

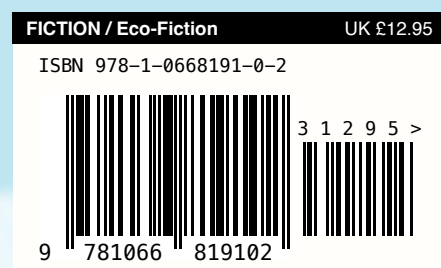


Yaz & Beaky, 4th August, 2020.

*Based on the true story of hand-rearing
common swift chicks during a global pandemic.*

Locked down in the heart of the Peak District with no experience caring for injured birds and no one to call for help, a married couple embarks on a frantic and heartbreaking mission to nurse two malnourished swifts back to health. While acting as surrogate parents, the couple discuss and imagine the incredible migration one tiny swift will take when fully fledged. A perilous nonstop solo flight of over seven thousand miles to the African continent.

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ADVENTURES of BROKEN BEAK

TIDESWELL to TANZANIA

Mat Dale



Based on a true story.

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Illustrated by
Mat Dale



**HUMAN
BEING**

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FOR CHLOË

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Author’s Note

In the Peak District village of Tideswell, at the height of a pandemic, a common swift chick nesting high in the eaves of our neighbour's roof leapt, or fell depending on your point of view, from its natural nest. The neighbour informed my wife, Chloe, that a swift chick was on their patio, huddling by an ornate chimney pot. We used a tall ladder to place the tiny bird safely back in its nest, hoping the parents would care for their offspring. They did not, and the next morning the chick jumped again, followed a day later by its more cautious sibling.

Chloe and I had no knowledge or experience in caring for common swift chicks, and we were unable to contact anyone with these specific skills. Because of a global pandemic, around half of the planet's human population was under some form of lockdown, and our phone calls were diverted to answering services that were already full.

The idea for this book began to ferment soon after those febrile times subsided. Some kind of picture book. Pencil sketches were made based on photographs taken during the chaos of caring for the chicks. The sketches were accompanied by a few notes on the experience of hand-rearing the chicks. Notes that could be useful to other unsuspecting newbie swift carers. There is care information, website links, and emergency contacts for some remarkable humans at the back of this book.

Pencil sketches continued, and so did a nagging thought on what common swifts get up to once they fledge. Soon, the notes took over the sketches, and frankly, got out of hand for someone more at home in the visual arts.

The first four chapters of this book are based on actual events, lightly embellished, of myself and Chloe hand-rearing the swift chicks, a rollercoaster ride of caffeine-fuelled highs and heartbreaking lows. The following fifteen chapters are a love letter from a hobbyist. My dreams of what one of the swifts may get up to on his migration, propped up by interesting facts about how and why common swifts migrate to the African continent. The imagined and dramatised action draws on a variety of published material, scientific and otherwise, as well as on the actual flyways swifts use to reach Sub-Saharan Africa. Please excuse inaccuracies or out-of-date information. Research into bird migration is moving fast. I am no ornithologist, and I have kept the statistics to a minimum.

Peppered throughout the book are pencil drawings of the most enigmatic, aerobatic, and fastest bird in level flight, not to mention one of the oldest bird orders on the planet. Greeting cards and limited prints will be available at humanbeing.co.uk.

The story also accommodates some tangents, questionable puns and grumbles. Especially about feet and misidentification of swifts. Even my computer's spell checker kept trying to change 'swift' to 'swallow', and 'swan' for crying out loud!

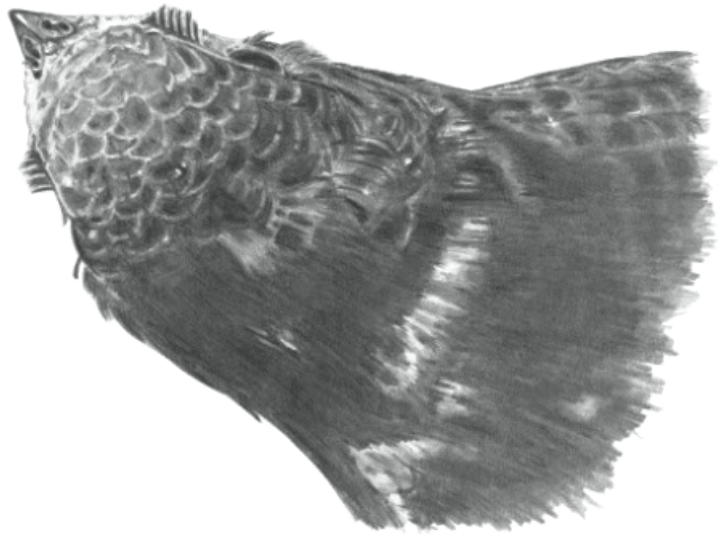
Wherever possible, human names, geographical locations, historical accounts and specific dates are obscured or alluded to. The intention is not to offend, but an attempt to slightly disorient and put the reader on more equal footing, or wing, with the swift. You see, the questionable puns have already started. Try to treat the missing information as a kind of pub quiz. However, a full list of references is provided at the back of the book. If the tone feels condescending or didactic at times, that is not the intention. I was learning a great deal during the writing process, and am simply excited to share every new discovery, however obtuse and cryptic they may seem.

Foremost, this story is about the remarkable and dangerous adventure of a tiny bird trying to survive against the odds. It is a swift's eye view of life on the wing. An airborne travel log, told in simple language, of a young swift's first attempt to fly solo over seven thousand miles across two continents and one of Earth's greatest land-based barriers.

And remember, the common swift is just one of billions of migratory birds attempting such an awe-inspiring journey twice every year, and with a favourable wind, for their entire lives.

M.D.

Tideswell, 2026



Chapter One

FREE FALL

A squidgy pink chick is trapped inside a silky membrane. The membrane is encased in a grape-sized eggshell. Vessels drawing air from the shell's surface into the chick's bloodstream are shutting down. The chick is being starved of oxygen.



The chick's sister wriggles her head under a stubby featherless wing. She jabs at her tough membrane with an egg tooth. A tiny, sharp horn on the tip of her beak. On the other side of her membrane sits an air sac, plump with oxygen. She jabs, 'pipping' at the membrane. It stretches but does not yield. She jabs again. The membrane pops. Air whooshes over the chick, and she gasps her first breath.

Pipped free of his white shell, Little Brother lies squished under Big Sister. The naked hatchlings are exhausted and malnourished. They huddle together to keep warm in a shallow cup-shaped nest. A nest perched on a musty oak beam. It is made of feathers, pink petals, and black cat fur. This floating detritus is caught by the chick's parents and fused together with their saliva.

Rain pitter-patters close on wonky roof tiles above the nest. Whitish dew clings to the underside of the tiles. Water droplets push through cracks and trickle down the rafters. A small dark bird darts through a tiny hole into the stuffy attic. It clatters over the chicks and slams into a sloping oak rafter. Big Sister cranes her blind, bug-eyed head and yawns. Her short, broad beak opens wide, revealing an immense pink mucous mouth. The small dark bird is an adult common swift. She is the chick's mother. Mother shoves her beak inside Big Sister's gaping mouth and disgorges a ball of insects bound with saliva. The ball, sometimes called a bolus, is rich in calcium, iron, potassium, and magnesium. These minerals are essential for the chick's growth. Mother has some bolus left in her throat. She gives it to Little Brother.

The chick's mother is sleek with dark brown feathers. Some say she is superficially similar to a barn swallow. One difference is that common swifts have a white throat. During flight, it can be seen bulging with hundreds of airborne insects. However, this year, summer is struggling. The mercurial climate is swinging from something like clement to cold and damp. Insects are harder to find. Mother picks up a piece of broken shell in her beak and shuffles to the attic hole. She squeezes through and drops out of sight. Moments later, the siblings' father barrels into the nest. Again, Big Sister gets the lion's share of the insect bolus.

Every day, before dawn, the sightless chicks listen to their parents scabble from the nest. Today, the parents flew hundreds of miles to avoid bad weather and to hunt tens of thousands of insects. After dusk, they found their way home. Now they huddle with their chicks, keeping them warm as rain drums the wonky roof tiles. Common swifts avoid the worst of heavy downpours, when rain keeps the insects below the hedgerow. Swifts are the only bird species on the chick's island to fly hundreds of miles a day just to circumnavigate thunderstorms in search of insects. However, if this short breeding season remains a washout, many common swifts will leave early for the African continent.

It is eleven days since the chicks hatched. Big Sister opened her eyes yesterday. Little Brother is opening his for the first time. He spies his new world: clumpy webs dangle from rotted oak rafters, and wisps of fibrous insulation whirl on the breeze over a dusty attic floor. Poking from Big Sister's wrinkly pink skin are some ugly black spiny pins. She has started to sprout quills of pennaceous feathers. The chicks' mother clatters into the attic. Little Brother clumsily cranes his head. Mother clambers over him and disgorges a smaller insect bolus inside Big Sister's throat.



There is no sign of Father this week. Mother is feeding, preening, and huddling both chicks at night. On top of all this, she must build up her own strength. An autumn migration to the African continent is only weeks away. The swift family listen to the incessant chattering of birds outside their attic, accompanied by the distant chiming of large cast bronze bells. Much closer is a loud burst of metal drilling into stone, reverberating through the attic. Mother and chicks freeze. Another burst. Mother scrabbles over her chicks and drops out of the nest hole. Days pass, and she does not return. Night after night, rain pelts down on the crooked roof tiles.

After several rainy nights, another dawn starts to break. Dim sunlight pushing through the tiny attic hole brings a touch of warmth to the cold chicks. Big Sister stirs from her slumber, flops out of the cup nest, and shuffles over to the nest hole. Little Brother remains rooted, watching his sister squeeze through the hole, her dark tail feathers flitting as she drops out of sight.

The following day, as the incessant drumming of rain on roof tiles finally fades, Little Brother claws listlessly out of the cup nest and flops headfirst onto the musty oak beam. The swift chick gathers himself and then waddles towards the attic hole, snagging a tuft of insulation on his left foot as he goes. It can be a real problem if a swift becomes entangled in loose insulation. This stuff can cause severe nasal and eye damage. The tiny swift's claws scratch on the oak beam as he scrabbles to reach the hole.

Little Brother squeezes his fluffy body between crumbling limestone and rotting wood. This is a perfectly worn gap through which generations of common swifts have wriggled. The chick peers out from under the eaves of the grey tiled roof. He is blasted by a gust of fresh air. Little Brother blinks in the harsh sunlight. Below is a flagstone patio and a small rear garden.

The garden is one of a row of six, separated by pine picket fences. A tall coniferous hedge, glistening with morning dew, runs along the gardens' bottom edge. Each manicured lawn belongs to a cottage, and all six cottages sit under the roof of an old school. The building was made from thick limestone over a hundred years ago, and common swifts have used this building for decades, launching over the heads of children playing in what was the schoolyard, now thinly buried beneath strips of turf. Every so often, a child would stop, raise a hand, and shield their eyes from the sun. They just wanted a glimpse of the crescent-shaped swift silhouettes wheeling and screaming overhead.

A broad tree towers over the gable end of the old school. A wych elm, planted by the schoolchildren long ago. With thick, grey-brown, furrowed bark and large, toothed-edged oval leaves, the elm has weathered a century of strengthening storms and heatwaves. This tree is also a rare survivor. A fungal disease felled most of the elms in this region around sixty years ago. The disease, believed to be carried from Asia by a certain beetle, still wreaks havoc today. Further north, one of the oldest wych elms on Earth, dating to the high medieval period, was recently felled by the disease.

Perched on her left leg in the crown of the old school wych elm is a common raven. Her dark, iridescent feathers glisten in the morning sun. The bird keeps watch over a village of limestone houses, hemmed by green hills and higgledy-piggledy dry stone walls, snaking onto purplish-brown moors.

Based on a true story.

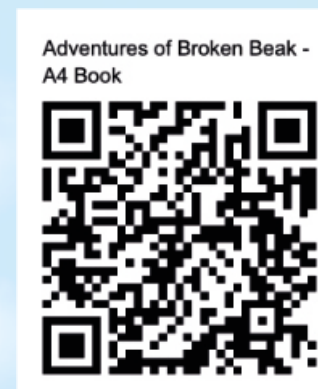
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LAND *of* GIANTS

Inside one of the cottages, Steven the black cat blunders through his front door cat flap with the swift chick clamped in his jaws, and meanders across the red kitchen tiles. Music from the Hi-Fi is resonating around the kitchen. A soft, deep, shimmering string melody, accompanied by a beautiful female voice singing in her native language about a hero who cannot use his legs. Steven drops the swift chick and licks its underbelly. At this point, a sporty woman with red hair and green eyes bounds into the kitchen, humming loudly, smothering moisturising oil on her face. She unwittingly tramples the cat, deftly side-stomps the chick and screams at the top of her lungs. Steven saunters away. This is not his first trampling. Sporty composes herself, and with all the ease of a child, plops down into a squatting position and gently scoops up the tiny ball of dark feathers into her warm, oily hands.

In the cottage's cosy loft-converted bedroom, hunched over a tiny pine computer desk, is Sporty's big, balding husband. He's wearing a blue fluffy bathrobe, reading glasses and a surgical glove on his left hand. Big Man awkwardly examines the lifeless chick. Mercifully, Steven is a lazy cat, and there are no visible puncture wounds in the chick's flesh. Surprisingly, the chick's eyes are not sunken, and the inside of his mouth is pink, not greyish white, which would indicate acute dehydration. Big Man places the common swift in a small, shallow bowl, perched on a set of silver digital scales. Sporty squints at her phone, searching the internet to find how to age the chick. Best guess is around thirty days. The swift weighs the same as a large plump strawberry, and if Sporty is correct, this little ball of feathers is half the weight he should be.

Big Man gently holds the common swift in his gloved left hand, and with the other, pipettes a droplet of lukewarm water onto the side of the chick's beak. He is careful not to flood the nasal cavities on the bird's upper beak. Sporty makes a 'peeping' sound. The chick yaps down the droplet, opens his eyes, and replies with a 'peep'. Gently wiping a cotton bud alongside the bird's beak also works well, but it's important not to lay the chick on its back, or the bird could choke and suffocate. It is also important not to panic when a hideous gang of six-legged parasites crawl from under the chick's wings to rest on the back of Big Man's warm hands. Seed-eating birds could crush tough parasites like these, but a swift's beak is not up to the job. Sporty uses a pair of her medical tweezers to hesitantly pluck the critters away and squish them onto a kitchen towel.

Big Man carefully wraps the chick in a small, soft, black linen cloth, and with the forefinger of the gloved left hand holding the bird, he calms the swift by softly preening his throat. Using a disinfected nail on the middle finger of his free right hand, Big Man clumsily prises open the bird's beak. To keep

the beak open, the gloved forefinger is wedged into the side of the chick's gaping mouth. With another pair of Sporty's long, blunt tweezers, Big Man selects one of four headless wax moth larvae from a petit love heart-patterned saucer on his desk. Replicating how Mother fed her offspring, Big Man inserts the moth larva down the swift's throat, then removes his fat, gloved finger from the chick's mouth. Little brother shivers, cocks his head, and stares up at Big Man. A few more larvae down the hatch, and Big Man gently preens Little Brother's feathers with one of his watercolour brushes. He lowers the chick into a blue storage box at the bottom of the couple's oak bedstead that has been deliberately placed out of direct sunlight.

Little Brother studies the bright light flooding in through a nearby window, a modest rectangular skylight, fitted vertically into the sloping bedroom ceiling. His only view of the outside world. The chick is mesmerised by a crystal hanging from the skylight on a piece of nylon fishing line. It's scattering rainbow light around the room. Inside his temporary home of the storage box, Little Brother rests on a shallow cup-shaped nest. A nest the couple hastily constructed from a tapas dish and some soft linen cloths held together, not with their own saliva, but with an elastic band. Huddled in the dish next to the swift chick is his sister. Soon after she fell from the nest, the neighbour found her and called Sporty.

The couple have never before hand-reared common swift chicks. They once fed lettuce to an escaped floppy-eared rabbit that would hop through Steven's cat flap and settle in the living room to watch television. Common swifts are very difficult to hand-rear successfully, and it is best to find an expert to take on their rehabilitation. However, a human pandemic is raging across the planet. The couple telephoned all animal rescue centres, veterinary clinics, and dedicated swift carers. None of their calls were answered, and all answering machines were full.



Based on a true story.

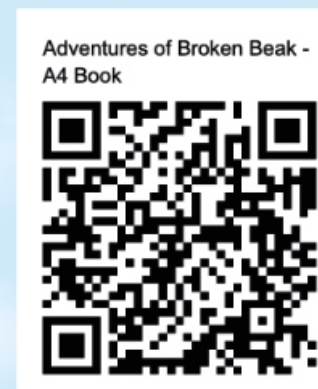
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YOUNG CONTINENT

Beaky hears a few high-pitched 'pee-pee-pee' sounds from a 'cast' of hobbies, thankfully a small cast, circling and preparing to use the thermals for their super flyway sea crossing. The young swift ascends, thrusts out over the Strait and in under half an hour, he's halfway across.

With the sun rising on his left side, Beaky cocks his head and spots a human clad in a wetsuit, swimming alone in the choppy waters of what is another busy shipping lane. The floating human, and hundreds of triumphant swimmers before him, all follow in the wake of the first known human to swim the Strait nearly one hundred years ago. A young woman, who six months before conquering this strait of water, also became the first woman to swim the channel just south of Beaky's island. The woman swam this Strait in winter wearing a woollen swimsuit, battling unpredictable currents, plummeting temperatures, and fog. During a previous attempt, she nearly drowned in a whirlpool.

It is thought that our kissing cousins, the Neanderthals, were good swimmers, and evidence from those caves suggests they hunted seafood and marine mammals, such as monk seals and dolphins. Did Neanderthals cross the Strait to the African continent? Tempting, but the evidence says otherwise.

From outer space, the two continents on either side of the Strait look like they're puckering up for a kiss. Beaky makes land on the southern pucker, the African continent, and flies straight past a proud mountain, a jebel twice the height of its twin pillar, the Neanderthals called home. This jebel is named after a medieval commander who raided, plundered and went on to conquer most of the peninsula. Beaky has just spent the last week flying down. Unlike the medieval conqueror who sailed to Beaky's Island, this commander from the African continent did not have a wife to build him a ship, but it's said he did set fire to his sailing fleet once his army made landfall, thus preventing them from retreating. You probably know this version even without names and dates. However, it is probably an apocryphal story as the fleet was composed of valuable trade ships that the commander borrowed from a friend who had a score to settle with a king across the Strait.

A hundred and fifty years after the commander's successful conquest, an inventor living on the peninsula decided to launch himself from the wall of one of those exquisitely decorated medieval palaces where swifts make their nests. He was inspired by the peninsula's largest birds, a species he revered and called 'Lords of the Air'. The inventor would study this 'Venue' of black vultures gliding effortlessly as they used updrafts on the slopes near his home. In his sixties, the larger-than-life inventor clothed himself in feathers fastened to light coloured silk, and spread for himself two wings of calculated width, with which he was able to rise into the air. He moved through the air, circled and landed in a place far from where he had departed, very badly on his tailbone. Afterwards, the inventor noted that he had not taken into account that, when landing, real birds do so on their 'tails-heads'.

This leap of science happened well over six hundred years before the Renaissance polymath, who shall not be named, sketched his glider without steering, making the larger-than-life inventor the first recorded human to attempt 'gliding flight'. The feathered flying human is also credited with inventing the reading stone, a hemispherical corrective lens crafted from rock crystal and placed over text to magnify the letters. This led to the invention of spectacles, a pair of which, Sporty should really invest in, if she wants to read the small print on her vitamin tubs. The larger-than-life inventor also created a room in his house that simulated stars, clouds, thunder and lightning. For this, he was accused of sorcery.

Falling in behind Beaky is a scimitar-shaped silhouette soaring across the rising run. The juvenile swift banks away from the falcon and flies over the northwestern edge of his new African continent. Considered the oldest inhabited continent and often called the "Cradle of Humanity", the median human age on this landmass is just nineteen years old, making it also the youngest continent on Earth.

Beaky thrusts forward but struggles to gain speed as he tries to lose the falcon now on his tail. The juvenile passes over the heads of a group of young Western musicians. In a region with a long history of attracting artists from the West, seventy or so years ago, a famous playwright with a handsome moustache and fond of the culture here, who shall also not be named to keep things fair and hopefully fun, once mused about a bird without legs. A bird that belonged nowhere and spent an entire life on the wing. In the writer's play, his protagonist, a guitar-plucking drifter, speaks passionately about a bird that spreads its wings and goes to sleep on the wind. A bird that is never to set foot on this earth except when it dies. The drifter knows this because he saw one die and fall to earth, and he held it in the palm of his hand. A bird that never sets foot on the earth and spends its entire life on the wing? What could it be? Another character in the play believes nothing living has even been that free, and the bird only exists in the guitar player's imagination.

The hobby bearing down on Beaky is definitely not in the common swift's imagination. Beaky tries to thrust further west, then south, away from the hobby. The birds head into the airspace above an international airport, where a silver jeep with an amber beacon flashing on its roof is parked at the end of the runway, right next to the ocean. Perched on the jeep's wing mirror is a stocky, two-foot-tall, ghostly white bird, wearing a leather hood over its head and eyes. Beaky darts across the runway with the hobby now hot on his tail. A young man wearing a baseball cap, sunglasses and a hi-vis tabard gets out of the silver jeep and leans against its bonnet. The man's left hand is gloved with a large brown leather gauntlet. He gazes wearily west at the early morning ocean. Somewhere over the horizon is a delayed inbound plane carrying jet-lagged passengers.

Big man has only recently learned that migratory birds like Beaky do not suffer from 'bird-lag', but something is definitely wrong with the young swift. He's slowing down as he doubles back across the runway, trying to shake off the hobby. Beaky darts left then right, to 'Hoodwink' his pursuer.

The young man removes the leather hood from the white falcon perched on his wing mirror, and she immediately takes flight. Her name is Freyja, a gyrfalcon '*Falco rusticolus*', the largest falcon on the

planet. Big Man has also recently learned, as with many facts in this story, that 'hoodwink' refers to the leather hood just removed from Freyja's head. A hood that is supposed to calm the raptor by fooling her into thinking it is nighttime. The baseball-capped Falconer in charge of Freyja is pretty much using the same techniques Tideswell's warrior chief would have been familiar with.

As we know, Falconry is the practice of hunting small wild animals with a trained bird of prey, a practice that is believed to date back thousands of years. No one really knows its origin, although Big Man has got it into his head that the birds are training the humans. Raptors, such as falcons and hawks, are mostly used for hunting, but sometimes vultures, eagles, and owls. It's interesting to note that a raptor is defined as a bird that grasps prey with its feet, and almost any type of raptor could be trained. Some have considered training the smart, sociable raven, which occasionally hunts small live prey, and the clever bird has even been given an honorary title of 'Raptor' by some. However, for the most part, they clearly prefer impersonations, riding snow sledges, and flying upside down.

Freyja is flying straight for Beaky and the hobby. The six-year-old gyrfalcon does not normally visit the African continent, but she's on loan and had just finished her nightshift flying through the cooler night air when her handler got a call for one last job. Apparently, 'planes striking birds' happen at low and high altitudes, day and night, and during an aeroplane's take-off and landing. And the risk of a strike is obviously much higher when millions of birds are following their ancient migratory flyways during spring and autumn. In one region on Beaky's first continent, he's just left behind, thirty per cent of 'plane striking bird' incidents involve swallows and swifts. These strikes are heavily underreported because there is usually not enough of the bird left to identify.

Many birds easily outsmart human inventions meant to disperse flocks around airports, so this is where the great white shark of the sky, Freyja, comes in. She is simply impossible to ignore. The hobby closing in on Beaky is twice the size of him, weighs five times as much, and is known for its ability to outfly, catch and eat a swift. Hot on the hobby's tail, Freyja is more than double the hobby's size, weighs ten times as much, and can carry prey twice her own size. The equivalent of an average human lifting a wildebeest, before attempting to fly off with it.

The Falconer is becoming increasingly 'fed up', another Falconry term that tickled Big Man. Like Beaky and Yaz filling up with crickets and wax moth larvae, Freyja will gorge until she is literally fed up to the throat. She will then look bored and refuse to do anything. Big Man can relate to this. The Falconer watches with 'bated breath' as Freyja chases the hobby out over the beach at the end of the runway. Beaky sees his chance to escape, banks and flies south along the beach before drifting inland on a cooling sea breeze. The ghostly white gyrfalcon continues to pursue the hobby out to sea.

Freyja learned to hunt as a young adult in her natural habitat, the high Arctic, where she laid her eggs and endured temperatures of minus fifty degrees centigrade. Because she learned to hunt on her own, she's considered more powerful, self-sufficient and a better hunter, earning her the epithet 'Haggard'. She did all this before being trapped, along with her brother. The siblings were drugged,

stuffed into a postal tube, and illegally shipped to a Middle Eastern Prince who bartered discounted crude oil for the birds.

The Falconer works for a raptor rescue charity that saved Freyja from this particular fate. Her brother's whereabouts are still unknown. The young man swings a long rope above his head with a piece of meat attached to the end, a 'Lure' used to, well, lure Freyja back to him. She's not paying attention. The man obviously assumed he had Freyja 'under the thumb', but it appears she has him 'wrapped around her little finger', sorry, claw. Both these terms refer to the leather straps, or jesses, attached to Freya's legs, which should be looped around the Falconer's gauntlet to restrain her. The young man pulls his baseball cap low over his eyes and gets back into his jeep to wait for her.



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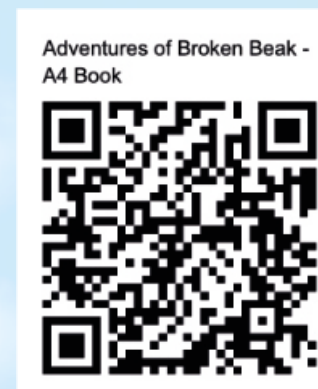
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