

The Channel 24 Chronicles

perched for
PROGRESS

M. N. Kollar



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This book is dedicated to my husband, Brian and my children, Sydney, Zachary, and Sean. This book is not dedicated to my cat, Ruby, because she always sat on my research notes.

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I would like to thank all the brave, dedicated members of NASA, both on the ground and in space. This book is only possible because they reached for the stars.

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PROLOGUE

James had a stunning view of the rocket launch from the airport control tower. He would occasionally glance at the radar even though he knew 'his' planes would not be in the airspace, but he was always vigilant for lawbreakers. Fresh out of controller school, eager to learn and anxious to please, he asked for all the night shifts and any days that no one else wanted. The airstrip he controlled was tiny now, but he knew it was going to grow into something amazing. Even better, it put him less than thirty miles from rockets being launched into outer space. This was a dream come true.

The sleeves on his crisp, white shirt were rolled up for no other reason than he thought it made him look like he was ready for business. Now he wished his sleeves were down because the hairs on his arms were standing up, pulling at his skin. The air was electric.

He would remember this night for the rest of his life and already found himself looking forward to sharing events like it with his young son when he was old enough to appreciate them.



Astrid opened her sleepy eyes and saw the blaze of light shoot straight up into the darkness, going higher than she knew any bird could go. A deep rumbling sound reached the nest, causing most of her family to stir but not awaken. Her tiny beak hung open as she watched the huge, bright bird cross the sky. Her father's eyes opened for only a moment. If her father was not concerned about the strange light or noise, then neither was she. Later. . .she would ask later. Her lids fluttered closed.



CHAPTER 1 THE FEATHERLESS FLIGHT

“Father, Father. I saw something last night.” Astrid came up close and loudly whispered her secret. She did not know why it felt like a secret, but it was something special and she needed help to understand it.

“There was a strange bird I saw before the light. It flew higher than I’ve ever seen even you go. Its tail feathers were long and glowing like, like...I don’t even know what. Was it just a dream?” She had meant to wait until after nest repair time, but she couldn’t. Her father was always

very serious and focused about nesting materials and their placement, but he surprised her with his full attention.

Her father, Avis, looked at his youngest and most curious. He knew right away that she would be the one to take to the box his father had taken him to many years before. He decided in that very moment, this adventure was just days away. Letting the twig drop from his beak, he answered. “That was no bird, Astrid. That was a creation that belongs to the featherless ones, the peep-el.”

“So, they can fly?” Astrid asked, amazed. “No wings, no feathers, but they can fly higher than any of us? No. No. You said they can’t get to us if we stay above them in the air. How can this be possible?”

“It was not one of them but something they built, just as we build a nest. It is called a rocket ship. They can go all the way up to the stars and they begin their flight not far from here,” he answered.

“The stars? You mean the lights in the sky are places they can go? How do you know these things, Father?” Astrid was becoming more and more astounded. She had always admired her father’s flying skill and his wisdom, but this was something completely new.

“Beyond the bushes, in the nests of the peep-el, they have a box that tells of these things and much more. My father and I have visited the box for a long time and listened to the things it said. The box is called a tee vee. I will take you there, in due time.”

The questions came from Astrid faster and faster and louder and louder. She began hopping from one foot to the next until she almost fell off the branch. Avis laughed as he put out a strong wing to steady her. He looked into his daughter’s shining eyes and ruffled feathers and said kindly but firmly, “So many questions. In time, Astrid. In time.” Astrid knew her father would say no more

until after nest repair, food gathering and flying lessons.

When it was Astrid's turn to fly with her father, she pressed her beak closed to keep herself from asking any questions. It was important for her to concentrate anyway. She was becoming very skilled at flying straight ahead but turning was still a bit of a challenge. She needed to show him that all of her flying was strong before he would risk taking her down into the peep-el world.

CHAPTER 2 FIRST ENCOUNTER OF THE TEE VEE KIND

Days later, Astrid and her father set out for the nest of the peep-el. Her mother looked on, in silent disapproval, as they flew away. She busied herself with building a new nest for another brood. They had flown out of the thicket many times, but this time was special. Astrid glanced back at the swaying leaves, and the slanted branches, and knew she would see them differently when she returned from her first experience with the box.

Gliding over the peep-el world, Astrid now saw them as more than something to avoid. Now she wanted to learn more about them and their many creations. Astrid followed her father as they descended toward a specific house with dull red stones her father had once told her were called “bricks.” Afraid but trusting, Astrid landed on the windowsill next to her father and looked inside. There it was, the room with the box.

“You see Astrid, that box holds many things, some foolish and some amazing. There is one who lives here who often peers into it. His name is Daveykins. He was born on the same day as the first man to walk on the moon. This man must have possessed arms of great strength because they always called him Neil Armstrong. And, the mother must have given Daveykins his middle name after this man because it’s Neil. The Mother says it is a sign he will do great things. Your grandfather was not so sure though,” he quipped. “He had seen the peep-el do some very foolish things, but I believe they are learning. At least they are trying to do better.”

“What kind of foolish things, Father,” Astrid asked.

“The thing that upset your grandfather the most was how the peep-el would argue and fight and even hurt each other over their colors,” Avis answered.

“What colors?” Astrid laughed. “They don’t have any feathers. Do you mean the things they use to cover their lack of feathers?”

“No, Astrid. If you look at the peep-el closely next time we fly overhead, you will see that the colors of their skins are slightly different.”

“But, Father, What could that matter? Aren’t the peep-el all of the same kind. That is like saying because you and I have slightly different feather colors and different markings that we are not of the same kind!” Astrid was getting quite upset. “We are the same, right, Father?”

“It is upsetting, Astrid. We are the same kind and all the peep-el are of the same kind. I have heard Daveykins’ mother and father talk about this quite often. They and many others believe this, and this is what gives me hope for the peep-el. Your grandfather saw so much of their hatred that it hurt his heart and did make him wonder how smart they were. A lot of this happened in the years before Daveykins was born. Things began to

change though, and I saw many, of every ‘color’, working together. A great man, with a black book like the one Daveykins’ mother reads from daily had a lot to do with the change. I suspect that book had a great deal to do with the changes too.”

“Okay, Father,” Astrid complied while still trying to understand.

He stroked her tiny head and waited for her to calm herself. Only then did he continue. “When Daveykins was just hatched, the Mother would sometimes leave him in front of this box. He would be quiet, and we could hear and learn the words that came from it. We found it to be mostly nonsense. Your grandfather was especially annoyed by a bird the tee vee called Woody. He had red feathers on his head and a laugh that was maddening. Woodpeckers everywhere would be aghast if they knew they were being represented in such a looney way. None of our neighbors to the west have ever behaved in such a dreadful manner as this bird. Also, it had peep-el hands where its

wings should be. Your grandfather thought this was awful, but it did make me wonder about all the things we might be able to accomplish with that adaptation. But anyway, look at that round thing in the middle they call a dial, Astrid. That points to the numbers that surround it. When the dial pointed to the number 24 then we learned the most marvelous things about the world outside of our thicket and about the things the peep-el did.”

Avis hopped down from the sill, grabbed a twig in his claw and scratched out ‘24’ in the dirt. Astrid had seen strange markings all over the featherless world during her flight lessons but had no inkling her father knew what they meant or how to use them.



Back on the sill, Astrid watched in wonder; peep-el, animals, all kinds of things seemed to fit in that box. They watched as Daveykins approached the small box on top of the larger box and then turned the dial. Every time the dial pointed to a different number, the picture on the big box would change. When the Mother called him for a snack, he raced out of the room. Astrid did not expect what happened next. Her father, her careful father, slid through the open window, flew past the couch where Daveykins had been sitting, and approached the smaller box. He hopped on top of the dial until she saw the arrow point to the number 24. Avis just made it out of the room before Daveykins returned with crumbs and a half-circle of white around his mouth.

“Mom! It changed again!” he yelled.

“It’s okay, sweet Daveykins,” the Mother answered. She was sure he just didn’t understand that the next show had come on.

Avis looked at Astrid and noticed that her puzzled eyes were fixed on him instead of the box. “I needed to act quickly,” he began to explain. “My father taught me to do that a few years ago and now I am teaching you. But you must always be careful. If you have a partner with you, then they can watch for Daveykins and make our sound of the peep-el mover. Those are called cars. Sometimes Daveykins will go out of the room for only a moment and come right back, but when the Mother calls ‘snack’ he is usually gone longer. It is like when we give you worms and bugs. Only the peep-el eat really strange things.”

Daveykins reached for the dial but, before he could turn it, a voice in the bigger box said he must stay tuned for an exciting replay of the recent Saturn V launch that put the Skylab space station into orbit.

“Wow,” came from under his breath and he settled down on the floor in front of the couch.

Squinted eyes peered out between the leaves. The bushes were at the back corner of the large yard behind the two –story red brick house. The cats had a direct line of sight to the large window at the side of the house.

“They’re baaaack,” whispered Andromeda. “The ones that took your pater from us.”

“Yes, Mater. There are birds on that window sill. There are often birds there so why do you suspect these birds?”

“Look closer,” she whispered as she shoved Orion’s head out of the bushes. “They are not searching for worms in the turned earth of the garden. No! They are looking into the tee vee box just like our lazy humans.”

“Yes, but maybe we should just...” began Orion. He stopped as his mother hissed in his face.

“Maybe we should just have our revenge!” Andromeda spat. “I’m sure that was what you were going to say, my son. Yes! We shall rain vengeance down upon them like...like...rain!”

“Yes, Mater. We will have our revenge,” repeated Orion dutifully. “We must be the only cats hoping for rain,” he added quietly as he started to head out of the bush.

“The Cats Who Came Before’ may want me but they must wait until I have had my revenge,” she added.

“I’m sure the Cats Who Came Before will have no trouble waiting for you, Mater,” chuckled Orion, as he licked a front paw and ran it across his face.

CHAPTER 3 FIRST ENCOUNTER OF THE PEEP-EL KIND

“Saturn Five,” Avis thought out loud. “That is the name of your bird from nights ago. I remember them talking about it when I’d listen to the box. This is amazing, Astrid. It is like one bird carrying another bird into space, but the Skylab bird will stay there.”

“Father, do you think we’ll ever fly as high as peep-el?” asked Astrid, as she tried to shake off the shock and wrap her mind around all she just learned.

“The air is for us Astrid, but those rocket ships go beyond to places that are not for us, places with no air to fill our bodies or to lift our wings. Your grandfather explained to me that even though our wings are indeed marvelous, the hands of peep-el are what make them able to accomplish so much. The box also said their brains are larger and better than most other creatures. Now you understand,

because of their unkindness to each other, why your grandfather was not sure about their brains being any better."

Still, who can say where we may end up going one day?"

Astrid paused to consider his question, but her father did not wait for an answer. "There is one more thing I need you to know about the peep-el world, Astrid. Around here lurks a creature that has hunted us since grandfather's time. The name changes but not the manner so they are just called 'Kitty'. Quiet and crafty is Kitty so beware."

Astrid shivered as her father gave her a quick description. The picture painted in her mind was of something akin to a fur covered alligator; claws and jaws and sharp teeth. The world of the peep-el was proving to be dangerous; all the more reason for her to be brave.

"Why is the Kitty after us, Father? she asked. "Why does it hate us? We didn't do anything to it."

“Blame and bitterness for things from the past, Astrid. These are very difficult feelings for some to overcome.”



Avis brought Astrid to Daveykins’ nest again and again. She waited and watched while her father snuck in each time. Then one day, he turned to her and said, “Today is your turn, Astrid.”

Her little heart was almost beating out of her chest, but she would not let her fear show and she refused to let her father down. She hesitated at first but then thought of her family. Others in her family had made the trip to Daveykins’ nest but they all ended up being more interested in the worms in the flower bed than in the tee vee.

“Every bird from every brood is special, Astrid,” Avis told her. “But you must find the one that is right for the tee vee; smart, curious and focused.”

Focused or not, the whole brood was obligated to listen to whatever tee vee news Avis found worthy to share with them after the excursions. They all paid attention but only her sister, Celeste, would ask Astrid more questions when they were alone. Celeste would then try to explain things to the other siblings in simple, fun ways so that they would start to become more interested. Astrid knew this sister was different and special, but she did not yet know how special.

It was for them, her family, that she finally took a deep breath and entered the peep-el nest. Once inside, with peep-el so near, her whole body shook. Astrid pushed through the fear, approached the small box, and began hopping on the dial as she had seen her father do. Try as she would, she got the dial to point at every number

except the precious '24'. There was a gentle tapping at the window and Astrid looked over into her father's worried eyes. That's when she knew she was running out of time.

"No! Just one more try," she said to herself as she willed her tiny limbs to steady and gave one more hop.

"Stay tuned for a special guest from NASA to discuss the launch of the Titan-Centaur rocket to send its Viking payload on a 500 million-mile journey to Mars..." she heard coming from the box. She had done it! She was so proud but when she looked at her father again, her pride turned to dread because he was looking behind her into the face of Daveykins.

Avis began tapping at the window loudly with his beak and fluttering madly. Daveykins walked over to the window immediately without paying any attention to the box or even noticing Astrid. Luckily, he was busy twisting apart two dark discs and munching on half that was covered in white.

While Daveykins was at the window, talking gently to Avis, Astrid ducked under the couch and tried to be as still as a stone. Avis flew away to clear the window, but she knew he would not go far. When Daveykins was again settled in front of the tee vee, Astrid crept out quietly and saw her father anxiously waiting for her. Astrid feared he would be angry, but a strong wing around her said he was not.

“There! See! Only one of that same family of birds would dare enter the home. I knew it!” hissed Andromeda. “Come, my son. Help me practice my pounce. I must do this for your pater.”

“Yes, Mater. But, do you think you will move quickly enough?” he asked backing out of the reach of her paw.

“The young one. She does hop around quite a bit, but when the tee vee interests her, she will not move. I will easily bat her off the sill as I glide majestically through the air, lifted by vengeance.

And then...I will pounce. Then, and only then, will
I join the Cats Who Came Before.”