

The Wyvern's Gyre

"It's hardly groundbreaking work..."

"Well, perhaps not to you," Albert said, adjusting his glasses further up his nose. Albert was thin and lithe with well-combed hair and a tweed suit that seemed like it was hanging from his scarecrow-ish frame. "But very few people have ever seen it up close! And now I have the chance to go...paid for by the university!"

"I'm sure the university will be all too happy to ship you off for a few weeks," Benedict scoffed, running his hand down his white beard. "Dean Valentine's face is still red after that whole debacle at the Benefactor's Dinner."

"And I apologized for that," Albert said, tucking a few books into his pack. "Water under the bridge, eh?"

"So they say, but make sure you come back by the end of your sabbatical. Valentine will be pleased to find some other plucky, young dragonology professor who doesn't bore the department donors to tears."

"The lady asked a question..."

"A yes or no question. No one ever asks for a lecture they aren't prepared for."

"I was--citing myself."

Benedict chuckled a little and leaned back in his chair. While Albert was the sole professor of the dragonology department, Benedict was head of the general sciences. He was a cheerful professor with a grandfatherly disposition that encouraged his teachers to consider alternatives before surrender. With a bit of a round belly and a suit that fit him well, the older professor shared Albert's love of the natural world. Benedict had pulled Albert out of the fires a few times and spared the younger man from the dean's wrath. 'Uppity' was a common descriptor, as well as 'enthusiastic' or 'spirited'. Albert's hunger for knowledge made the dean's blood boil. While most of the other departments were satisfied with a firm no, Albert almost always pushed for 'No, but...' to get his way. Benedict was a good teacher and managed to keep Albert out of serious trouble. This trip would be Albert's victory for the year.

"I still can't believe you don't want to come with me," Albert asked.

"I'm far too old and brittle to be out on the ocean for three weeks," Benedict laughed. "I'd much rather be in my apartment with a good book and a fine cup of tea."

"Books and tea get a little suffocating."

"I've had my share of excitement. My son and his daughter are coming for a visit with their little one and I don't doubt that will prove as exciting for me as seeing the Gyre will for you."

Albert grinned at the thought. The Wyvern's Gyre was an often observed phenomenon with little known about the reasons behind it. Wyverns would meet in smaller groups for mating and feeding, but it was during this very narrow window in the middle of June that wyverns of several clutches would all meet together. Mating seemed unlikely, as rival clutches would even set aside grudges for this spiraling flight. The wyverns would eat, but it didn't seem to be an especially rare resource that wouldn't be plentiful without the union in the skies. Albert had applied to view the event on behalf of the university. He had enough money to charter a boat and others in the department had been more than willing to offer whatever equipment he required. Most people were eager to be a footnote, assuming that Albert found anything.

On the first day, Albert went down to the docks, with nothing but a suitcase full of clothing and a steamer trunk for all his equipment. Captain Mercist, a tall woman with short hair and a cat-like face, was amicable to the idea.

"Been out there a few times," Captain Mercist said, helping Albert move his trunk down to the room he'd be calling home for the journey. "Tend to stay about a thousand feet off, if I can help it. Sure we'll be safe?"

"Several expeditions have been right under the Gyre before," Albert assured her. "The wyverns won't attack until they feel threatened and even then they're more likely to disperse."

"So long as I and my boat make it back to shore? I trust you. But if anything gets damaged? I'm charging extra...and that's for me or my boat."

The voyage was pleasant for the most part. A strong wind carried them through the water and Captain Mercist managed to avoid the worst of the storms. The first two days, Albert spent most of the time in his room battling sickness but was on deck by the third day. He cheerfully took photographs and notes for his marine biology cohorts. The crew didn't mind Albert's

eccentricities as long as he stayed out of the way, which was where Albert was most comfortable on the strange vessel. They spotted the first wyvern in the middle of the fifth day.

"Professor?" Captain Mercist called, looking at the sky through her telescope. "I could use an academic eye on this."

Albert rushed to the steering wheel and took the offered spyglass. He looked through the length of the tube and focused on the smudge until it became clear. It was a long, serpentine creature with a pair of avian-looking legs and two large bat wings with hooks at the joints. The neck was as long as the tail and the head had a ring of horns on the brow.

"Looks like a lone male," Albert said. "Four...five...six horns. Adolescent. Probably left his previous clutch and is searching alone."

"For what?" the helmsman asked. "Dinner?"

"Very doubtful," Albert said. "More likely a mate or another clutch to join. Nearly in his prime now, so he'll be a top contender for a female."

"So we're safe?"

"We're too small to worry him," Albert said. "In fact, it's not bad he's nearby. Wyverns are natural enemies of sea serpents, so having him flying nearby will keep the serpents from surfacing to attack."

"Splendid," the helmsman grunted. "Death from above or death from below...this voyage is a plethora of choices."

"Don't mind him," Captain Mercist said, walking down to the next level with Albert. "We're all very pleased with the expedition so far. I, for one, appreciate seeing a wyvern on journeys for the same reason."

"Do you have an interest in dragons?"

"Only as a casual observer," the captain laughed. "It's an old superstition that wyverns are good luck. Maybe their height in the pecking order will confirm that."

A few hours later, another wyvern appeared. This one was floating in the water with its wings outstretched and the long tail propelling it through the surf. The dragon didn't do much more than give the passing ship a cursory glance before shifting away as the vessel dared to get a little closer. Another pair drifted in the sky, soon followed by another set with a small clutch of

younglings. The wyverns grew more and more numerous to the point that Albert began to make out the shape of the Gyre on the horizon.

A vast column of reptilian creatures flew in lazy circles, some much higher up than others. The circle measured about a hundred feet across by Albert's best guess and there seemed to be no real rhyme or reason to the order. Clutches stayed close to each other, mated pairs closer and mothers looked over their young most of all. The wyverns would mostly drift in the circle, rarely flapping their wings to do much more than gain a little lost height.

"Steady on," Captain Mercist said when they were about five hundred feet away. "Hard to port and stay to the outside. Well, Professor, you wanted to see them in action. Now what?"

Albert could barely speak. The massive collection of wyverns was beautiful to watch. He could see matriarchs of clutches keeping other wyverns in line with a snarl. Younglings chased one another but settled with a huff from an annoyed adult. The adolescent they saw first was among their number, dark green scales glimmering with sea spray. He tilted and spiraled like a daredevil, his eyes set on impressing a golden female from a fairly large clutch. Albert didn't know what to make of it. All he knew was that it was beautiful.

"Professor?" Captain Mercist asked again. Her tone shook Albert out of his trance as he remembered that they would only be here for the day. He would have more time to remark on the beauty later. He was, after all, an academic. Let the poets weep while he defined the natural world.

The first step was photographing the event. It was a challenge to get all the dragons photographed and Albert knew most of the pictures would come out blurry. He felt dismayed until he saw a sailor had taken to sketching the event on a piece of paper. When Albert offered to buy it from him, the man only asked for time to make a copy. Albert next did his best to count the number of dragons present. It was a difficult task, but Albert estimated the number at five hundred and forty. He couldn't recall a collection of dragons quite so numerous. Now, the question was why.

As Albert took readings on the weather, the ocean, and the dragons themselves, the other sailors lost interest. Once they were comfortable that the wyverns wouldn't attack, they went

about their business. A few watched the event in rapt curiosity, but more went below deck to tend to their own business. It was calm as the noonday sun loomed overhead, but Albert was frantic.

"No strange weather conditions," he shook his head, "no special qualities to the ocean water...no apparent illness or mating rituals. They're just...there!"

"Albert," Captain Mercist offered, using his name for the first time in the entire journey, "maybe it's more than just one thing."

"What makes you say that?"

"Did you ever hear the story of the Mariner's Wyvern?"

"Can't say I have," Albert said, only half listening while he took more measurements.

"According to the story, a crew is out sailing when a fierce wyvern descends on their ship. The battle rages on with fire and wind, but the crew proves victorious. The wyvern plummets from the sky and falls into the ocean. And, the following day, more dragons came to the spot. The crew was prepared for another fight, but the wyverns only flew around where the dragon had died. It was only a handful, but the clutch stayed from morning until night, spiraling overhead until finally departing without further conflict. The next year? Those same dragons came back to this spot. And the year after and so on, with the group gaining more members each time."

"Are you suggesting that this is some kind of...religious observance?"

"Not as structured as that," Captain Mercist said. "They might not worship a god, but they must grieve. Maybe that's what this is. Generations of wyverns grieving a fallen hero."

"In the story, he seems like a villain. Besides, it doesn't make sense."

"And humans burying our dead in graveyards is so logical?" Captain Mercist smirked. "Sometimes...things are more than survival. That's what living is all about, right? Survival is important, but thriving is the ultimate sign of superiority. If all these dragons--generation after generation--can understand that there was a wyvern here who died many years ago? They're more intelligent than we understand."

"Quite the theory, Captain..."

"Just a casual observation," Captain Mercist said. "No different than any other supposition, I suppose."

After another hour spent under the Gyre, Albert could only gaze at the dragons as they looped around. The sun was set lower behind him, casting all the dragons in a dark orange glow. Albert had written down every observation he could think of: weather, numbers, coloration, even water conditions. After he'd filled a notebook, he settled for crossing his arms and watching the dragons for a bit. They didn't eat throughout the day, not even diving down low enough for a drink of seawater. Apart from a few rogue males, the clutches kept together. The Gyre still kept its secrets.

As the first stars glittered against the night sky, the Gyre started to loosen. Albert's curiosity picked up, but there was no noticeable shift in the clutches. Before the moon had started its crest above the horizon, the Gyre had splintered off. The wyverns scattered off to where they had come from, leaving the space with nothing for a prize.

Dismayed, Albert told Captain Mercist to return to port and retreated to his quarters. The next day, with a fresh bout of energy, Albert tackled his notes with vigor. When the sailor came with a copy of his illustration around lunch, Albert barely noticed. By the following night, Albert had yet to meet a reason for the event.

Late into the night, Albert was awake and staring at the sketch of the gyre. He could hear the low flaps of dragon wings and the low growls of the wyverns in the loops above. The smell of sea salt brought him back on deck and the dim lights in his room were like the sunset against the gyre. In the early hours of the morning, it came to him.

The next morning, Captain Mercist found Albert on deck with the sunrise with a cup of tea and a grin. "Well," Captain Mercist said, "you seem rather chipper."

"You were right."

"Normally, yes," Captain Mercist grinned. "Though I'm curious as to why..."

"It was a way to remember the dead," Albert said.

"The story?"

"More like...a census," Albert smiled. "The rogue males were the key. They went off with all the smaller clutches. Not only to eliminate competition but to regrow that clutch's population."

"Why meet all together?"

"I feel like that was the Mariner's Wyvern," Albert said. "If the story is true, then the other clutches would have come to fill the gap left by a male. Why should rogue males travel all over the world when they could all migrate to the same place?"

"So it's courtship? Why bring the young or mated wyverns?"

"The young need to know the way from a young age. But I think you're right that they do it to honor the dead. Elephants, crows...even dogs and cats will pay their respects to the dead. Maybe it started as something for the young bucks and the females, but it turned into something more ceremonial."

"Can you prove it?"

"I will," Albert said. "In time. But it makes the most sense."

"I hope to be there for the next gyre," Captain Mercist said, standing at the helm. "Just make sure I'm more than a footnote in your treatise."