

THE QUARRY

The Falcon

Emily Shaw

Nobody in Berlin knew where Herr Fischer found the items that were for sale in his shop. Not even Anikó knew where the merchandise came from and she'd worked at Herr Fischer's Antiques for almost two years. She'd heard virtually every single theory though; a fresh one entered the store whenever a new customer waltzed in through the revolving doors. *I heard he buys everything on the black market*, one lady had stated last week before purchasing a porcelain bowl. Someone, the other day, claimed that Herr Fischer must have had a liaison with aliens, after spotting an Egyptian sarcophagus propped against the wall. *After all*, the customer had commented in that flat tone everyone reserves only for reiterating the most basic of knowledge, *aliens did build the pyramids*.

But no matter how bizarre or mundane the theory was, the customer would always look at Anikó once they'd finished talking as if to say, *Well? Am I right?*

Anikó never gave her opinion, never indulged in their fantasies. She'd just respond to the customer's questions with a smile while silently assuming that Herr Fischer's antiques were nothing more than fakes. She retained that belief until the day she met the falcon.

It was waiting for her when she arrived at work one Sunday morning, perched in an antique laced cage. Herr Fischer had placed the cage up onto the counter top

and was studying it with a magnifying glass. His eye bulged through the circle of glass so large it looked like it was on the verge of popping out of his skull.

Herr Fischer tapped the side of the cage, lowering his magnifying glass. 'Recognise it?'

The bird was a slight thing. Dark circles framed its eyes so that the creature looked like it was wearing a permanent mask across its beak. When it lowered its head to peck at the bottom of the cage, Anikó caught a flash of its wings; crests of all different shades of brown melded together in a mosaic of feathers.

'It's a male red-footed falcon,' Anikó murmured. She cocked her head to the side, and the bird's gaze latched onto hers. They stared at each other for a moment, weighing up the situation they'd both found themselves in. 'They're only native to Eastern Europe and Asia. I used to see them all the time on my parents' farm in Hungary.'

'Never seen one before, personally,' Herr Fischer commented.

'Where did you find him?' Anikó tested, wondering whether or not he would ignore her.

'He found me,' Herr Fischer replied.

'What? Was he just sitting here, waiting for you to come in to work this morning?'

Herr Fischer scoffed, as if the answer was so obvious it didn't need conveying. 'Of course.'

Anikó considered his words. 'That's weird.'

'Is it?' Herr Fischer turned back to the falcon. 'But never mind. I want to show you his strange cry.'

He pursed his lips together and the sound of his raspy whistling filled the room. The bird perked up at the noise, craning back its neck and opening its tiny hooked beak.

Red-footed falcons don't sing. They screech and chatter; their throats incapable of making a tune that doesn't sound like static on a broken television. But for some reason, as soon as the falcon's call slipped out of its lungs and into the room, everything Anikó thought she knew about falcons shattered before her eyes.

The falcon's tune was fiercer than any grasp Anikó had ever felt. She could feel it inside of her, gliding down her spine and pressing against her skin. The noise rose and fell, twisted and turned; each note hanging in the air for a moment longer than it

ought to. Its song sounded like a mourner's wail, drenched in so much fresh pain that it could only belong to someone who had been stripped of all they cared about. Nothing that was happy could make such a noise.

After what felt like forever, the falcon's song faded into silence.

It took a few moments for Anikó to gather her thoughts and several more before she could speak again. 'I've heard red-footed falcons before,' she said, 'and none of them sounded like that.'

'It's an odd sound,' Herr Fischer mused. 'Most would call it ugly but I find a strange beauty in it.'

'Ugly?' Anikó echoed. 'Who would call that ugly?'

'It sounds a bit, you know—' Herr Fischer gave a vague gesture as he fumbled for the right words, '—*Screech, screech.*'

'You're joking, right?' Anikó said. 'That tune was—'

'Awful enough to make one's ears bleed?' Herr Fischer finished.

Anikó frowned, searching his face for any sign that he was joking—a smirk, an out-of-place frown. But his expression was blank. 'Why have it if it's so awful?'

Herr Fischer's eyes glinted, nodding at the collection of customers growing by the counter. 'I don't control what comes in to be sold any more than I control the customers who walk through the door.'

Soon the thought of the falcon receded to the back of her mind as Anikó continued her work, oscillating between punching numbers into the computer and wrapping purchased items in paper. Before long, the sun began to set, and the shop's oil lanterns spilt their halos of golden light across the store. Herr Fischer and all the other customers had left long ago, and now, Anikó was alone to the daily ritual of closing up the shop. She vacuumed the floors, counted the money in the cash register, and flipped the 'open' sign on the front door to 'closed'. When she was finally finished, she stood at the shop counter, hands on her hips, surveying her work.

But there was one thing that caught her eye as being unfinished.

The falcon was still perched on the counter top, waiting patiently inside its iron cage. Anikó bent down to get a closer look at it, hooking a finger through a gap in the metal lacework.

'You're a strange little thing,' she whispered.

The bird looked her straight in the eye as though it knew exactly where her consciousness lay. She'd never seen a bird stare straight into a person's eye.

‘How did you get all the way to Berlin?’ she continued. ‘Are you lost?’

As soon as the words left her mouth, Anikó’s gut felt a pulling sensation as if her internal moral code was alerting her that she was about to commit some heinous sin.

She glanced over her shoulder, checking that there was nobody watching her, but the only thing she could see in the store apart from the falcon were shadows. They covered the entire store in a heavy mist, blocking out all of her surroundings in grey.

She glanced back at the falcon. Around its cage, Herr Fischer had tied a strip of paper with the price €250 scrawled on it. Anikó’s hands fiddled with the note, flicking it back and forth between her fingertips.

And then, acting entirely on impulse, she grabbed the top handle of the cage and marched out the front door, only stopping to lock the shop up behind her.

She paused outside on the footpath, heart thrumming in her throat, restricting the air from entering her lungs. The streetlights outside were broken, caging Anikó and the falcon in darkness.

‘Well,’ she muttered to the falcon, ‘I may now be unemployed.’

With nowhere else to go, she began her walk home.

Anikó lived in a room that she’d found advertised on a telegraph pole two years ago when she first arrived in Berlin. It was nothing but four walls of red brick containing a bare mattress and a small desk. The light switch only worked if you punched it with your fist first, and there was a leak in the corner that dripped even when it wasn’t raining.

Normally when she returned home after a day of work, she’d go for a walk through the city, aching to be outside after being cooped up inside for so long. But today was different because she was no longer alone.

Anikó placed the bird’s cage on top of the desk and then collapsed onto her bed. She watched as the falcon took in its new surroundings, cocking its head as it studied the steady *drip drip* of the leak in the corner.

As she lay there, studying the falcon, her mobile phone pinged from within her pocket. And then, after not even a minute of silence, the familiar sound pinged again and again. It was like an agitated child begging for attention, whining and crying and pulling at her with determined hands.

Lazily, she drew out her phone to glance at the messages that had appeared on her screen.

Message One

7:15pm

Anikó, *hogyan ván Berlin?* Thank you so much for sending the money last week. The farm has been looking much better these past few months.

Message Two

7:16pm

We all miss you.

As soon as her eyes finished glancing over the words, a heavy feeling grew in her chest as something lodged itself between her ribs. *Heimweh*, Anikó thought—it was a slightly different word than *homesick*.

Heimweh was home pain.

That was when the falcon began to sing. Its voice was so soft at first; Anikó could barely hear it over her thoughts, but with each note it rendered, its tune grew into a crescendo, building itself up so that it drowned out the outside world. The song was a coloniser; it had lodged itself into her brain and was claiming every single synapse as its own. She couldn't fight it, couldn't stop it, and so she did the only thing she could do.

'Stop,' Anikó commanded.

The bird stopped.

Anikó stood up and walked over to the cage, hooking her index finger through the metal bar. The bird studied the intruding finger as if deciding whether or not it was edible.

'How did you get here, *kis solyóm?*' she asked.

The falcon ruffled its feathers as if preparing for flight but then quickly stopped, realising its caged surroundings.

Anikó's hands dropped to the cage's lock. It was a traditional antique padlock, and she could feel its rust prickling her fingertips.

She'd unlocked a similar padlock once before.

It had been on a night when Anikó was nine years old. Another blackout had choked all of the power out of her family's home, and so she had been sent to bed early. As she lay beneath her blanket, she noticed an eerie cry crawling in through her bedroom window. At first she had mistaken it for an illusion, a kind of hunger induced hallucination—food on the farm was scarce—but the noise continued to grow louder and louder, completely derailing the possibility for sleep.

She pulled herself out of bed, crept out of the house and followed the noise, eventually finding herself standing outside the farm's barn. But tonight, the barn was different. Its wooden frame was alive—shaking and heaving, coughing and rattling as if it had caught the flu.

Something was inside.

With curious fingers, she slid open the barn's lock, but as soon as the door sprung open, she realised that she'd just broken a spillway.

A flood of falcons flew out of the barn. There were thousands of them, tearing through the air, crying out into the night. The force of them threw her to the ground and she lay there for what seemed like hours, feeling their feathers beat against her skin, their claws scrape down her back.

The next morning, she showed her mother the lesions.

'It was just a dream. After all, red-footed falcons aren't nocturnal,' her mother declared, rubbing cream across Anikó's skin. In the bathroom mirror, Anikó watched as her open wounds ate the antiseptic. 'You must have scratched yourself in your sleep.'

The memory of the antiseptic's sting sent a shiver across Anikó's old scars. She'd forgotten her mother's touch, but she hadn't forgotten the burn of freshly carved wounds.

Frowning, her gaze fell back to the lock.

Anikó's brain ordered her fingers to open the cage but her nervous system refused to carry the order down to her hands. She sat there, paralysed, staring at a breed of falcon that she hadn't seen in years.

Anikó groaned, pushing her body off the desk so that she collapsed head first onto her mattress.

When Anikó woke up the next day, sunlight was pouring in through the window, dripping down the curtains and onto her bed. She blinked. Through the open window, she could hear cars beeping and pedestrians chatting and trees rustling. But there was one sound that was very much absent. Frowning, her eyes scanned the room, trying to find what was different. When her gaze settled on the birdcage, her pulse stopped.

The cage was empty.

Even though Herr Fischer's Antiques opened every day at 9 o'clock in the morning, Anikó always arrived five minutes earlier, and today was no exception.

Herr Fischer was already balancing the cash register when she approached him. He didn't glance up when the doorbell announced her entrance, nor did his body give any sort of indication that he noticed her.

Anikó stood awkwardly opposite the counter, shifting her weight between her feet.

'You've noticed the falcon is missing,' she commented, feeling a blush creep up her neck.

Herr Fischer didn't look at her. 'I thought it wouldn't be here for longer than a day.'

'Are you angry?'

'Why would I be angry?' Herr Fischer finally glanced up. 'I wondered whether the falcon was for you. You were the only one who could hear its true song, am I correct?'

'Why would someone deliver a falcon for *me*?'

Herr Fischer exhaled, giving Anikó a thoughtful frown. 'This shop has the habit of giving me just what I need. I assumed it would eventually do the same for you.'

Anikó gaped. ‘You mean ... you need things to sell so the store just *gives* them to you? Straight out of thin air?’

‘Must I repeat myself?’ Herr Fischer replied, turning back to the cash register. ‘Now close your mouth and get to work before a bug flies into it.’

Still reeling, Anikó did as Herr Fischer asked. But just as she was about to flip the shop’s ‘closed’ sign over so it would read ‘open’, she noticed something outside.

Sitting on a skeletal tree lodged into the sidewalk outside was a bird. It had familiar streaks running down its back; different shades of brown creating a mosaic of perfectly arranged feathers. The falcon studied her with curious eyes.

‘It’s a long way to Hungary,’ Anikó murmured. ‘You’d better start flying.’

Herr Fischer was polishing the countertop when he heard the doorbell chime announcing someone’s exit. Reflexively, he glanced up just as Anikó stepped through the doorway and onto the sidewalk. He blinked—only for a second—but when he reopened his eyes, the street outside the store was empty.

He smiled.