

Songs of the Archaeopteryx is a collection of aviation-themed stories by Keoki Gray. While the focus is on characters, there is rich detail that provides a glimpse into the remarkable world of general aviation, flight training and aerobatics.

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Songs of the Archaeopteryx

From “Alex”:

The air maintained its silky smoothness until we reached eighteen hundred feet above ground where we punched through some strange turbulence. It felt as though we had driven a car over some tight “washboard bumps,” then it smoothed out just as abruptly. Once more, we were running clean and steady.

“What the hell was that?” I demanded.

“I’ve got it,” Alex answered, taking control. He swung us back into the disturbed airflow while he elaborated. “I think it was some turbulence off...a...helo. Probably an E-H if it’s out this far. Now if I can just...find...its...trail...”

“E-H?”

“Enforcement Helicopter.”

I watched, fascinated, as he punched through the wake several times in the next couple of minutes. We gradually spent longer and longer in the helicopter’s burbled air until Alex roughly matched the course it had flown. It reminded me of a predator stalking prey. A shark scenting a blood trail.

But a nagging uneasiness gnawed at the back of my thoughts...

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While some of the characters in this book are real people, they are used in a fictional manner and in fictional settings. Most characters and all events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

The author has sought to pen the technical aspects of these stories as precisely and accurately as possible. That does not mean that one can learn to fly, or learn aerobatics, from these tidbits. But it may appeal to the pilots among you to know the details are as correct as the author can manage.

Keoki Gray
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ARCHAEOPTERYX (ăr'kē-ōp'tēr-īks) Noun
An extinct primitive bird with teeth, a long tail,
and well-developed wings
[Greek *arkhaios* **ancient** + *pteryx* **winged creature**]

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Michigan J. Part I

The practice session was going very well. Maneuvers, carefully crafted and repeated, had been moved progressively closer to the ground. They still looked fluid and properly shaped even now that the plane was flying down to show altitude. It was obvious to the coach that the pilot remained well within her comfort zone. That, in turn, meant she was flying thoughtfully and safely.

It had been quite an evolution. He took a moment to reflect on just how far she had come in her training. At first she could barely fumble through three or four maneuvers in a row. But through effort and discipline she made rapid progress and was now flying as well as anyone he had coached in the last several years.

Of course there were setbacks. The usual weather and mechanical issues had delayed her schedule. But the most profound stumble was the break-up with her longtime boyfriend. They were more than romantically linked—they flew together often. They had even planned to fly air shows as a formation act...

“Good,” he radioed to her. “Now go back to maneuver seven and show me figures seven, eight, nine, ten and eleven.”

“Okay,” she acknowledged.

“And I want you to think about preserving your altitude. I think you’re using about two hundred feet more than you need to.”

“Okay,” she transmitted again. “Where’s it going?”

“It looks like you’re pulling across the top of the ‘reverse shark’s tooth’ a bit too early. You should only do that if you’re running out of space in the box. Pulling early is a last resort. The way you’re flying it now is probably costing about fifty to seventy-five feet right there. Relax on the up lines and be patient.”

“Got it.”

Her “P Loop”—figure seven—was placed exactly where it needed to be, and she swept through the “reverse shark’s tooth” with a precise, relaxed up line. After three more maneuvers, she checked her

altitude against the start value.

“Well?” he asked.

“That saved about two hundred thirty feet,” she reported proudly.

“That’s huge,” he told her, his enthusiasm plain to hear. “What now?”

“I’m about done.” She unkeyed the mike, then radioed, “How ’bout the ‘right-right?’ I want to get an extra rotation out of it.”

“How many are you getting now?”

“Three. Actually two and three-quarters,” she announced.

“And your entry speed?”

“One-fifty for the pitch up, and one-oh-five for the ‘right-right.’”

“Let’s bump that up to one-ten,” he suggested.

“Okay.”

While they conversed, the airplane had effortlessly climbed and turned in the watery blue sky. Now it dove back into the practice area, leveled off crisply, and pitched cleanly to the forty-five-degree up line. She rolled quickly and accurately onto her left side, checked her speed, pushed rapidly on the right rudder and fed in full right forward stick—“right-right.” The aircraft kept moving from the coach’s right to left, but the nose rotated away from its flight path. Even more interesting, the airplane seemed to tuck its nose under as though chasing its own tail. But after less than three rotations it simply ran out of energy.

“How fast are you inputting the stick?”

“As fast as I can!” she answered.

“Try slowing the input down just a tiny bit. It should take about a half second to go from centered to full deflection. Otherwise you may be stalling the elevator.”

“Oops. I’ve been doing it faster than that.”

“Well, don’t do that.”

She smiled to herself. *He always made it sound so simple*, she thought. *And he used the phrase, “Don’t do that,” well, not quite a lot, but often enough.*

“Look,” she recalled him saying once, “This isn’t rocket science. It’s all pretty basic stuff. Be suspicious of anyone who tries to

make this sound too complicated.”

“Okay!” she reminded herself in the now. “Simple.”

Her precision was good and the maneuver was executed exactly as the previous attempt, but with the one tiny adjustment. She found the “sweet spot” for the figure and was rewarded with the elusive extra rotation. With a deft movement, she captured the airplane in a near-perfect inverted attitude and smoothly nosed down for a diving forty-five line. She let the speed build for a moment, and then kicked through a half outside snap roll followed immediately by a four-point roll in the opposite direction. It was a spontaneous display of her aerial artistry and it impressed her coach.

“Yes!” she heard his voice in her headphones. She smiled again.

But she couldn’t hear him marveling to himself once more over her intrinsic ability. She had to be one of the best “natural pilots” he had ever seen. She could take criticism and apply the specified corrections very rapidly. Her flying seldom showed any weak spots, any areas of less than complete control. He knew of the months of hard work she put in to reach this point. And she had very little ego for her skill level. He could name many pilots who possessed much more self importance with much less ability, and preferred her personality to theirs.

“I’m landing,” she told him.

“Okay, switch to advisory,” he responded, reminding her to tune her radio from the discrete frequency they had been using for critiques to the airport frequency. It was not a necessary reminder in her case; it was just one of his habits.

He packed up the tools of the trade—radios, note pad, the copy of her sequence written in the hieroglyphic shorthand of Aresti—but paused before climbing into his truck. Coaching was a critical element for someone who sought to fly precise aerobatics. Maneuvers that felt perfect in the airplane could look perfectly awful from the ground. So the pilot had to rely on a knowledgeable ground-based coach to provide guidance and feedback.

She was curving in for her approach to landing, a beautiful sweeping arc that was as practical as it was captivating. Without the turn, her view of the runway would be obscured by the airplane’s wide

nose. This way, the runway remained visible for much longer and allowed her to place the aircraft precisely where she desired.

The wings came towards level, with just a ghost of a bank to correct for a tiny crosswind component, and the nose eased up into the landing attitude. The plane settled towards the runway, the flying speed ebbed, and the upwind main wheel and tailwheel touched—all at once.

Perfect, he smiled.

It was a short drive to her hangar. As he rode along the taxiway, he remembered sitting with her over a nice bottle of wine as their pasta went cold and she cried about the end of her relationship. It wasn't exactly within the coach's job description, but he was pragmatic enough to know the mental make-up of his clients was easily as important to their flying as their physical abilities. So he sat with her and listened, providing support simply with his presence, just as he had done for a few others before her.

By the time he arrived she had already shut down the engine and exited the cockpit. Her habit was to keep the parachute fastened as she climbed out—"For the practice, just in case..." she once told him—so she was just unfastening that harness. She removed the chute and turned to place it in the cockpit. Her back was covered with perspiration that betrayed her efforts, despite how effortless her flying appeared to be.

"That looked good, Alexis," he told her happily, stepping down from the truck.

"It felt good," she agreed.

"The 'right-right' was a lot better when you slowed down the input just that tiny bit."

"I know. It's surprising how much difference that made."

"Well, this stuff isn't supposed to be 'slam, bam,' you know?"

She grinned.

"The flow of the sequence is good. The energy is nice. And you're looking comfortable down to show altitude. Fly it like the last time—save your altitude. Someday, you're gonna need it."

She nodded in understanding.

"Who's your 'ACE' gonna be?" An "Aerobatic Competency Evaluator" would observe her flying to verify that she was safe to

perform aerobatics close to the ground.

“I was hoping Patty would do it for me.”

“Have you contacted her? She can be pretty busy.”

“Yeah, and she said about the middle of next month—”

“Three weeks?”

“Uh-huh. I’m really excited to meet her.”

“Aw, she’s just a ‘girlie-girl,’” he told her.

“*You’ve* met her?” she asked wide-eyed.

“Yep. She’s coached me a couple of times and I’ve worked a few days with her when we shared a coach. Seriously, she’s great. You’ll really like her.” He changed tacks slightly. “You’re going for five hundred feet, right?”

She nodded.

“Well, your flying is safe to that altitude. Your first show is ‘Sun ’N’ Fun’?”

“Yes.” Her clear blue eyes studied him.

“Then where?”

“That’s it.”

“Aren’t you flying shows after you get your ‘low card’?” He assumed all this work was to get her the waiver—the “low card” that allowed her to fly closer to the ground than federal regulation normally permitted—so she could start an air show career.

“No.”

He blinked. “I’m confused. Why are you spending all this effort and money if you aren’t flying shows?”

“Well, for the experience,” she began, holding out her thumb.

“For the sense of accomplishment,” she continued, counting on her forefinger. “For the joy,” she told him, showing a third finger. “And for my soul,” she ended with her ring finger.

He shook his head, smiling. “You’re good enough to show this to more than one audience. And I know you have a commercial license, so there’s no reason you have to hide your light under a barrel.”

“But I don’t want to fly shows.”

They watched each other for several seconds.

“Okay, what about competition?” He thought that might give her a gateway into show flying.

“Doesn’t do anything for me. I like to watch—and volunteer. But not fly.”

He was slightly flabbergasted. With her talent, work ethic and discipline, she could be a star.

She saw him studying her. “I never told you why Scott and I broke up, did I?”

“No.”

“You remember he started doing air shows about the middle of last year?”

He nodded.

“I went to the last show of the season. Scott flew great and I saw him after he landed. But he was different. You know how some shows drive the pilots along the crowd line so people can see them up close?”

He nodded again.

“Well, the ride seemed really, really important to him. And when he signed autographs, it was kind of weird how he...*expected* people to treat him like a star. It was like his ego got out of control. I don’t want to end up like that.”

“I can’t see you *ever* ending up like that,” he interjected.

“Maybe. He wasn’t like that at all when I first met him. I didn’t think he could ever be that way, either.” She hesitated, debating whether or not to put the last piece of the puzzle in place.

“Then there was this awkward moment with some...*girl*...”

For just an instant he caught the emotions struggling in the depths of her eyes. He wondered about Scott, who had seemed anything but egocentric when the coach worked with the young pilot early last year.

“You like cartoons?” she inquired, heading in another direction.

“Huh?”

“Cartoons?” she repeated.

“Uh, sure, I guess. At least, I used to.”

“Ever see that one about the guy who gets a singing frog?”

“I don’t—maybe. I don’t remember...”

“This guy finds a singing frog. Of course, the guy thinks he’s gonna be rich. The frog can sing anything—opera, show tunes,

anything.”

“Yeah...”

“But the frog’ll only sing for the guy. When the guy meets a promoter to make the frog a star, the frog won’t sing. So the guy rents a concert hall on his own, but the frog still keeps quiet. No singing, just a croak or two.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I’m like the frog. When I saw Scott at that show, and what it did to him, I realized I don’t want an audience. I’d rather do this because I love it; I love the process and I *love* the flying. I can’t think of anything more demanding than getting my ‘low card.’ I have to see it through—for me. And I promised I would fly the show at Lakeland. A promise is a promise. But that’s it.”

“Now hold on. You know I’ve always been honest with you?” She nodded. “So you have to believe me when I tell you that I’ve worked with a lot of pilots in this business. I’ve seen competition pilots and show pilots who have gone on to success. You’re as good as any of them. You could do very well.”

“Thanks. But I don’t need the external validation from a crowd—or from judges.” A pause. “And competitions don’t pay,” she added slyly.

“Okay. You know you may have to convince Patty? She’s told me before that someone getting a ‘low card’ should get one for a reason—to fly air shows. She may not issue you one if you aren’t going to use it.”

“But I *will* use it—at ‘Sun ’N’ Fun.’” With the quiet, self-assured strength he had seen her display during her flight training, she said, “Besides, if Patty is reluctant, I can be very persuasive...”

“But...” His mouth worked soundlessly once or twice. Alexis half expected him to croak just as the cartoon frog had done. She laughed.

“Adam, I want to thank you for *everything* you’ve done for me, and for having faith in me.” She hugged him tightly around the neck, surprising him. “Thank you,” she repeated close to his ear.

He realized there was no point in arguing further. As she stepped back, he told her, “You’re welcome.”

Does Alexis get her "low-card?" Does she perform her air show sequence? Is she accepted by the established air show pilots? And what secret is hiding in Adam's past?

The answers to these questions, and many more, are revealed in "Songs of the Archaeopteryx." Get your own copy today and fall in love with flying, too!

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