

## A Siren's Revenge

By Ari Lentini

The smell of manure was the regular wakeup call for Walter Holgate but it smelled sweeter today. *Today is the day*, Walter thought as he hopped out of bed and pulled on his officer's uniform. *Today is the day I set out on the caravel*. From the corner of his family's wood and mud home, Walter's younger brother moaned groggily. Walter took a single step in Gryffen's direction but stopped. *My brother is 17 years old now*, Walter shook his head. *He's old enough to be responsible for himself, which includes waking up early enough. He's been conceited for all of his life but no one on the caravel will put up with that kind of attitude.* Sighing, Walter grabbed a piece of the freshly baked dark rye bread his mother had made and headed out the front door. The bright sun of East Anglia had just peaked over the horizon.

“Son!” Walter turned his gaze to the disembodied voice coming from the fields. “Come here for a second!” Walter began jogging to his father despite his left leg forcing him to move with quite a bad limp. *I'm going to miss being home*, Walter gazed at the fluffy white clouds over his head, *but I need to do this for my family. We can't continue to be farmers. We were meant for so much more...* Walter's father, who was already drenched in sweat, smiled at his eldest child and hugged him.

“Are you leaving soon?” His father had that familiar look of dread in his eyes. The old man knew the dangers of sailing all too well. Walter's grandfather died at sea when Walter was young but the stories he told of his time at sea stuck with the boy as he grew.

“Yes, I just need to pack my bag.” Walter's family was very poor so they didn't have much. However, Walter did have his prized possession, which was *The Canterbury Tales*. His

family didn't know how to read, but Walter learned from their pastor at church. He also had to bring some clothes for the trip, as it was going to be a long one. Captain Ellerton mentioned that they would be traveling from East Anglia around the African coast on the North Atlantic Ocean. He told Walter that they would be gone for several long months.

"HEY!" Walter turned back towards their home to see Gryffen standing at the door. Even from a distance, Walter could see the bits of hay sticking out of Gryffen's dirty blond hair. "You didn't wake me!"

"You're old enough to take care of yourself," Walter shook his head and laughed. "It's not my responsibility to make sure that you're awake on time." Walter watched as his younger brother groaned and quickly slam the front door before sprinting to the bathing trough. Baths weren't common for the family due to their financial status but today was a special day. This was going to be Gryffen's first time sailing. Walter turned back to his father, giving him the smallest grin. The father put a hand on his son's shoulder, gave him a gentle nod, then returned his attention to the wheat.

Walter jogged back to the house to quickly pack his belongings into an old sack his mother made him. Along with clothes and his book, he placed a very worn rosary in his bag. He took one last look around their very small home, which also served as housing for their livestock. *I won't miss the smell of the animals,* Walter smiled to himself.

"Walter?" He turned to see his mother at the front door holding his little sister, Agnes. "I was about to head out." Walter slung his bag over his back. His mother smiled at her eldest child.

"What about Gryffen?"

“He’s old enough to take care of himself.” His mother frowned at his response.

“It’s not that.” She looked down at her dirt skirt, which hung loosely at her ankles. “He looks up to you, you know.” Walter groaned.

“Yeah, yeah.” Walter walked over and kissed his mothers’ forehead. He was six feet tall and towered over most of his family, so forehead kisses were his specialty. Anges looked up at him with a puzzled look. Walter had been sailing since he was 17, which was two years before his little sister had even been conceived, so she had a reason to be confused as to who he was and his relation to her could be.

“Oh, look under that basket on the table,” his mother pointed at their old dining table by the kitchen. Walter lifted the basket to see a loaf of bread wrapped in cloth. “I made it for you so you can have some when you’re homesick.” Walter hugged his mother tight, tears welling in his bright green eyes. His mother has always been his rock, so leaving her for every excursion hurt him deeply.

“Thank you.” She reluctantly let go of her son, knowing he was leaving for the valiant reason of giving the family a better life. “I’ll be back before you know it.” Walter quickly walked out the front door, worried that he’d never be able to leave if he stayed longer.

“Gryffen,” Walter called out. “I’m leaving right now, with or without you.” Gryffen appeared from behind the house, his hair still wet from his bath and his uniform already dirty with mud.

“I was saying goodbye to the livestock.” He nervously twisted his cap in his hands. Walter inquisitively cocked his head. His younger brother had never cared about the livestock before.

“Let’s go.” Walter headed east towards the main part of town to meet with their captain. The walk wasn’t terribly long, only thirty minutes or so. The dirt path to the town square caked their boots. Walter could hear Gryffen groaning quietly behind him, causing Walter to sigh. *I don’t know how he ended up this way.* The Tudor style rooftops started to appear on the horizon. *It’s like his maturity went backward instead of forward.* Walter tugged on his left ear, feeling his scar from the top of his ear to his lobe.

“What’s wrong?” Gryffen asked curiously. “You only tug on your ear when you’re thinking.” Walter shook his head.

“Nothing...” Walter looked back at his brother, forcing a smile to satiate Gryffen. “Guess I just got lost in my thoughts again.” Within a few minutes, they had finished their journey on the dirt road and stepped on the cobblestone path. Walter loved the architecture of East Anglia, since it was vastly different than from their farm. The boys headed towards the far east side of East Anglia where the dock resided. Almost immediately, Walter spotted Captain Ellerton and some of the crew. The second they locked eyes, the captain let out a deep belly laugh.

“Well,” he said, his blue eyes sparkled. “If it isn’t my favorite senior petty officer. The last voyage didn’t scare you off?”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily.” Walter smiled at his captain. Walter viewed Captain as a second father to him; Ellerton had taken Walter under his wing and showed him everything he needed to know about sailing. The captain was the only one aboard the ship that knew in detail just how poor his family is and why Walter was so determined to make more money for them. Walter watched the captain’s eyes shift onto his younger brother.

“This must be Gryffen?” His brother nodded. The captain shook Gryffen’s hand firmly. “Well, if you’re anything like Walter, you’ll be a great addition to the crew! Considering there’s now two Holgate’s, we’ll have to call Gryffen ‘junior Holgate’ and Walter ‘senior Holgate.’” Gryffen cringed.

“It makes sense because I’m a junior petty officer.” The captain laughed once more.

“Oh yeah! That works, too!” Gryffen sulked, feeling defeated. The captain tossed the brothers a sack, which contained their bedsheets and a pillow. “Now remember, you wake up before the sun rises and that we only serve lunch and dinner. Oh, and never bring a female on board.”

“Wait, no females?” Gryffen asked confused. Walter chuckled to himself, knowing that Gryffen had specifically looked forward to the women he would meet while sailing.

“No females,” the captain said without further explanation and walked away. Walter looked around at the crew, noticing several familiar faces. What Walter was truly excited about was the ship, a caravel called the Pembroke. The Pembroke was a small ship created for the sole purpose of exploration and had been brought over from the Portuguese so that England could further explore the surrounding areas. All of a sudden, a loud bell shook Walter back to reality.

“Alright, crew!” The captain shook his bell wildly, forcing the shiphands to heed his commands. “It’s time to come aboard. Junior petty officers, you’ll be sleeping in hammocks located in the hull. Senior petty officers, talk to me personally.” Walter walked to his younger brother, who was frantically looking around. Walter put his hand on his shoulder.

“Nervous?” Gryffen gently nodded. “I understand. It’s a huge change, but don’t worry. It’ll be fun! The crew is great.” Gryffen still didn’t look confident. “Hey, go settle into your

hammock and I'll meet back up with you in a bit." He gave Gryffen a pat on the back and watched as his brother scurried onto the ship. Walter made his way to the captain.

"Ah, Walter," the captain kept his eyes on the crew as they boarded the Pembroke. "You'll actually get your own bed this go around. It's located in the hull, you know where." Walter's eyes became wide with excitement. "I know you've never had your own bed and," the captain gazed down at Walter's left leg, "it's the least I can do for you after what happened on our last trip."

"It wasn't your fault," Walter grimaced. He hated feeling like he had upset the captain. "I should have known not to get my leg tangled in the shrouds." The captain smiled half-heartedly, returning his eyes to the crew.

"My statement still stands. You'll have to share the room with two other senior officers but at least you can get your own stable bed. Now, run along. We have to start sailing soon." Walter grinned wildly and ran aboard. The ship may be smaller than most but it felt huge to Walter, who had only ever known the tiny house his family and livestock lived in. He walked down the stairs to the hull and saw Gryffen setting up his hammock. He got a lower hammock since he was a good bit shorter than most of the crew. Not wanting to bother him, Walter quietly moved past him to the wooden door in the back. *For senior crewmen only*, the sign read. Walter turned the brass handle and entered.

There were three beds built into the floor to prevent from them sliding around during travel. Two of the beds were already made so he took the bed on the far right by the wall. He unpacked the sheets the captain gave him and made his bed. Then, Walter removed his personal bag from his shoulder and hung it on the bedpost. He took his copy of *The Canterbury Tales* and

put it under his pillow along with his rosary. A whistle was blown from above his head. *Time to head off*, Walter thought happily to himself.

Once upstairs on the deck, he noticed the rest of the crew running around getting the sails ready. Walter quickly joined in on the chaos. Within minutes, the ship was ready to go and was moving south towards France. One of Walter's main jobs was keeping watch in the crow's nest, so he carefully climbed up the shrouds to his post. *I'll be up here until the sun sets*, he thought dreamily. *Then one of the other senior officers will take my place so I can eat dinner and sleep*.

This back and forth between Walter and William in the crow's nest lasted for over two weeks until they reached their first port near Brest, Africa. As much as Walter loved sailing, he also loved the two days they got to be on land. It meant fresh food and drink, exploration, and, most importantly, women.

Despite being in a devout Catholic family, Walter wasn't the prime example of faith and he knew it. Most of his time at ports was spent at brothels with the rest of the crew. *However, Walter thought nervously as he walked from the ship to the sandy dunes of Brest's beach, the brothels may be weird to visit since Gryffen is here now*. Gryffen was only seventeen years old while Walter was twenty-one. As he thought about this dilemma, Walter watched Gryffen bound off of the Pembroke and towards town.

“Where do you want to go first, Gryffen?” His brother had quickly made friends with another new crewman that Walter wasn't familiar with at all.

“Probably a brothel,” Gryffen smiled ear to ear. Walter's jaw dropped. *Seriously?! Steam almost began to come out of Walter's ears. All this time I was worried and... he sighed. Nothing is stopping me now, I suppose I can go.* Walter began to make his way to the brothel, eyeing his

younger brother carefully. Walter wasn't used to this side of Gryffen. He was used to the quiet, conceited boy that was typically with their parents in the fields from sunrise to sunset, never indulging in anything but work and complaints.

Walter opened the door of the brothel only to be greeted by the smell of tobacco smoke, damp floors from spilled alcohol, and tons of candles illuminating the space. Walter tugged on his ear anxiously. Most of the crew had already partnered up with a woman or were busy getting drunk. Walter had quickly lost sight of Gryffen and didn't care to find him so he headed over to the bar.

"Hey there, sailor." The shaky voice came from behind Walter. It was a voice as sweet as honey and it instantly pulled Walter in. He slowly turned in his barstool and was met with bright blue eyes illuminated from the candles around them. Her skin was fair and as pale as clouds, something Walter wasn't used to seeing as he was tanned deeply from the sun. Her long brown hair cascaded around her shoulders and cheeks. Her hands pulled nervously on her dark blue dress and her cheeks flushed. Walter could tell she was new.

"Hey." Walter smiled at her. "Want a drink?" Confusion flashed across her face, but only for a moment.

"You... you don't want to go somewhere more private?" She was a timid thing but Walter's kindness caused her shoulders to relax slightly.

"Maybe later. Why not take a break and enjoy a drink with me?" Walter motioned to the bartender for another drink. The girl carefully took a seat next to him. "My name is Walter." He stuck a hand out at her.

“My name is Elizabeth.” She shook his hand gingerly. Her skin was incredibly soft and there didn’t seem to be a single callous on her dainty hands. For the next several hours, the pair talked about everything from why Walter was sailing to how she liked living near Brest and even what their favorite colors were. After a few drinks, they went into an empty room and innocently laid together talking about more serious things.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Walter kept his attention directed at a pillow he was fumbling with, “how did you end up in this brothel?” He noticed Elizabeth from the corner of his eye wince at his question and Walter immediately felt regret.

“To keep a long story short, my parents wanted a son to continue the family name and couldn’t afford two children. They sold me to the owner of this place and I’ve been here ever since.” Walter’s eyes widened with horror.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been *working* since-“

“Oh, heavens, no,” she waved her hand, cutting him off. “The owner became like a father to me. This is my fifth day working. I recently turned twenty and he felt that was a good time for me to start. Most girls start as young as sixteen but he let me wait.” She twisted her dress in her hands. “Can I ask you something?” Walter nodded. “Why didn’t you want to buy time with me?”

“I’ve been coming to places like this for quite some time. I could tell you were new and I would rather not make a lasting impression on you that’s negative.” He dug into his pocket and gave her a small bag of coins. “For your time.” She stared at the bag, confused. “I hope to see you again one day, Elizabeth.” Walter slowly got up and walked out of the bedroom door only to run into Gryffen. His brother was staggering, desperately holding onto the walls to keep himself from stumbling over.

“Is there a girl in that room?” Walter nodded and before he knew what was happening, Gryffen drunkenly sprinted into Elizabeth’s room and slammed the door. Walter winced a little at the thought of his brother doing unspeakable things to that lovely girl but knew it wasn’t his fight. It’s not like he would ever see Elizabeth again anyways. Walter made his way back to the ship and passed out in his bed, dreaming of the timid girl in the blue dress.

The next morning, Walter jolted awake to start preparing the caravel for sailing as quickly as possible. As he got to the bottom of the stairs, he heard the softest giggle coming from the barrels by the hammocks. He squinted into the darkness of the hull, looking for the source. Finding nothing, he continued up the stairs to help the crew prepare the vessel for sea. Within twenty minutes, the ship was sailing towards her next destination. Walter looked out on the calm water below, thinking of Elizabeth, when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Come to the hull,” Gryffen whispered over Walter’s shoulder. You could hear the smile on his face. The brothers went down and Gryffen sprinted to the barrels behind the hammocks, smiling. To Walters’ horror, Elizabeth slowly appeared from behind the barrels. She was still wearing the same blue dress and smiled sleepily at Walter.

“What is she doing here?” Walter’s blood had gone cold and he was close to shaking.

“It’s so boring on this ship,” Gryffen sighed, sounding almost annoyed. “I thought it would be nice to bring her along. Plus, it seems like you both hit it off rather well last night.” Gryffen winked at his brother.

“You absolute bobolyne.” Walter spoke louder than intended but there was no stopping it now. “How could you have done this? You knew the rules.” With each word, Walter’s voice became louder and more shrill. Gryffen shrugged at this.

“What’s all that yelling?” Captain Ellerton had heard them and started making his way down the stairs into the hull. Walter stared at Gryffen with a mix of horror and rage. Captain Ellerton stared straight at Elizabeth once he got to the last step. “Who did this?” The captain’s voice sounded almost on the edge of tears. Gryffen finally stopped grinning. The captain, without another word, walked over to Elizabeth and grabbed her by the arm and began to drag her up the stairs. Elizabeth began to scream.

“What is he going to do?” Gryffen’s voice was shaking. Walter’s mouth had gone dry, preventing him from speaking. The brothers followed the captain up to the quarterdeck. The crew had stopped everything to watch, as this was the first time someone had ever brought a woman aboard.

“I tell you all every time we set out to never bring a female on board,” the captain’s voice had taken a sinister tone that Walter had never heard before. “They bring nothing but bad luck and distractions.” He focused his attention on Gryffen. “You forced me to do this.” Without skipping a beat, the captain yanked Elizabeth’s arm and flung her overboard. Walter fell to his knees. “Anyone who wants to help her can join her.” Walter didn’t want to see that beautiful girl struggling but also couldn’t defy the captain by trying to help her. Gryffen ran to the side of the ship, watching Elizabeth flounder helplessly in the waves below. The ship moved farther from her and Walter began to feel light-headed. The overwhelming guilt of having a hand in killing a young girl was too overwhelming. Darkness overcame his vision, causing his head to smack onto the wooden floor with a thud.

When Walter regained consciousness, he was in bed with Gryffen sobbing quietly by his bedside. Walter could feel the boat swaying due to extremely choppy waters, which was concerning. Gryffen looked up at his older brother, tears flowing down his cheeks.

“How long have I been out?” Walter rubbed the newly formed bump on his head.

“Never mind that.” Gryffen sounded scared. “Elizabeth is on board.” Walter furled his eyebrows, confused. “I now understand why we don’t bring women on board.” Gryffen bit his bottom lip to keep it from quivering. Above their heads, Walter realized there was screaming. He looked towards the door of the bedroom to see the other two beds piled in front of the door, keeping it shut. Walter screamed at his brother for an explanation but Gryffen looked as though his mind was a million miles away.

“After we put you to bed, we heard singing in the distance. It was the most beautiful singing coming from a girl on a rock. We thought we had found a real mermaid so Captain Ellerton took the dingy to see her.” Gryffen’s entire body began to shake. He looked up at Walter and quietly said “We watched her rip his head off with her teeth.” Walter’s face went pale. A thud was heard from above. “Elizabeth is a siren now. Me convincing her to come on board just for the captain to throw her into the waves gave her enough spite for the sea to transform her.” The boys heard someone coming down the staircase into the hull.

“Look, I’ll protect you. I always swore I-“

“Shut up.” Walter was taken aback by how calmly Gryffen said it. His brother wiped the last tear from his cheek. “I don’t need you to protect me. I’m done sitting in your shadow constantly.” Gryffen stood up, glaring at him. “I don’t need protection.”

“Why did you even start sailing?” Walter barely noticed that his hands were balled into fists and that his entire body trembled with a rage he had never felt before.

“To prove to mother and father that I’m just as good as you!” Gryffen’s voice was shrill now. “I wanted to show them that I can make money, too. I wanted to show that I’m strong and

brave.” He slowly slid his back down the wall opposite to Walter’s bed. “But all I’ve done is manage to kill an innocent girl...” Singing started from outside the barricaded door. It was truly mesmerizing and it was obvious that Gryffen was struggling to ignore the call. Walter jumped out of bed and started removing the barricade. He put his hand on the doorknob, turning back to his brother.

“Trust me.” Gryffen nodded slowly. Walter opened the door to see Elizabeth, who looked much different now. Her ribcage looked like gills and there were scales on her cheeks and arms. Her fingers developed a sort of webbing and her hair hung around her, intertwined with seaweeds and dripping salt water with every move she made. She sat precariously on her new, turquoise tail and her eyes widened at the sight of Walter.

“Where is he?” she said in a low voice. Walter, despite his fear, closed the bedroom door behind him.

“Listen to me, Elizabeth.” Walter tried to keep his composure as best as he could. “What Gryffen and the captain did to you was wrong. My brother...” he sighed. “He doesn’t always think things through. He’s impulsive and selfish, but killing him isn’t going to solve anything.” Elizabeth looked straight into Walter’s eyes, almost piercing into his soul. “He’s a young kid and he didn’t know what he was doing.” Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief.

“To be honest, I loved that night we spent together, laying in that tiny bedroom where we talked about anything and everything. It made me...” she gulped. “It made me fall in love with you. I had never had someone treat me like anything other than an object for their own personal gain except for the man that adopted me and now you. What your brother did to me after you left and then being the direct reason that I was left for dead is unforgivable.”

“I agree.” She seemed surprised at Walter’s response. “What he did was unforgivable but killing him won’t change what happened.” Walter bent down to Elizabeth’s level and gingerly placed his hand on her cheek, wincing slightly at the feeling of her scales. She smiled up at him then immediately frowned as though she had just remembered something.

“You won’t love me because I’m like this, I presume.” Her eyes began to fill with tears as she laughed at her own misery.

“I won’t love you if you exist for the sheer purpose of killing my brother.” Walter chuckled and she smiled in return. “Was there... anyone else you killed besides the captain?” She shook her head. “Then what was the thumping?” Elizabeth giggled and gestured to her tail.

“It’s hard getting around with no legs.” Walter laughed and picked her up, carrying her gently up the stairs. The crew had split up to hide in various places on the Pembroke so it was just the two of them in the moonlight. He sat Elizabeth up on the railing and steadied her by holding her hips.

“I’m sorry I lashed out,” Elizabeth said sheepishly, twirling her wet hair in between her webbed fingers.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what *did* he do to you once I left?” Elizabeth moved her hair from her neck and shoulders to reveal cuts all over her. Walter gasped.

“Women have no purpose in this world,” Gryffen said from behind him. “If a woman cannot please a man, she’s as good as dead.”

“So you planned to use her as a piece of meat.” Walter’s voice was deadpan. “You really have such little respect for women?” Walter turned his head to see Gryffen looking unphased.

“It’s not really about how much I respect women. It’s about getting what I want. I have been forced to do everything for mom and dad.” Gryffen scoffed at the idea, walking closer to the pair by the railing. “However, I do have more respect for women than I have for you, Walter. You’ve never been anything special so why have I always been forced to exist in your shadow? No longer will I allow that. Maybe leaving this wench for dead is just what I need to prove I’m better than you.” Walter’s heart stopped, hearing the man he once knew as his brother say such vile things. He turned his gaze towards Elizabeth, who simply raised an eyebrow at him. Walter nodded, knowing exactly what she was thinking.

Elizabeth grabbed Gryffen by the arm, jamming her nails into his flesh, and he screamed. Elizabeth smiled and began to fall backward into the sea, taking Gryffen along with her. Walter cautiously peered over the railing to watch Elizabeth dragging his younger brother deep into the depths of the sea. Walter quietly counted to himself, knowing that Gryffen’s best time for holding his breath was sixty seconds. At fifty-five seconds, the choppy waters came to a calm halt. Walter began to shake. *I promised my mother to protect my brother*, Walter thought as he gazed up into the parting clouds, *but that wasn’t my baby brother anymore. Please forgive me, mother. Please forgive me, Lord.*

The crew slowly began to come out of hiding and stared wide-eyed at Walter. Walter slowly shook his head and the crew lowered their heads. The first mate stepped forward, tipping his hat up.

“We’re cutting this voyage short,” he yelled to the crew. “We’re going back to East Anglia. You will receive double the pay for enduring this and in hopes that you return for the next voyage.”

Within a few weeks, the crew was back in East Anglia. As Walter stepped foot on land, he looked back out on the water knowing Gryffen was out there somewhere. In the distance, he saw a strange shape in the water. Before he could grasp what it was, a tail flung up into the air then went splashing back into the sea, almost as if it was waving goodbye.