



DARK TALES OF THE BRUCE ♦

# Le Griffon

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

### MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the cold grey waters off the Bruce Peninsula, out of the fog that rolls in over Tobermory and Georgian Bay, and it is the oldest ghost story on all these Great Lakes. This is the tale of Le Griffon, the very first sailing ship ever to cross the upper lakes, and the first ever to vanish from them without a trace. She sailed in the year 1679, Carol, three hundred and forty-some years gone, and by every account she is still out there somewhere on the bottom, or still under sail in the mist, trying to make a port she will never reach.

### CAROL

Sixteen seventy-nine. Oh, Marty, that is old, older than the country itself. A sailing ship on these lakes before there was anything else out here at all. Tell me, who on earth built her, and how did a ship come to be up above the falls in the first place?



#### **MARTY**

A Frenchman built her, Carol, and a bold and doomed one. His name was René-Robert Cavelier, the Sieur de La Salle, an explorer with a dream as big as the continent. He meant to open the whole western fur trade, to sail the inland seas that no European ship had ever touched. But there was Niagara, you see, that thundering wall of water, and no ship could ever climb it. So above the falls, on the banks of the Niagara River, La Salle's men felled the timber and laid the keel and built her right there in the wilderness, hammer and adze in the dead of a hard winter, with the Seneca people watching from the woods, uneasy at what these strangers were making.

#### **CAROL**

Building a whole ship in the raw forest, by hand, with the falls roaring below them. Marty, the nerve of it. And the name, Le Griffon, the griffin. Why did they call her after a creature out of a legend?



#### **MARTY**

For pride, Carol, and for a kind of magic. The griffin was on the coat of arms of Count Frontenac, the governor, La Salle's great patron, half eagle and half lion, the king of the birds joined to the king of the beasts. And La Salle, they say, swore he would make the griffin fly above the crows, meaning the Jesuits and the rivals who mocked him. So he carved a great snarling griffin for her figurehead, up at the bow, and he mounted seven small cannon along her sides. She was maybe sixty tons, Carol, a little square-rigged barque, tiny by the measure of the ocean, but on these lakes she was a floating cathedral, a wonder no one here had ever imagined.

#### **CAROL**

A carved griffin at the bow and cannon on her sides. Oh, I can just see her. And when she finally sailed, Marty, what did that look like, that first ship out on all that open fresh water?



#### MARTY

Like nothing the world had seen, Carol. In the August of 1679 they hauled her out and away she went, up Lake Erie, through the Detroit passage, out onto Lake Huron, sailing the very waters we look at from the Bruce. And she met her first storm on Huron, a savage one, and the sailors fell to their knees and prayed, all but the pilot, a great one-eyed mariner they called Luke the Dane, who cursed La Salle to his face for bringing them to die on a lake with no salt in it. But she rode it out, Carol. She came through and sailed on north and west, past Mackinac, down into Lake Michigan to the Green Bay, and everywhere the Indigenous peoples paddled out in their birchbark canoes to circle this floating island with wings, having never seen a sail in all their lives.

#### CAROL

The canoes coming out to meet her, a whole people seeing a sailing ship for the very first time. Marty, what a thing to witness. So she made it, then. She reached the far end of the lakes safe and sound. Where does the sorrow come into it?



#### **MARTY**

It comes on the eighteenth of September, Carol, at Green Bay. La Salle loaded her hold with a fortune in furs, a king's ransom in beaver pelts, because he was deep in debt and those furs were meant to save him. But La Salle himself did not sail home. He stayed behind to press on west by canoe, and he sent the Griffon back east without him, with just six men aboard and Luke the Dane at the helm to bring that fortune home. And as she weighed anchor, Carol, she fired a single farewell cannon, one flat boom rolling out across the bay, the smoke hanging on the water. The men on shore watched her small sails lean into a rising wind, watched her stand out into the lake toward a sky going black in the west. And that, Carol, was the last that any living soul ever saw of Le Griffon.

#### **CAROL**

The last anyone saw of her. Oh, Marty, that farewell cannon, that gives me a chill, like she was calling goodbye and no one knew it. A storm coming on and six men and that fortune. What happened to her out there?



#### **MARTY**

That, Carol, is the question that has haunted these lakes for three hundred and forty years, and no one can answer it. A great gale came down that night, one of those autumn storms that still sink ships on Huron and Michigan, and the Griffon sailed straight into the teeth of it and was never seen again. Not a mast, not a spar, not a body ever came certain to any shore. She simply went into the dark water and the dark water closed over her, ship and men and the whole fortune in furs, gone as if she had sailed clean off the edge of the world.

#### **CAROL**

Not a trace at all. Marty, how does a whole ship just disappear? Surely people had ideas, surely they whispered about what became of her and those poor men.



#### **MARTY**

Oh, they whispered, Carol, and they whisper still, and there are as many endings to this tale as there are firesides to tell it. The plain telling is that she foundered in the storm and sank with all hands, and that is likely the truth. But the sailors never liked a plain telling. Some said the one-eyed pilot and the crew turned mutineer, scuttled her, stole the furs and slipped away to vanish into the wilderness rich men. Some said an Indigenous war party caught them at anchor in the night and burned her to the waterline. Some said she struck a hidden reef in the fog, off Manitoulin, off the Bruce, and broke her back on the rocks. La Salle himself believed to his dying day that his own men had betrayed and robbed him. Nobody knows, Carol. Nobody has ever known.

#### **CAROL**

Every one of those endings is worse than the last. And has no one ever found her, Marty, in all this time? All these years and no one has laid eyes on her bones?



**MARTY**

Ah, Carol, that is the part that never dies. For three centuries the wreck-hunters have chased her. Every generation, somebody swears they have found the Griffon at last, a set of old timbers off the Bruce, an anchor near Manitoulin, a little wreck deep in Lake Michigan, and every time the experts come and shake their heads and say no, it is not certain, it is not her. She has been found a dozen times and never once for sure. She is the holy grail of these lakes, the first ship lost and the last one found, and maybe she never will be. Maybe she does not want to be found.

**CAROL**

Maybe she does not want to be found. Marty, that gave me shivers right up my arms. Do you mean the old sailors thought she was still out there, still somehow sailing?



#### **MARTY**

They did, Carol, and that is where I will leave you tonight. The old lake men swore that on the foggy nights, when the mist lies thick on Georgian Bay and you cannot see the length of your own boat, you may hear her first, a groan of timber and the crack of canvas, and then she comes, a little square-rigged ship under full sail with a griffin snarling at her bow, gliding silent through the fog with no lights and no sound of men, standing on and on toward a harbour she lost three hundred years ago and will never reach. So if you are ever out past Tobermory on a grey and foggy evening, friends, and you see a small old ship come sliding out of the mist under full canvas, do not hail her. Just let her pass. She is still trying to make her port. I'm Marty Shepard.

#### **CAROL**

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of those six men and their one-eyed pilot, and that little ship with the griffin at her bow, out on the black water with the storm coming down. Keep a light in the window for the ones still out on the lakes, be gentle with the old mysteries that were never meant to be solved, and always, always come back to the fire.

