

# Elementals Water

Peter Dickinson and Robin McKinley

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## About the Book

*What magical beings inhabit earth's waters? Some are as almost-familiar as the mer-people; some as strange as the thing glimpsed only as a golden eye in a pool at the edge of Damar's Great Desert Kalarsham, where the mad god Geljdreth rules; or the unknowable immense Kraken, dark beyond the darkness of the deepest ocean, who will one day rise and rule the world.*

Robin McKinley and Peter Dickinson have given us six stories of the fabulous creatures associated with the element of water. *Elementals: Water* is a wonderful collaboration from two outstanding writers and demonstrates that age-old themes can still evoke fresh and enthralling story-telling.

A decorative graphic consisting of a thin black line that starts at the top left, curves down and to the right, then loops back to the left and forms a large, open circle. Inside this circle, the word "Elementals" is written in a cursive, handwritten style. To the right of the circle, the word "Water" is written in a similar cursive style.

*Elementals*  
*Water*

PETER DICKINSON  
*and*  
ROBIN MCKINLEY

RHCP DIGITAL

*To Anne Waters*

## *Mermaid Song*

HER NAME WAS Pitiabie Nasmith.

Her grandfather had chosen Pitiabie, so that she and others should know what she was, he said. All the People had names of that kind. He was Probity Hooke, and his wife was Mercy Hooke. Their daughter had been Obedience Hooke, until she had married Simon Nasmith against their will and changed her second name to his. Because of that the People had cut her off from themselves, and Probity and Mercy had heard no more of her until Simon had come to their door, bringing the newborn baby for them to care for, and told Probity of his daughter's death. He said he was going away and not coming back. Probity had taken the baby from him and closed the door in his face without a word.

He had chosen a first name for the baby because she had neither father nor mother. She was pitiable.

The Hookes lived in a white wooden house on the edge of the town. Their fields lay a little distance off, in two separate odd-shaped patches along the floor of the steep valley, where soil deep enough to cultivate had lodged on the underlying granite. The summers were short but desperately hot, ending usually in a week of storms, followed by a mellow autumn and then a long, bitter winter, with blizzards and gales. For night after night, lying two miles inland in her cot at the top of the ladder, Pitiabie would fall asleep to the sound of waves raging along the outer shore, and wake to the same sound. Between the gales there would be still, clear days with the sun no more than a hand's-breadth above the horizon, and its light

glittering off mile after mile of thigh-deep snow. Then spring, and thaw and mud and slush and the reek of all the winter's rubbish, rotting at last. Then searing summer again.

It was a hard land to scrape a living off, though there was a good harbour that attracted trade, so some of the People prospered as merchants. Fishermen, and others not of the People, came there too, though many of these later went south and west to kinder, sunnier, richer places. But the People stayed 'in the land the Lord has given us', as they used to say. There they had been born, and their ancestors before them, all the way back to the two shiploads who had founded the town. The same names could be read over and over again in their graveyard, Bennetts and Hookes and Warrens and Lyalls and Goodriches, but no Nasmiths, not one.

For eight years, Pitiabile lived much like any other girl-child of the People. She was clothed and fed, and nursed if she was ill. She went to the People's school, where she was taught to read her Bible, and tales of the persecution of her forebears. The People had few other books, but those they read endlessly, to themselves and to each other. They took pride in their education, narrow though it was, and their speech was grave and formal, as if taken from their books. Twice every Sunday, Pitiabile would go with her grandparents to their church, to sit still for two hours while the Word was given forth.

As soon as she could walk she was taught little tasks to do about the house. The People took no pride in possessions or comforts. What mattered to them in this world was cleanliness and decency; every pot scoured, every chair in its place, every garment neatly stitched and saved, and on Sundays the men's belts and boots gleaming with polish, and the women's lace caps and collars starched as white as first-fall snow and as crisp as the frost that binds it. They would dutifully help a neighbour who was in trouble, but

they themselves would have to be in desperate need before they asked for aid.

Probity was a steady-working, stern old man whose face never changed, but Mercy was short and plump and kindly. If Probity was out of the house she used to hum as she worked, usually the plodding, four-square hymn tunes that the People had brought with them across the ocean, but sometimes a strange, slow, wavering air that was hardly a tune at all, difficult to follow or learn, but once learnt difficult to let go of. While Pitable was still very small, she came to know it as if it had been part of her blood, but she was eight before she discovered what it meant.

The summer before that, Mercy had fallen ill. At first she would not admit it, though her face lost its roundness and became grey and sagging, and sometimes she would gasp and stand still while a shudder of pain ran through her and spent itself. Probity for a while did not notice, and for another while chose not to, but Pitable found herself doing more and more of her grandmother's tasks while Mercy sat on one of the thin upright chairs and told her what she did not already know. By winter, Mercy could not even sit and was forced to lie, and the neighbours had come to see why she no longer came to church, but Probity had sent them away, saying that he and the child could manage between them. Which they did, but Pitable's days were very long for a child, from well before dawn until hours after dark, keeping the house clean and decent, and seeing to her grandfather's meals and clothes, and nursing her grandmother.

On a Sunday near Christmas (though the People did not keep Christmas, saying it was idolatrous) there was a storm out of the west, driving snow like a million tiny whips, fiery with cold. Still, Probity put on his leather coat and fetched out his staff and snow shoes, and told Pitable to get ready so that he could drag her to church on the log sled.



‘Let her stay,’ said Mercy. ‘I am dying, Probity. I may perhaps die while you are gone. May the Lord deal with me as He will, but I am afraid to die alone.’

Probity stared at her with his face unchanging, then nodded and tied on his snow shoes and went out into the storm without a word. Mercy watched the door close.

‘He had love in him once,’ she said. ‘But he buried it the day your mother left us and set the tombstone on it the day she died. Bear with him, Pitiabable. Deal with him as best you may. It will not be easy.’

‘Are you really going to die?’ said Pitiabable.

‘As we all are, when the Lord calls to us.’

‘Today? Now?’

‘Not today, I think. I am better today. The pain is almost gone, which is a bad sign. My body has no more messages to send me.’

Pitiabable knelt by Mercy’s cot and put her head on the quilt and wept, while Mercy stroked her shoulders and told her she was glad to be going, because she trusted in God to forgive her the small harms she had done in her life. She told Pitiabable to fetch a stool and sit by her and hold her hand.

‘I have a story to tell you,’ she said. ‘My mother told it to me, and her mother to her, through seven generations since *The Trust in God* was lost. You remember the story of Charity Goodrich, our ancestress, yours and mine?’

Pitiabable nodded. Every child among the People, even those who were not directly descended from her, knew about Charity Goodrich. It was almost the only story they knew, outside the ones in the Bible. They were told that the stories other children knew were superstitious nonsense, inventions of the devil, to distract believers from the narrow path to salvation. Two hundred years ago, three small ships had set out to cross the great ocean. They had been given new names before they left, *The Lord is Our Refuge*, *The Deliver Us from Bondage* and *The Trust in God*. Apart from their

crews they carried the People, two hundred and eighty-seven men, women and children who had determined to leave the country where they were oppressed and imprisoned and burnt for their beliefs, and settle in new land where they could worship as they chose. After a dangerous voyage, they were in sight of land when a storm separated them. Two ships came safe into the providential bay which was now the harbour of the town, but the third, *The Trust in God*, was driven against the cliffs to the north of it and lost with all hands. All hands but one, that is, for five days later a child was found wandering on the shore, unable to say how she had come there. Her name was Charity Goodrich.

'I am going to tell you how Charity was saved,' said Mercy. 'But first you must promise me two things. You must remember it so that you can tell it to your daughters when they are old enough to understand. And you must tell it to nobody else, ever. It is a secret. You will see why. Charity Goodrich was my great-grandmother's great-grandmother. There are other descendants of hers among the People, but I have never asked, never even hinted, and nor must you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, and I promise,' said Pitiabie.

'Good. Now this is the story Charity told. She remembered the storm, and the breaking of the mast, and the shouts of the sailors, and the People gathering on the deck, standing all together and singing to the Lord Who made the sea, while they clutched at ropes and spars and the ship heaved and wallowed and waves swept foaming around their legs. Some of them were washed away, still singing, and then the ship was laid on its side and the deck stood upright and they all went tumbling down into the roaring sea. Charity remembered her hand being torn from her father's grasp, and then a loose sail tangled round her and she remembered nothing more.

'Nothing more, that is, until she woke. A shuddering cold roused her and told her too that she was not dead, but alive.

Her clothes were soaked, but she was lying on dry sand. She sat up and looked around. She saw a dim, pale light to one side of her. It was just enough for her to make out the black water that stirred at her feet, and the black rock all around her and over her. Somehow she had been washed up in a small cave, whose entrance was beneath the water.

'Beside her was a small sea chest of the sort that the People had used to store their possessions for the voyage. With numbed fingers she opened it and found that it had been well packed, with all its contents wrapped tight in oilskins. There were dry clothes, far too large for her, but she stripped off, spreading out her own clothes to dry on the rocks, and wrapped herself in these others, layer on layer, and nursed her body back to warmth.

'Now she began to wonder what had happened to her and how she had come to this cave. She remembered the sinking of the ship, and herself being tumbled into the sea and tangled in the sail, and remembering that, she saw that the sail was lying half out of the water, over against one wall of the cave. So she supposed that some current had washed her in here, and the sea chest too, and the tide had then gone out and left her in air. But why was it not dark? The light came from the other side of the cave, low down, and when she went to look she found that the water washed in along that wall, making an inlet in the waterline, and part way up this was a pool where lay a coiling fish like a great eel, which shone with points of light all along its flanks. It stirred when it saw her and the light grew stronger, and now she saw that it was trapped in that place by a wall of small boulders, piled neatly against each other across the inlet.

'Then she grew afraid, for she could see that the wall had not come there by chance. She searched the cave, looking for a place to hide, but there was none. Only she found that the inlet was formed by a little stream of water, sweet to drink, that ran down the back of the cave. After that she

prayed and sang, and then fell asleep, weeping for the mother and father she would never see again.

'When she woke she knew before she opened her eyes that she was not alone. She had heard the whisper of a voice.

'She sat up and looked at the water. Two heads had risen from it. Four eyes were gazing at her. She could not see them well in the faint light, but her heart leaped and her throat hardened. Then one of the heads spoke, in a weak human voice, in a language she did not know, though she understood it to be a question.

“Who are you?” she whispered, and they laughed and came farther out of the water, so that she could see that they were human-shaped, pale-skinned and dark-haired, wearing no clothes but for what seemed like collars or ruffs around their necks. She stood and put her palms together and said the Lord’s Prayer in her mind while she crept down to the water’s edge. As she came, the creatures used their arms to heave themselves up through the shallows. Closer seen, she thought they were children of about her age, until she saw that instead of legs each had a long and shining tail, like that of a fish. This is what Charity Goodrich said she saw, Pitiabie. Do you believe her?’

‘If you believe her, I do too.’

‘Then you believe her. Now it came to her that these two were children of the sea people, and the cave was a place they had found and made their own, as children like to do. They had caught the fish and imprisoned it here to give light to the cave, for their own amusement, and in the same way they had found Charity and brought her here, and the chest, floating them in when the tide was high and dragging them on to dry land.

‘They fetched the sail, and by signs showed her that somehow a pocket of air had been caught in it with her, allowing her to breathe for a little beneath the water. All this

and other things Charity learnt as the days passed. She could count those days by the coming and going of the tide.

'They had brought food for the shining fish, so she made signs that she wanted to eat and they swam off. She was afraid that they would bring her raw fish, but instead they came with human stores from the wrecked ship. Some were spoilt with salt, but some were in canisters that had kept the water out, wormy bread and dried apples and oatmeal which she mixed with fresh water from the stream at the back of the cave.

'She tried to talk with the sea children. Their voices were weak, and they could not breathe for long out of the water. What she had thought to be ruffs around their necks were plummy growths with which they seemed to breathe the seawater, as a fish does with its gills. Their language was strange. She told them her name, but they could not say it, nor she theirs. Instead they sang, not opening their mouths but humming with closed lips. You have often heard me humming the song of the sea people.'

'This one?' said Pitable, and hummed the slow, wavering tune that she had heard so often. Mercy joined her, and they hummed it together, their voices twining like ripples in water. When they finished, Mercy smiled.

'That is how I used to sing it with my own mother,' she said. 'And then with yours. It needs two voices, or three. So Charity sang it with the sea children in their cave, and they hummed the tunes she taught them, *The Old Hundredth* and *Mount Ephraim* and such, so that they should be able to praise their Creator beneath the waves. So as the days went by a kind of friendship grew, and then she saw that they began to be troubled by what they had done. At first, she supposed, she had seemed no more than a kind of toy or amusement for them, a thing with which they could do as they chose, like the shining fish. Now they were learning that this was not so.

'They made signs to her, which she did not understand, but supposed them to be trying to comfort her, so she signed to them that she wished to return to her own people, but they in their turn frowned and shook their heads, until she went to the place where the shining fish was trapped and started to take down the wall they had built. They stopped her, angrily, but she pointed to the fish as it sought to escape through the gap she had made, and then at herself and at the walls that held her, and made swimming motions with her arms, though she could not swim. They looked at each other, more troubled than before, and argued for a while in their own language, the one trying to persuade the other, though she could see that both were afraid. In the end, they left her.

'She sat a long while, waiting, until there was a stirring in the water that told her that some large creature was moving below the surface. She backed away as it broke into the air. It was a man, a huge, pale man of the sea people. If he had had legs to walk upon he would have stood as tall as two grown men. She could feel the man's anger as he gazed at her, but she said the Lord's Prayer in her mind and with her palms together walked down to the water's edge and stood before him, waiting to see what he would do.

'Still he stared, furious and cold. She thought to herself and closed her lips and started to hum the music the sea children had taught her, until he put up his hand and stopped her. He spoke a few words of command and left.

'She waited. Twice he came back, bringing stuff from the wreck, spars and canvas and rope, which he then worked on, in and out of the water, making what seemed to be a kind of tent, which he held clear of the water and then dragged back in, with air caught inside it, so that it floated high. He then buoyed it down with boulders to drag it under. He took it away and came back and worked on it some more, and then returned, having, she supposed, tried it out and been satisfied. Meanwhile she had gathered up her own

clothes and wrapped them tightly in oilskin, and stripped off the ones she was wearing, down to the slip, and tied her bundle to her waist.

'When he was ready the man, being unwilling himself to come ashore, signalled to her to break down the wall that held the shining fish, which she did, and it swam gladly away. So in utter darkness she walked down into the water, where the man lifted his tent over her and placed her hands upon a spar that he had lashed across for her to hold, and towed her away, with her head still in the air that he had caught within the canvas and her body trailing in the water. She felt the structure jar and scrape as he towed it through the opening and out into the sea. By the time they broke the surface the air had leaked almost away, but he lifted the tent from her and she looked around and saw that it was night.

'The storm was over, and the sea was smooth, with stars above, and a glimmer of dawn out over the ocean. Charity lay along the sea man's back with her arms around his shoulders as he swam south and set her down at last in the shallows of a beach. Oyster Beach we call it now.

'She waded ashore, but turned knee-deep in the water to thank him. He cut her short, putting the flat of his hand against his lips and making a fierce sideways gesture with his other hand - so - then pointed at her, still as angry-seeming as when she had first seen him. She put her palms crosswise over her mouth, sealing it shut, trying to say to him, *Yes, I will keep silent*. She had already known she must. She did not know if any of the People were left alive after the storm, but they were the only folk she knew, and who of them would believe her, and not think she was either mad or else talking profane wickedness? Then she bowed low before him, and when she looked up, he was gone.

'She took off the slip she had worn in the sea and left it at the water's edge, as though the tide had washed it there. Then she dressed herself in her own clothes, dank and

mildewy though they were, and walked up the shore. Inland was all dense woods, so she walked along beside them, past Watch Point to Huxholme Bay, where three men met her, coming to look for clams at the low tide.

‘So. That is the story of Charity Goodrich. Tomorrow you shall tell it to me, leaving nothing out, so that I can be sure you know it to tell it truly to your own daughters, when they are old enough to understand.’

Probity sat by Mercy’s bed throughout the night she died, holding both her hands in his. They prayed together, and from time to time they spoke of other things, but in voices too soft for Pitiabie, in her cot at the top of the ladder, to hear. In the end she slept, and when she came down before dawn to remake the fire, she found Probity still in his clothes, sitting by the fire with his head between his hands, and Mercy stretched out cold on her cot with her Bible on her chest. For two days, Probity would not eat or dress or undress or go to bed. He let the Church Elders make the arrangements for the funeral, simply grunting assent to anything that was said to him, but for the ceremony itself he pulled himself together and shaved carefully and polished his belt and boots and dressed in his Sunday suit and stood erect and stern by the graveside with his hand upon Pitiabie’s shoulder, and then waited with her at the churchyard gate to receive the condolences of the People.

Mercy in her last hours must have spoken to him about their granddaughter, and told him to take comfort in her and give her comfort in return, and this he tried to do. He read the Bible with her in the evenings, and sometimes noticed if she seemed tired and told her to rest. And around Christmas, when all the children of the townspeople were given toys, he whittled a tiny horse and cart for her to set upon the mantleshelf. By day he worked as he always had to see that the two of them were warm and fed, fetching in the stacked logs for the stove, and bringing in more from the



frozen woods to make next season's stack, and digging turnips and other roots from the mounds where they were stored, and fetching out grain from the bins and salted meat from the barrels, and mending the tools he would need for next summer's toil, while Pitable cooked and stitched and cleaned as best she could, the way Mercy had shown her. She was young for such work, and he did not often scold her for her mistakes. So the neighbours, who at first had felt that in Christian duty they must keep an eye upon the pair, decided that all was well and left them alone.

Spring came with the usual mud and mess, followed by the urgent seed-time when the ground dried to a fine soft tilth and had not yet begun to parch. It was then that Probity, after brooding for a while, went to the Elders of the People and asked for their permission to bring his daughter's body up from the town cemetery and bury it beside Mercy's in the graveyard of the People. The Elders did not debate the question long. They were all of one grim mind. Obedience Hooke had cut herself off from the People by marrying the outwarder, Simon Nasmith. When the Lord came again in glory, He would raise the bodies of His faithful People from their graveyard to eternal life, but Obedience Hooke had by her own act cast herself into damnation and would not be among them.

Probity sowed his crops as usual, but then, as June hardened into its steady, dreary heat, he seemed to lose heart. The leafy summer crops came quick and easy, and there was always a glut of them, but the slow-grown roots and pulses that would be harvested later, and then dried or salted or earthed into clamps, were another matter. He did not hoe them enough, and watered irregularly, so that the plants had no root-depth and half of them wilted or wasted. He neglected, too, to do the rounds of his fences, so that the sheep broke out and he had to search the hills for them, and lost three good ewes.

Pitiable was aware that the stores were barely half-filled, but said nothing. Probity was her grandfather, her only protector, and absolute master in his own house. He did what he chose, and the choice was right because it was his.

September brought a great crop of apples from the two old trees. Mercy had always bottled them into sealed jars, but that was a skill that had to be done just right, and Pitiable did not know how. Probity could well have asked a neighbour to teach her, but he was too proud, so he told her to let them fall and he would make cider of them. Most of the People made a little cider, keeping it for special days, but this year Probity made a lot, using casks he would not now need for storage as he had less to store. He shook himself out of his dull mood and took trouble, so that the cider brewed strong and clear. He took to drinking a tankard of it with his supper, and became more cheerful in the evenings.

Winter came, with its iron frosts, and Probity started to drink cider with his dinner, to keep the cold out, he said. And then with his breakfast, to get the blood moving on the icy mornings. By the time the sunrise turned back along the horizon, he was seldom without a tankard near by, from the hour he rose until the hour at which he fell snoring, and still in his day clothes, onto his bed.

He began to beat Pitiable, using his belt, finding some fault and punishing her for it, though both of them knew that this was not the cause. He was hurt to the heart, and sick with his own hurt, and all he could think of was to hurt someone or something else, and doing so himself to hurt himself worse, dulling the pain with new pain. One night, Pitiable watched as he took the horse and cart he had made her and broke them into splinters with his strong hands and dropped them into the fire.

Pitiable did not complain or ask anyone for help. She knew that anything that happened to her was a just punishment for her having been born. Her mother and father should

never have wed. By doing so, they had broken God's law. And then Obedience, Probity's lovely lost daughter, had died giving birth to Pitable. So Pitable was both the fruit of her parents' sin and the cause of her mother's death, and of Probity's dreadful hurt. Nothing that was done to her could be undeserved.

On Sunday mornings, Probity did not drink. He shaved and dressed with care and took Pitable to church. They made an impressive pair, the big, gaunt man and the pale and silent child. Neighbours remarked how much they meant to each other, now Mercy was gone. Once a woman asked Pitable why she wept in church, and Pitable - replied that it was because of her grandmother dying. The woman clucked and said that she was a good little girl - how could she have known that Pitable had been weeping with the pain of having to sit still on the hard bench after last night's beating?

They came through the winter, barely, scraping out the old and mouldy stores from the year before. Probity butchered and salted one of his ewes, saying she was too old for bearing, which was not true. So they did not quite starve.

The mush of spring dried to the blaze of summer, and Probity pulled himself together and drank less and worked in his fields and brought home food and kept his belt around his waist, but he did almost nothing to provide for the coming winter. One noon in the late summer heatwave, Pitable went out to tell him that his dinner was on the table and found him at the door of his storshed, staring into its emptiness, as if lost in a dream. He started when she spoke and swung on her and snarled, 'The Lord will provide.' That evening he undid his belt and beat her for no reason at all.

From then on, he was as harsh as he had been last winter, but at the same time strangely possessive. He seemed unable to bear to let her out of his sight. Having no harvest to gather, he took to wandering along the shore, in the

manner of the truly poor and shiftless townspeople, looking for scraps of the sea's leavings, driftwood and such, which he might use or sell. Almost at once he was lucky, finding a cask of good sweet raisins, unspoilt, which he sold well in the town. After that he would go almost every day, taking Pitiabie with him to help search and carry, but the quiet days of the heatwave brought little to land.

That dense stillness broke, as usual, with a week of storm. There was a proverb in the town, 'The hotter burns the sun, the wilder blows the wind,' and so it proved that year, with gales that brought down trees and chimneys and stripped roofs and scattered haystacks, while day and night huge rollers thundered against the shore. On the ninth night the storm blew itself out, and was followed by a dawn of pearly calm.

Probity was up before sunrise and gulped his breakfast and pulled on his boots and told Pitiabie to leave the dishes unwashed and the hearth unlaid.

'The Lord spoke to me in the night,' he said. 'We must be first down on the shore, for this is the day on which He will provide.'

The town was barely stirring as they hurried towards the harbour and turned left up Northgate to the beaches. On Home Beach there were men about, seeing to their boats, many of which, though drawn well up above the tidelines, had been tossed about by the storm, overturned, piled together or washed inland. Probity hurried past, and on over Shag Point to Huxholme Bay, which was steep small shingle. Here they stopped to search. The waves had brought in a mass of new stuff, piles of wrack and driftwood, tangles of half-rotted cording, torn nets, broken casks and crates, as well as sea things, shells and jellyfish and small squid and so on. Probity had a piece of chalk with which to mark anything he wanted to collect on his way back, but he was not looking for timber or firewood today and marked nothing.

Next came Watch Point, both sandy and rocky. Here, Pitiabile picked out of the sand an ancient leather boot with a spur, which Probity tested with his jackknife to see if it might be silver. It was not, but he put it in his sack and poked around with his staff in the sand, in case it might be part of some buried hoard exposed by the storm, but again it was not.

Beyond Oyster Bay lay the Scaurs, two miles of tilted rocky promontories with inlets between, like the teeth of a broken comb, and beyond them black unscalable cliffs. The Scaurs were the best hunting ground, but slow work, full of crannies and fissures where trove might lodge. If Pitiabile had been less sore from last night's beating - lengthy and savage after Probity had been nine days cooped up by the storm - she might have enjoyed the search, the jumping and scrambling, and the bright sea things that lurked in the countless pools. As it was, she searched numbly, dutifully, her mind filled with the dread of their homecoming, having found nothing. That failure would be made her fault, reason enough for another beating.

She searched the upper half of the beach, and Probity the lower. They were about halfway to the cliffs, and could already hear the screaming of the tens of thousands of gulls that nested there, when her way was blocked by the next jut of rock, a vertical wall too high for her to climb. She was hesitating whether to go shoreward or seaward to get past the barrier when she heard a new noise, a quick rush of water followed by a slithering, a mewling cry and a splash. After a short while the sounds were repeated in the same order. And again. And again.

They seemed to come from beyond the barrier to her right, so she turned left, looking for a place where she could climb and peer over without whatever was making them becoming aware of her. She came to a pile of rocks she could scramble up. The top of the barrier was rough but level. Crouching, she crept towards the sea and discovered

a large, deep pool, formed by the main rock splitting apart and then becoming blocked at the seaward end by an immense slab, trapping into the cleft any wave that might be thrown that far up the shore. The seal at the top end wasn't perfect, and enough water had drained away for the surface to be several feet down from the rim, leaving a pool about as wide as one of the fishing boats, and twice as long or more.

As Pitiabile watched, the surface at the seaward end of the pool convulsed, and something shot up in a burst of foam. She saw a dark head, a smooth pale body, and a thrashing silvery tail that drove the creature up the steep slope of the slab that held the pool in. A slim arm - not a leg or flipper but an arm like Pitiabile's own - reached and clutched, uselessly, well short of the rim, and then the thing slithered back with its thin despairing wail, and splashed into the water. From what Mercy had told her of Charity Goodrich's adventure, Pitiabile understood at once what she had seen.

Amazed out of her numbness, she watched the creature try once more, and again, before she silently backed away and looked down the shore for her grandfather. He was standing near the water's edge but gazing landward, looking for her, she guessed. She waved to him to come and he hurried towards her. She held her finger to her lips and made urgent gestures for silence with her other hand. By now he must have heard the sounds and understood that something living was concerned, which must not be alarmed, so he made his way round and climbed cautiously up the same way that she had. She pointed and he crept forward to peer into the pool.

She lost count of the cries and splashes while he stared, but when at length he backed away and turned she saw that his eyes were glistening with a new, excited light. He climbed down, helped her to follow, chalked his mark on the rock and led her up the beach.

‘The Lord has indeed provided,’ he whispered. ‘Blessed be His name. Now you must stand guard while I fetch nets and men to bring this thing home. If anyone comes, you must tell them that the find is mine. See how excellent are His ways! This very week He brings the fair to town! Stay here. Do not go back up the rock. It must not see you.’

He strode off, walking like a younger man, picking his way easily across the broken rocks. Pitiabie sat on a seaworn slab and waited. She felt none of Probity’s excitement. She was now appalled at what she had done. Probity and his helpers would catch the sea child and sell her – from what she had seen Pitiabie was almost sure it was a girl – sell her to the showmen at the fair. That in itself was dreadful. The People had no dealings with the fair that came each autumn. It was an occasion of frivolity and wickedness, they said. But now Probity was going to take the sea child to them and haggle for a price. More than anything else, more than the ruined farm, more even than her own beatings, this made Pitiabie see how much he had changed.

Obediently, she sat and watched him go. When he came to Oyster Bay he turned back, shading his eyes, so she stood and waved and he waved back and vanished into the dip, leaving her alone with the sea and the shore and the strange, sad cries from the pool. By now Pitiabie was again too wrapped in her own misery to hear them as anything more than cries, as meaningless to her as the calling of the gulls. It struck her perhaps that Probity would perhaps not sell the sea girl, but would join the fair, taking Pitiabie with him, and show her himself. She would be dead by then, of course – in Charity Goodrich’s story the sea people could not live long out of water – but people would pay money to see even a dead sea child.

The cries and splashes stopped for a while. Probably the sea child was resting for a fresh attempt, and yes, when it came the swirl of the water was stronger and the slap of the body against the rock was louder, and the wail as the child

fell back yet more despairing than before – so lost, so hopeless, that this time Pitiabie heard it for what it was, and when it came again she felt it was calling to her, to her alone, in a language she alone knew, the language of a child trapped in a pit of despair by things too powerful for her to overcome.

Weeping, she realized that she could not bear it.

She dried her eyes and rose and climbed back up to the pool. This time as she watched the sea child's desperate leapings, she saw that there must be something wrong with the other arm, which dangled uselessly by the slim body as it shot from the water. Still, one arm should be enough, if Pitiabie could lean far enough to reach it, so she made her way round to the sloping rock, knelt and craned over.

The sea girl was on the point of leaping again. For a moment Pitiabie gazed down at the wan, drawn face with its too-small mouth and its too-large dark eyes, but then the sea girl twisted from her leap and plunged back below the surface, leaving nothing but the swirl of her going. Pitiabie reached down, calling gently and kindly, telling the girl she wanted to help her, though they must hurry because her grandfather would soon be back. But the girl hid in the depths, invisible behind the sky-reflecting surface, and did not stir.

Pitiabie stood up and looked along the Scaurs, but there was still no sign of Probitie. He must have reached Home Beach by now, but perhaps the men there were too busy with their boats to listen to him. Well, she thought, though I cannot swim, if the girl will not come to me I must go to her. At its shoreward end the pool narrowed almost to a slit, into which a few boulders had fallen and wedged, so she made her way round, sat down and took off all her clothes. Then she lowered herself into the slimy crack and using the boulders for footholds, climbed down to the water.

Despite the hot summer it was chill from the storm, which had churned up the underdeeps and thrown them here