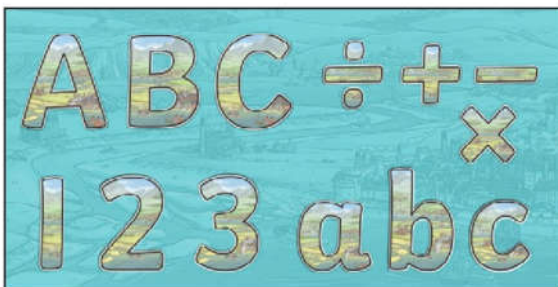
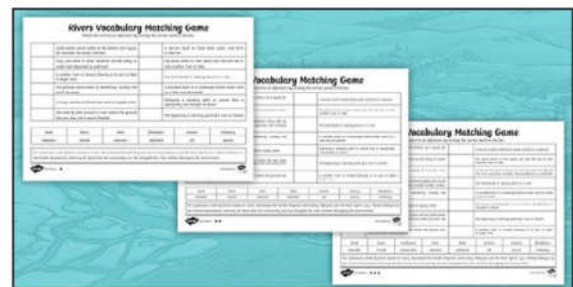
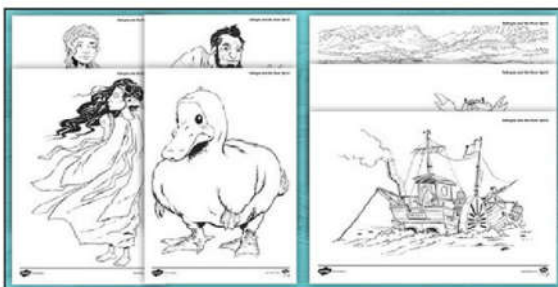
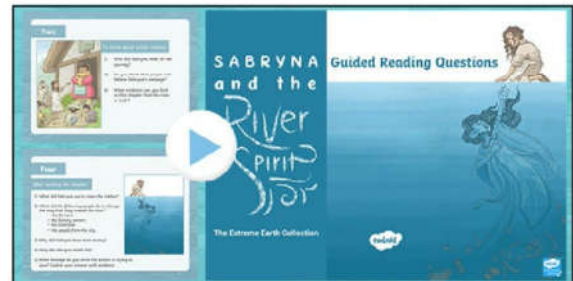
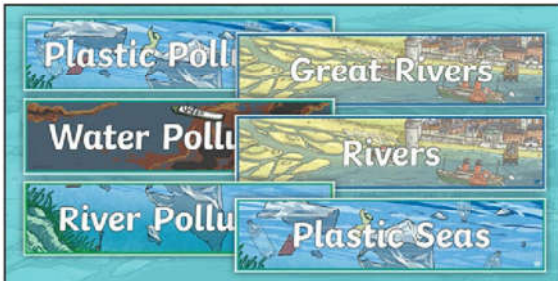
Things had changed for Sabryna's family, too. No matter how long they scrubbed or what soap they used, the other laundresses in the village could never get clothes as clean and bright as Sabryna. With the extra money that this brought, Sabryna kept her family well fed and they could finally afford to improve their cottage and repaint the figures on their shrine. Sabryna couldn't help but believe that Dia was watching over her and with every passing day, more birds flew over the river and more fish swam through the reeds.

Sabryna watched the white soap bubbles float away. She imagined them passing the village and the town and the city, travelling all the way to the sea. "Thank you, Dia, for blessing us," she muttered as she wrung out her laundry and listened to the happy *cheep, cheep* of a beakling.



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Her skin was blue and her hair bubbled like river rapids. She was beautiful – but Sabryna could tell, by the limp way in which she held herself and by the thinness of her cheeks, that something was wrong...



Life is hard for Sabryna and her family in their small home high up on the hillside. The river that flows from the mountains to the sea is the lifeblood of their village.

However, when the river becomes dry and the towns begin to struggle, Sabryna discovers that it is she who must help the people to find a way to live alongside their river without destroying it.

Follow Sabryna and her father on their journey down the river to find out whether they can save their home in time...

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