

Mermaids vs. Humans: Reality in Fantasy

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### Abstract

This thesis analyses how fantasy literature relates to and transforms concrete perceptions of reality, tracing its origins from mythic creation epics and the qualities that it shares with scripture. Overall, I propose a more imaginative approach to realistic literature that draws from the truths found in fantasy literature and by discussing fantasy literature and genre.

The creative element of this project includes an excerpt from an original children's fantasy novel. In it, I compare mythical characters with human characters and an imaginary world to the real world as it is experienced by characters from both worlds. The fantastical reality attempts to show how imagination, hope, human nature, and the supernatural link fantasy literature to realistic literature and reality itself.

## Mermaids vs. Humans: Reality in Fantasy

**Introduction**

Fantasy literature plays a unique role in the imaginative lives of children. Each of its elements, from dragons and alternate realities to superhuman abilities, encourages the reader to think beyond the world as they experience it. The reader is encouraged to hope for the supernatural or the unlikely. Both low and high fantasy literature reflect human nature and often echo a human desire for a more interesting world, one that might be accessible by way of imagination. In fact, I argue that this hope is not based in fiction but in reality. Throughout this paper, I explore the following questions: In what ways do high and low fantasy literature reflect reality as humans experience it? How and why does this reflection resonate with young readers?

High fantasy is a subgenre of fantasy literature in which the story told is set in its own fictional world, which is wholly separate from our own. These worlds, though fictional, typically draw from the real world for themes and other characteristics. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, takes place in Middle Earth, but it reflects an England "lost in time" (Artan 3). Low fantasy, on the other hand, consists of an alternate world within our own world (Vike 11). C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* is an example of such literature, as the Pevensie siblings can access the magical world of Narnia through a gateway in England. Both subgenres share a connection to the real world by either imitating it in some way or by being located within it. In some sense, this characteristic suggests that writers and readers can only imagine a world that shares characteristics with our own, particularly concerning the following characteristics: hope for the supernatural, meaning in the mundane, and the inescapability of human nature.

Fantasy literature is full of the supernatural. In both high and low fantasy literature, supernatural events and manifestations are "attributed to some force beyond scientific

understanding or the laws of nature” (“Supernatural”). Tolkien, for example, tells his high fantasy story of Middle Earth with “Dwarf and Hobbit, Elves and Men, with mortal and immortal folk” (Tolkien)—elves, dwarves, hobbits, and immortal folk all being examples of beings that supersede the laws of nature. Rowling contributes to this list of supernatural elements and beings with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, a low fantasy novel. Harry is presented as equal parts human and wizard (Rowling 50), suggesting that magic and humanity can reside in one being. This combination further suggests that, in Rowling’s mind, mankind can be understood as more than scientific or physical. Lewis identifies both moral and immoral characters with supernatural qualities in his low fantasy *Chronicle of Narnia* tales; in fact, the primary example of good and the primary example of wickedness each possess magical qualities, exemplified when the Christ-figure Aslan discusses “Deep Magic” with the Satan-figure, the White Witch (Lewis 155). Here, Aslan neutralizes the supernatural, that being “Deep Magic,” and rids it of morality, though he suggests it can be twisted into something like witchcraft.

What supernatural elements are prevalent in high and low fantasy today can be traced back to ancient mythology and creation stories, showing a connection between fantasy literature and literature that was, at one time at least, considered believable. That Greek mythology is riddled with the supernatural, an important feature of contemporary fantasy literature, suggests that the ancients desired the spectacular in their everyday lives. Countless deities are mentioned in Homer’s *The Iliad*, such as Thetis, Eris, Phobos, Iris, Proteus, and more (Homer, *Iliad*). Mystical beings like giants, sirens, and sea monsters litter Homer’s *The Odyssey* (Homer, *Odyssey*). The centaur, cyclops, Pegasus, and mermaid all originate in Greek mythology (“Greek Myths”). According to Jack Zipes, a professor of comparative literature and cultural studies, this tendency to tell stories of creatures that had never been seen suggests that ancient Greeks longed

for the supernatural. Zipes argues that “[t]hough many ancient tales might seem magical, miraculous, fanciful, superstitious, or unreal to us, people believed them, and these people were and are not much different from people today who believe in religions, miracles, ... and notions such as ‘free’ democracies” (Zipes 2). Or, perhaps the ancients needed to cling to lofty explanations to explain their own physical world. For example, the Greek creation myth claims that the sky is simply Uranus, Mother Earth’s son (Evans and Millard 8). What modern scientists would explain with concrete, physical evidence, the ancients explained with stories of unobservable forces, suggesting that they were comfortable believing claims unsupported by physical evidence and, in turn, with the idea that truth has multiple potential routes, another feature of fantasy literature. Joseph Campbell argues that mythology is “the womb of mankind’s initiation to life and death”; it is “dreamlike, ... a spontaneous product of the psyche” (108), revealing that its key characteristics—like storytelling, the supernatural, and comfort in unfounded beliefs—are developments of human nature itself. The supernatural was a key facet in the lives of ancient Greeks, and its popularity in contemporary fantasy suggests that modern readers want to believe in a world where the supernatural is possible as much as the Greeks actually did intrinsically believe in it.

Though there may be many reasons why some modern readers want to believe in the fantastic, I suggest that readers embrace fantasy as a means to look beyond the mundane, or to find meaning in it. I do not mean traditional escapism, however, which is frequently used to argue for the illegitimacy of fantasy. Maggie Barrett quotes senior professional lecturer at American University Charles Cox, saying that “[A]ll entertainment provides a way to escape our day-to-day lives” (qtd. in Barrett). The idea that fantasy literature is popular only as a means to distract readers from the mundane does not fully answer the question as to why fantasy readers

want to believe in the fantastic, although it may be accurate in part. I would like to argue instead that readers want to find glimpses of the supernatural in their own lives. This could be why Harry Potter, though a famously powerful wizard, is also a mistreated human boy; why fans relate to Frodo, an everyday hobbit unaccustomed to adventure; why readers relate to Hiccup, a weak Viking who disappoints his father; why the kings and queens of Narnia are seen as commoners, being war-stricken kids from London. The typical hero in a fantasy novel is thoroughly acquainted with the mundane: more often than not, they prefer it. Where readers cannot relate to the superhuman circumstances or abilities of these characters, they relate to their human weakness, and find hope in their ability to rise above it.

### **Fantasy Literature vs. Realistic Literature**

Fantasy literature and realistic literature are typically considered opposites, but the two are not always mutually exclusive. Fantasy literature is defined as “a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic.” It contains “a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live” (Mathews 1). Alternatively, realism in literature was developed to replace fantastic literary elements with the concrete or “real”—to show what life is actually like (“Realism”). However, literature can arguably reflect our “rationally predictable world” while also inspiring a hope for the possibility of something “beyond the ordinary” (“Realism”). The idea that realism excludes imagination developed in the 1600s, when the Renaissance introduced Enlightenment ideas about how knowledge can be attained, dividing the once close-knit genres of realism and legend, or fantasy, and bringing about the fear of and denial of “superstition” for the sake of empirical, scientific thought (Mathews 2). Living in a Postmodern era, individuals are taught today to align themselves with concrete reality, but also to “develop a strong emotional response” to their own unique perceptions of reality, according to

Kathryn Hume (194); this worldview combines the aforementioned desire for realism and imagination. Although fantasy literature contains elements that do not align with reality, it reflects realistic literature's demand for truth by creating for itself a consistent internal system of scientific laws and beliefs. For instance, when Lewis Carroll's Alice recognizes that she cannot reach her destination by walking forward, "she very intelligently walks in the opposite direction and reaches her destination" (Hume 13), showing that although the rules of her new world are different than our own, they are not irrational. In many ways, fantasy literature's adherence to tradition and the belief in creation contradicts Postmodern and Enlightenment values, but it complements modern ideas about truth and individuality by allowing room for subjective and objective approaches to reality and imagination.

Fantasy literature seems more realistic to those who believe in a transcendent order of being than realistic literature does, since it allows for a reality beyond the natural order through the use of the imagination. Where realistic literature teaches the reader to associate what they read with reality, fantastical literature, if it is traditional, encourages the reader to connect what they read with tradition (Hume 192). However, fantasy literature contributes to the reader's sense of reality by introducing the idea of creation to the reader's own life. By observing a work of fiction created by another person, the reader is faced with the fact that creativity is an element of human nature, regardless of whether the created thing aligns with the laws of nature. In this way, fantasy is important because it establishes creative connections between reader and writer, most of which "are not scientific, but are moral, aesthetic, social, or personal" (Hume 194), values which are typically found more in fantasy than realistic literature because they extend beyond the natural. Where realistic literature strives to be "unambiguous," fantasy "instead aims for richness, and often achieves a plethora of meanings" (Hume 194). This idea does not mean,



however, that realistic literature is not multi-faceted or that it does not contain multiple meanings, rather that fantasy literature allows for all of the complexity of realistic literature plus the added complexity that comes with valuing tradition and the transcendent, and by incorporating themes of community, the way that Tolkien does with his dwarves in *The Hobbit* (16). By “imbuing their writing with ancient human impulses toward myth and romance,” modern fantasy writers “create a complex and appealing counterpoint to popular fiction about ordinary life” (Mathews 2-3). In this way, fantasy reflects reality by offering a transcendent perspective, where the perspectives in realistic literature are often primarily materialist.

### **Historical Value of Fantasy and Myth**

Unable to study the factual histories of the generations that came before them, ancient civilizations used myths to tell their origin stories. Fantasy literature arguably finds its roots in these origin stories, or “magical stories of myth, legend, fairy tale, and folklore from all over the world” (Mathews 1). According to Hume, myth is typically considered to contain “more meaning than ordinary narrative” (186); this meaning is typically displayed in the values and metaphors assigned to characters and events, in the value of the myth as a story, and in the rituals disclosed within the myth itself. In John Barth’s retelling of the myths surrounding Pegasus, Medusa, and Perseus, for instance, Pegasus represents the imaginative hopes of mankind, according to Hume. The fact that he is a “flying animal” symbolizes “heroic activity” and “suggests ties to the spiritual aspirations of man” (Hume 188). In fact, Greeks constructed fantastical stories “to invoke this quality of spirit,” although they did not view this style as limiting (Hume 188). Instead, fantasy was considered “the natural way of expressing something nonmaterial,” including the Greeks’ own history. In fact, almost “all of the surviving literature of the ancient world, ... is rooted in fantasy, though at the time each work was composed much of it

was believed by those who heard or read it to be true” (Mathews 5-6). Instead of associating a story’s value and sense of meaning from its factual validity alone, however, ancient civilizations like the Greeks believed that a story was valuable for its other contributions, like pleasure or a lesson in morality (Hume 188). Native American tribes constructed myths and rituals to reconcile themselves with their guilt at the reality and necessity of hunting (Campbell 92-94). In fact, these tribes, who humbled themselves before even the food that they ate, “addressed all of life as a ‘thou’—the trees, the stones, everything,” proving that “[t]he ego that sees a ‘thou’ is not the same ego that sees an ‘it’” (Campbell 99). This humility and respect, absent from purely realistic literature, came from the tribes’ origin stories. A Native American from the Pawnee tribe is noted to have claimed that “[i]n the beginning of all things, wisdom and knowledge were with the animal. For Tirawa, the One Above, did not speak directly to man” (Campbell 99). By acknowledging animals as superior in this way, the myths of the Pawnee tribe show a correlation with the mythic to fantasy literature, which often incorporates nonhuman beings into the fabric of the story as friends to the human characters.

In many ways, modern fantasy literature reflects mythology in its desire to embrace the sacred. According to acclaimed journalist Bill Moyers, historians began noting a “stirring of the mythic imagination” and an embrace of “the wonder of things” themselves (Campbell and Moyers 99) with the beginning of hunting as a means of survival. With the introduction of hunting came the introduction of ritual, and the mythic embrace of the sacredness of all life, particularly for Native American tribes. The absence of these “initiation rituals” in modern society leaves individuals longing for the sacred; according to Moyers, stories and movies have become a “faulty way” to incorporate this missing element into modern life (Campbell and Moyers 102). Author Joseph Campbell argues that these representations of myth fail to

satisfy the consumer because “[t]he kind of responsibility that goes into a priesthood with a ritual is not there”; without responsibility, ritual is meaningless, and the mythical quality associated with ceremony is absent (Campbell 103). A critical component of these rituals is community, an element often lost in realistic literature and the Western world, according to Moyers (Campbell and Moyers 105). While sacred community and the rituals required to create it can exist in realistic literature, these elements are so fundamental to fantasy literature that they appear to have laid its foundation.

### **Spirituality in Fantasy Literature**

The spiritual elements of fantasy literature can be traced to the Judeo-Christian creation epic. According to French theorist Marcel Schneider, fantastical stories thrive “on illusion, on delirium sometimes, always on hope and above all on the hope of salvation. For each of us hopes to be saved, and not only in another world but from now on, from here below” (qtd. in Hume 15). While the Judeo-Christian creation myth, meaning creation epic, does not include the gospel story of Christ’s death and resurrection, it describes a once-harmonious union between Creator and creation broken in such a way that man is left striving for survival when he once thrived in a perfect world. Similarly, fantasy literature reflects the human desire to transcend painful worldly circumstances. In Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, for instance, Gandalf and his 13 dwarves embark on a perilous journey to restore Thorin’s gold to his people, thus restoring harmony to his ancestors’ kingdom (27-32). Even with this desire for restoration, however, the biblical creation epic touches on the desire for individuality and even the mundane, since the Bible tells its epic from the “perspective of fishermen and farmers, pregnant ladies and squirmy kids” (Evans 150), reflecting a similar desire in fantasy works like *The Lord of the Rings* (Evans 150), with characters who resist adventure for the sake of home’s comforts. Besides favoring the mundane,

fantasy literature is typically complex and detailed, like Scripture. Although theologian D.L. Moody, inspired by Enlightenment thinkers, argued that gospel presentations should be brief enough to fit on a coin, the Old Testament was constructed like that of a narrative epic, making it difficult to shorten the gospel without ignoring a critical element or tone (Evans 151). Likewise, *The Hobbit's* wise and cunning characters speak in riddles about mountains (Tolkien 91) and sing the history of Smaug's gold (Tolkien 157-58), taking after Jesus himself, who often spoke in riddles and stories (Evans 153). In fact, reading the Old Testament in an overtly modern way, without the creative liberty given by a mythic interpretation, could cause misinterpretations of the ancient epic. In fact, Jewish communities, both ancient and modern, most often interpret the Torah using *midrash*, defined as "imaginative explorations and expansions of Scripture" (Evans 22), implying that Scripture, according to these communities, welcomes creativity and even embellishment in the right context. Having said this, Evans argues that "[w]e've been instructed to reject any trace of poetry, myth, hyperbole, or symbolism even when those literary forms are virtually shouting at us from the page via talking snakes and enchanted trees" (11), suggesting that the rejection of myth implies the rejection of its best qualities in the Bible: imagination, fluidity, tradition, and ancient ways of thinking. These characteristics, along with themes of hope and human nature, can be found abundantly in fantasy literature, and link the genre to ancient writings of the spiritual.

The first of the common themes of fantasy literature found in Scripture is hope. Rowling's beloved Dumbledore encourages Harry to hold on to hope, reminding him that he need not despair at the loss of his many loved ones, for example, as they will always be with him (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 427). This reminder is echoed repeatedly throughout Scripture, which states that "there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off" (Prov. 23:18), that "you will feel

secure, because there is hope” (Job 11:18), and that “the hope of the righteous brings joy” (Prov. 10:28). Biblical themes of imagination, too, are prevalent in fantasy literature. According to the Genesis account of creation, God “created mankind in his own image” (Gen. 1:27) and “stretched out the heavens by his understanding” (Jer. 10:12). These creative abilities are common in novels like J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, when Peter tells Wendy that the only thing she needs to do to fly is “think lovely wonderful thoughts, ... and then they lift you up in the air” (41), enabling her to self-produce abilities similar to the way that God speaks his ideas into creation. This creative ability is also evident in authors of fantasy literature that create an entire world, like that in *Harry Potter*, reflecting the ability to produce a coherent universe like that found in Genesis. These shared biblical characteristics further link fantasy literature to mythic creation epics.

### **Escapism in Fantasy Literature**

One of the greatest arguments against fantasy literature is escapism, which offers both positive and negative forms of interpretation to the genre. Hume poses a question that sums up the debate: “Does escapist fantasy refresh readers and send them back to their world renewed? Or does it make their real world less tolerable?” (12). The answer depends on the quality and purpose of the text at hand. Tolkien, for instance, provides his readers with “the feeling of devoting one’s life to an unambiguously good cause” so that “such heroic literature ceases to be casual escapism, and becomes something more deeply subversive” (Hume 195). Rather than delving into fantasy literature to avoid the bad in the world, these readers are inspired by fantasy literature to provide more good for the world. However, some fantasy literature, including Tolkien’s, glorifies the past to a dramatic, even noxious extent, leaving its readers with the idea that their futures cannot be better than the past, a concept Fabrizi notes in epics like *The Lord of*

*the Rings* (13). Merry, Pippin, Frodo, and Samwise Gamgee, Tolkien's main characters, are all "invested in the status quo, their quest an attempt to preserve the idyllic lifestyle of the Shire" (Fabrizi 14), which suggests that progress and the future are not something to be looked forward to. However, fantasy literature introduces ideals attainable in real life, like those found in Scripture and in mythology. The pleasures provided from fantasy literature may be valuable as well. Rather than pose a strict system of morality to inspire readers, fantasy may introduce the idea that life can and should be enjoyed, inspiring the reader not to avoid reality, but to embrace it (Hume 195). Fantasy literature encourages the reader to ask the questions, "How much of the beauty of our own lives is about the beauty of being alive? How much of it is conscious and intentional?" (Campbell 100). The pleasures of indulging in fantasy literature "are the fantasy for its own sake, and the experiences that the story gives us of recovery, escape, and consolation, all adding up to joy" (Hume 16). If done well, that temporary escape may lead to the desire to contribute the morality, pleasure, and hope found in fantasy literature to the reader's own world.

### **Fantasy Literature and Genre**

Fantasy as a genre is often attributed to children because of its ability to introduce new possibilities and ideas in a way that much realistic literature is incapable of. Fantasy offers universal truths disguised in myth in a way that is more palatable for children than works from other genres ("The Fantasy Genre"). Modern fantasy is marked by a narrative structure that connects "timeless mythic patterns" to "contemporary individual experiences" (Matthews 1) in a way that many parents and educators find beneficial for their children. However, by assigning fantasy as a genre to children and children alone, both the genre and children in general are done a disservice. The oversimplification of fantasy diminishes the weight of creation myths, their good qualities being overshadowed by the idea that they are either illogical or too childish to be

taken seriously. The belief that children are unable to grasp important concepts is strengthened when an entire genre that is perceived as silly is assigned to children. By incorporating the values of tradition, imagination, and community into realistic literature and into perceptions about reality, fantasy literature can begin to be properly related to ancient creation myths, whether biblical or otherwise. This appreciation can allow for a broader use of fantasy literature, academic or otherwise.

### **Application**

The following fiction excerpt demonstrates various characteristics of low fantasy literature that I have described as prevalent in creation myths and modern fantasy stories, such as the desire for the transcendent or supernatural, rituals and the community centered around them, and superhuman elements within the mundane. The fantastical world is placed within a more realistic setting, making the story a rendition of low fantasy, although the human characters respond to the unrealistic without much surprise to reflect magical realism. A creation epic is described throughout the story, tying the fantastic to the mythic, and the magical characters are described ritualistically and in deep community to further reflect mythic ideals. The desire for the supernatural and transcendent is implied in the contrast between Sav's selfish, pessimistic attitude and the dream-like, ethereal quality of Anthral life, along with the description of creation. Superhuman elements, like the ability to breathe underwater, are mentioned to contrast with more mundane elements, like the human character's lack of other magical abilities.

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**SOGGY SAVANNAH AND THE LEGEND OF KA****Creation**

When Ka created our world, it was as dark as a basement. He snapped his fingers and a moon like a yellow lightbulb flickered into existence and washed the vacant world in a hushed bedtime glow. Then, the ocean. I remember how it was then—deep, dark, powerful. Nothing filled it, nothing surrounded it. Then the moonlight spread, and life started to grow.

Do you remember what the first growing thing was? Before Ka made people or mountains or us, he stirred the ocean with his pointer finger like a cup of tea until a winding vortex circled to the ocean floor. He dug a small hole there with his nail and buried one of his small, glistening tears in the earth. After three days of exposure to the unforgiving sun (Ka had at this point burnt his eggs in a frying pan and tossed them into the sky, where they stuck, still flaming), Ka's buried tear sprouted roots, and out of those roots sprouted a tree. Not just any tree. *The Tree*. The Tree that, with no explanation, grew large glowing pods like green beans that dragged its heavy branches all the way down to the ocean floor with their weight. Those pods that, with no explanation, popped open in unison three years after their conception. And inside those pods—tiny, beautiful, screaming sea creatures with human-like faces and torsos. One by one they plopped out of their green bean pods and flapped their fishlike tails in wonder, with eyes as big as sapphires and just as brilliant, too. That day was generations and generations ago, when the Anthrals were created and your great-great-great-great-great-great Gran was hatched like a chicken.

These days, the Tree is withered and rotted, practically a myth.

And the sun is just as unforgiving.

### **Anthrals**

The bottom of the ocean isn't like what they've told you. They say it's cold and dead, without a sound or a drop of light. Soon, you'll see that it's just the opposite. It'll help if you picture something colorful. In some places it's green, in others blue, in others purple. It's so still and quiet that every time there is a sound, it's close and clear as a bell. The water is warm because of the roar of the lava underground. And if you look closely enough, you'll see that one cave in particular is lit up inside, just slightly. The light bounces off the jellyfish and seahorses that surround it, making them look like lamps and stars. You'll notice too that there are more jellyfish and seahorses around that one cave than around any other cave in sight. You might hear the sound of rushing water, like a whirlpool or a washing machine, and if you follow the sound just a little tiny bit further, you'll see something you've never seen before. Not ever. They're like fish, but much, much bigger. And they're like people too. They have tails that go on and on for as long as you can see, and they come in every color, and they glow. And their eyes are as big as sapphires, and just as brilliant, too. Think of mermaids, but bigger, more fishlike, and a little more dangerous. They're called *Anthrals*.

### Bad Eggs

The rusted red alarm clock atop Savannah's charcoal treasure chest shakes to life and tumbles to the pebbled floor. Groaning, Savannah, or Soggy Sav, as her friends call her, fumbles her old knobby toes into her old pink slippers and creaks out of bed. She hobbles to the window and stares at the blinding white sun.

Shaking her bony knuckles at the sky, Sav curses the day she was born. "I never wanted to live to see 99."

It is Sav's ninety-ninth birthday today, to her grave disappointment. Twisting her graying, natural hair into a lopsided braid, Sav cracks a couple of eggs into a frying pan. She whistles half-heartedly and scowls as the ghosts of birthdays past begin to haunt her foggy memory.

Nineteenth birthday: Sav's father returns home from an endless, sun-scorched morning of hunting the Mediterranean Sea for Atlantic Bluefin Tuna, huffing and dragging a 50-pound iron treasure chest behind him. *Original*, Sav thought. She remembers how he rapped his wrinkled black knuckles against the top of the trunk and howled, "*YOU'RE GONNA BE RICH, SAVANNAH!*"

Turns out that birthday present was *actually* meant to be a gift from the King of France to the ruling family of Philadelphia. No, not that Philadelphia. Sav's Philadelphia was an insignificant fishing village somewhere near the top of Africa.

A few drunk and misguided Yankees sailed here during the Revolutionary War, mostly because a genie told them to in a dream, and planted their roots in the African soil. I have no idea how they did it, but they renamed Sav's great-grandpa's village and force-fed everyone English, and then, 60 years later, Sav was born. *Voila*.

Sav twists the knob on her stove until the little blue flame beneath her flying pan rises higher, higher.

Twentieth birthday: Apparently, stealing French treasure is considered a crime. So, having committed their first act of piracy exactly one year prior, Sav and her father complete their first year in prison.

“I ‘spose I should be grateful we didn’t go straight to the gallows,” Sav mumbles at the memory. Her father used some golden goblet or other from her birthday present to bribe the ruling officials into labeling their crime a “poorly timed lapse of judgment due to extreme poverty.”

Sav humphs. She sprinkles paprika and garlic powder over her eggs.

Thirtieth birthday: Sav’s father kicks the bucket. Kaput. Dunzo. And on their last day in prison, too. To this day, Sav isn’t really sure how it happened. She woke up bright and early that day, stretched, knocked excitedly on her dad’s cell (which was right next to her own), and found him lying stone-cold on the ground, arms folded in an X across his chest.

“Good riddance,” Sav grunts. She flips her eggs to the ceiling and catches them with the frying pan behind her back. Her time in the pirating community has kept her athletic beyond her years.

Sav spent the next seven decades sailing back and forth between Turkey and Spain and sometimes beyond. Sometimes she fished, sometimes she looted small villages for gold. The authorities never caught her again. Now, she lives in a wobbly hut in Cyprus, a fully retired pirate.

“Yippee,” Sav mumbles at her completed breakfast, unexcited, and tosses her over-easy eggs onto a chipped green plate. Based on the soft yellow light drifting into the kitchen through a

window above the kitchen table, which is stacked head to toe in maps, scratched bowls, and dusty spices, it's approximately 6 o'clock in the morning. Complete silence. Sav smiles and thanks her lucky stars and the grace of Ka for giving her a perfect, quiet morning. No pesky neighbors awake to clutter the day with their presence. Sav smiles, leans back in her stool, and takes a slow, heartfelt bite of her breakfast.

“*SAAAAAAAAAV!*” a blood-curdling voice shouts. Sav chokes on an egg yolk and drops her plate with a loud *clink*. She scratches her head and presses her ear against the splintered front door. Panicked footsteps and heavy breathing approach, closer and closer, until—*WHAM!*

The front door crashes in and Sav tumbles backward, head over heels (literally), and rolls into the legs of her kitchen table in a heap.

“Magp—”

“Hey, hi, good mornin’,” huffs Magpie, hands on his knees in exhaustion. “Happy birthday. No time for chitchat. Emergency. Your boat—it’s,” he lets out a stiff cough that sends a shiver down his whole body, almost like a jig.

“It’s what, Mag?” Sav straightens up. Her boat is her baby. Her greatest treasure and one true love. She begins to sweat nervously.

“It’s—” Magpie, his long legs wobbling at the knees, wringing the sleeves of his striped shirt, flaming red hair askew, shouts: “It’s on *FIRE!*”

And that was that. Before Sav has time to ask how her ocean-dwelling boat could possibly be on fire, the two are racing to the pier, tripping over their worn shoes. They reach the bright blue ocean, the sun reflecting off every calm wave and the blinding white paint on countless little ships and rickety sail boats across the harbor. And then she sees it—her beautiful chipped green ship covered, absolutely covered, in scouring white flames.

“My *baby!*” Sav howls, running to the rescue. She reaches her little boat, the *Jumping Juno*, and begins furiously tossing sea water onto the deck with her small, cupped hands.

“How did this *happen?*” Sav shouts back at Magpie, whose wobbly knees had begun clanking together noisily.

“Listen,” he stretches out his hands in surrender, “I’d just got here before I rushed to git you. All’s I can say is it’s 115° today and there’s no clouds and you always got random metal things sittin’ on your deck and the sun hits that kinds of stuff and heats it all up—”

Sav holds her finger up between Mag’s eyes. “Not another word. Let’s go.”

She yanks Magpie by the elbow and drags him across the sand. Plopping him down in front of her flaming ship, she squats down and puts her finger between his eyes again.

“Here’s what we’re gonna do.”

### Putting Out Fires

“I *said*, get the *hose!*” Sav’s hands are too pruned to continue dumping water on the *Jumping Juno* by the fistful. Magpie was tripping to the ancient well nearby, which an old fisherman had rigged up with a modern red hose about five years ago. He came rushing and sputtering back, the hose gushing lukewarm water across the sand, and tossed it limply into Sav’s open palms.

“This could take hours,” she mutters in frustration. “We’ll need to push her into deeper water.”

“Deeper water? In *this* condition?”

“Obviously.”

“But she’ll get stranded! We can’t get aboard while the ship is on—”

“We don’t need to get aboard. Come here.”

Sav yanks the hose hard, disconnecting it from the spout at the well, and waves it over her head like a lasso. She gives it one swift toss, and the top of the hose loops around the mainsail. Then she jumps in the water.

“Come on!” Sav waves at Magpie, who is gawking at her from the shore.

“Seems—,” he stutters and gulps, “unwise.”

“Suit yourself, Mag,” Sav turns in the water and doggy-paddles out to sea without looking back. She does hear a faint splash, however, followed by a short squeal in response to the water’s icy temperature.

“How far are we going?” shouts Mag from what sounds like several yards back.

Sav ignores him, diving headfirst into the sea. The water is murky and green, with specks of plankton floating here and there. It is peaceful. In the distance, Sav sees what she thinks is a



giant red squid. Or is it an octopus? Either way, it looks old as dirt. Might even be dead.

Shivering at the thought, Sav lifts her head above water again and, to her shock, finds that it is pitch black outside. She has the eerie thought that, somehow, it is close to midnight. Panicking, Sav realizes she must be hundreds of yards away from the Cyprus shore. She can see Mag's fiery red hair bobbing not too far away and, somehow, her rickety boat is no longer up in flames. She turns away from him and screams. The red octopus is right in front of her, suction-cupped to the side of her ship.

### The Rotting Octopus

Sav covers her mouth to stifle a scream. Each of the octopus's tentacles reflects blood red in the moonlight. Its eyes, deep and black but ringed with amber, glisten like glass. As she looks closer, Sav sees the knobby, parched white of exposed bone between layers of the octopus's decaying flesh. She covers her mouth again, but this time to resist the urge to vomit.

"Oi, don't do that!" the octopus cries, leaping off the boat and plunging into the ocean with an obnoxious splash. Even the boat lurches in annoyance.

"Look, if it's about the smell," he says, holding up a rotting tentacle, "I really can't help that anymore. I mean honestly, look at me." His voice is loud and cockney.

"You're—"

"The name's Barry, yes. I'm a large, old, rotting octopus. Nice to meet ya'."

Sav flushes in embarrassment.

"I'm a 99-year-old retired pirate."

"It's her birthday, actually, mate," gasps a weak voice to Sav's right.

"Mag?" Sav shouts, relieved.

Magpie is crouched beneath the beak of the ship, shivering. "That'd be me, yeah—"

"Well happy birthday, miss! Hard to imagine you're 99. You don't look a day over 85."

Magpie sniggers. Sav glares at him.

"Thank you, mister, I try to wear a lot of sunscre—"

"*Wait!*" Magpie shouts with a surprising amount of energy, pointing at Barry. Barry squirms.

"You said you're a very old, rotting octopus?"

Barry bows, gesturing to his rotting flesh.

“My ma used to tell stories about sea creatures like you. That there was a whole collection of octopus and crabs and whales and whatnot that was half-alive, half-dead,” Mag is gasping with excitement and disbelief at this point. “I never believed her. Not ‘till today.”

Barry hesitates. He avoids eye contact and starts picking at a deep, mushy scab—

“Stop being awkward and acknowledge the boy—”

“Okay, okay. All’s I can say is I’m just shy of 500 years old. I sold my soul to the devil, you could say, when I was ‘bout yours age, lass, and I been what they call ‘almost ’live, barely dead’ ever since. I’ll be rottin’ ‘till I actually start rottin’, if you know what I mean. That’s why I had to start that fire, you know—”

Mag pounces on Sav just in time to stop her from pummeling Barry with her angry, wrinkled knuckles.

“*YOU?!?*” Sav gasps. “*You* did that? But *why?*”

“So you don’t have any questions about the whole ‘sellin’ my soul’ thing?” Barry murmurs earnestly and ushers to the night sky. “Or about the sudden change in time zone?”

And with that, Barry speedily wraps two long, dusty tentacles around Sav’s and Mag’s wrists at the same time.

“I know why ya’re here.”

### Funeral Crashers

The next thing Sav and Magpie know, they are being dragged underwater at lightspeed against their will. The water rushes past Sav's face with such fury that her nostrils flare and her braid unravels immediately. Magpie's hair flies back behind his head like fire, and his mouth flings open wide as if in a silent scream.

Sav tries to speak, to fight her wrists away from Barry, but she can't. He just keeps swimming, faster and faster, deeper and deeper, the water getting darker and colder all the while. Sav can't fathom why this was happening. She can't believe that just this morning she had woken up to a bright new birthday with no one around to bother her. She can't believe that the strength of the water hadn't broken her 99-year-old bones. In fact, she can't believe that—yes, it is true—she can still breathe. The trio has been surging into the ocean for at least half an hour. Is she dreaming?

Barry comes to an abrupt halt. So abrupt, in fact, that his tentacles fling out in front of him from the impact, tossing Magpie and Sav far away from him across the ocean floor. The three are now at the bottom of the sea, somehow still alive and breathing.

"Listen," Barry gurgles through the saltwater. "You have to be very quiet. Look—"

Barry points a long, exceptionally skeletal tentacle straight ahead. Sav stares at him a moment, then directs her gaze in his tentacle's direction, seeing nothing but darkness. The water is murky and nearly black, but after a moment, she glimpses just a hint of green. Then dots of bluish white light fill her view, like stars, all swarming in a circle. She hears Magpie gasp. He must see it, too.

Just as Sav is beginning to ask Barry about the bluish lights, he slaps a tentacle over her mouth and shakes his head. He nods in the lights' direction.

One by one, long figures cloaked in black swim in single file out of the blue lights. They drift out of what must be a deep, dark cave, the lights bobbing out of their way.

“Those are jellyfish,” Barry whispers hoarsely, as if he can read Sav’s thoughts. “And sea horses.” He raises his eyebrows and grins, as if this fact is normally quite the showstopper.

Sav nods and turns her gaze back on the dark procession. There must be hundreds of these giant cloaked figures. She can’t make out what they are, but each has what looks like a larger-than-life glowing tail curling out of the bottom of their cloaks, intermingling with the creature behind them or trailing up above their heads.

Just as Sav thinks the line of figures will never end, the biggest creature of all comes looming out of the shadows, carrying a long, slender box. Smaller creatures surround the box, weeping and mumbling a haunting lullaby.

“What are they doing?” Magpie whispers harshly, his arms and legs trembling like noodles.

Barry pauses. The largest creature pauses too, and the line in front of him follows suit. One of them sounds a gong. Another joins in the lullaby, then another, then another, until each is singing at once softly and loudly the most beautiful, horrifying song Sav has ever heard.

“They’re buryin’ their dead.”

Sav got chills. Barry lowers his head in respect.

The creatures seem not to have noticed the trio yet. One of the smaller Anthrals surrounding the casket howls, saying: “*An eye for an eye! Revenge is Ka’s!*”

These were no ordinary fish.

“They’re like fish-people,” Barry whispers, as if reading Sav’s mind. “They’re called Anthrals.”

