



SKY TRAILS

As the morning sun hurries over the mountains, the persistent pitter-patter of snowmelt quickens off pine boughs. The mounds of snow dissipate into little trickling crevices weaving through the thick mud. The roaring rush of the river drowns out the clatter of swaying aspen branches. Spring declares its presence by gifting purple crocus and yellow daffodils amongst the brown grass and molded leaves. And from overhead, the croaking trumpet of the Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Crane calls across the valley.

Leaning into the warmth of southern winds, the flock communicates their intentions through the brush of wings and murmured gobbles to navigate towards their summer sanctuaries. One particular female, a curious juvenile distinguished by the stark appearance of a black spot against her long neck, is guided by the presence of her ancestors. Though she has never witnessed the vast valleys and twining creeks, a vivid painting is imprinted precisely in her mind. Like a petroglyph on a cave wall, the painting holds the innate wisdom from thousands of previous cranes, surveying the valleys and carving sky trails. These sky trails call flocks back to their heritage sites.

The spotted female recognizes the approaching riverbed as a sanctuary, promising a feast of berries and a much-needed night's rest. Upon landing, the female cocks her ruffled head and observes her flock for signs of approval. Warily, she arcs her neck into the crook of her feathers and closes her eyes, greeting sleep.

Four years pass, and the southern winds carry a familiar female marked by a black spot. The female has become wise through her migrations and no longer relies on her timeless painting. The inevitable power of time bestows upon her a vivid red crown, complementing her rusted feathers. She stands boldly in her pack on a pair of black legs, corded by eloquent muscles climbing her thighs. She no longer cowers from the snarls of canine appetites but instead arms herself with talons fit to slice metal. The spotted female is juvenile no longer; she carries herself with the grace and deity of adulthood.

The trickling rush of the Yampa River greets the female as she lands amidst the growing wetlands. The elder cranes trill gratefully. Exhausted contentment seeps through the night air. An excitement spreads through her bones, and the female knows that this is the place. She observed the flock members partake in joyous courtships for years. Each bird executes a thrilling performance, seeking their partner from cha-chas and sways. When a pair of cranes accept the treasured waltz, the primordial mating bond clicks into place. The mates claim each other for life and promise unwavering loyalty.

The whisper of her ancestors chimes through the spotted female's body and informs her that it is time. For five years, she practiced leaps and bows, perfected the timing of wing pirouettes, and composed the routine of her mating dance, preparing her for this moment. Her beauty and maturity have not gone unnoticed—three males approach her. Their ruffled feathers and squawking impatience fill her senses; she bows her head, counting her quickening breaths. The clabber of the surrounding flock fades, and the spotted female peers at her courtiers from lowered eyes. Suddenly she explodes into a delicate array of twists and turns. She arcs her neck as she spreads her wings; she lowers her beak to the ground and bows sensually. Minutes pass like seconds. She halts her dance as rapidly as she began. Her promenade is a success.

The males flair their feathers and compete to perform first, but the female's attention is snagged by the amber eyes of the center male. He senses her gaze and lowers his body in an offering; her signaling croak signifies her approval. The amber-eyed male holds her stare while matching her dynamic performance with his own. His companions sense they have lost and retreat into the shadows. The female remains fixated on the male. He is her mate.

The sweet aroma of cherry blossoms infuses the valley air. The native grasses stagger boldly among the banks and a blanket of green cascades over the hillsides. The spotted female and her mate retreat from the restlessness of the flock and seclude themselves along the banks of the river, protected by the tall grass. The cranes take turns exiting their prized homeland to find materials for their nest. Long stalks of cattails, willow branches, and fallen strands of grass construct their home. Soon, a pair of eggs grace the nest. Each egg resembles a small stone: colored creamy olive, like the shallow depths of a sandy creek bed, and painted with hazel specks, mirroring the birds' rusted feathers. Parental instinct echoes down the spine of each crane's body, urging them to guard the eggs. The female and her mate alternate perching atop the olive stones. Their beady eyes scorch the luscious flora for signs of trespassing mammals. When the moon perches over the valley in silver luminescence, the flicker of coyotes' hungry gaze, the rustle of weasels' leaping trot, and the scratching of raccoon paws do not evade the cranes' attention. The amber-eyed male approaches the edge of the grass bed. He jumps without warning. Razor-sharp claws evoke furious yowles and snarls. He defends his family and honor.

The days become longer, and the temperatures rise. No longer a roaring menace, the river peacefully trickles through winding beds. Finches, Warblers, and Sparrows rejoice in the sweet morning air, smelling of damp grass and dew-covered sage. Summer claims its' rightful place.

The spotted female rests wearily upon her treasured stones when a faint tapping jolts her awake. From the pit of her stomach resonates a purr, mirroring her calls of the past days. She senses the existence of life within her nest and calls to it, guiding the slumbering presence toward awakening. She eyes the olive eggs. The tapping resumes, and a thin line of blackness webs across an egg, shattering the glorious shell. Slowly, a mound of egg falls to the ground, and a heap of slime-covered fuzz stumbles forth.

A whisper of instinct hums through the female's weary frame at the sound of murmured chirping. The female hurriedly discards the remnants of the creamy egg and inspects her chick. She wipes the slime off the matted coat as the new crane staggers towards the warmth of its mother. She croons at the touch.

The amber-eyed male senses change upon landing at his home. He surveys the egg remains, a heap by the river, and finally, his mate swaddling a ball of fur. He purrs, approaching his family, and nestles down towards the chick, inhaling the newness. The colt, no longer resembling a drowned cat, is covered with yellow feathers. Dark eyes peer at its parents with curiosity, wonder, and hunger.

Together the amber-eyed male and the spotted female turn their red-crested heads towards the remaining egg. A knowing dread settles deep in their bones. Unlike the slumbering curiosity of the hatched egg, the flecked egg bears no residing warmth, resembling a void.

The afternoon heat bounces off the ground in waves, and the vibrant greens of the grass bleach away into faded yellows. The river now relies on dark, looming clouds to fill its banks with cool water. Reds, pinks, and oranges scorch aspen leaves like painted fire.

Summer has been prosperous for the curious colt. Feasting on various seeds, ripe berries, and wiggling worms, the young crane stalks the dry marshes upon growing legs. Though his parents remain nearby, the juvenile tests his growing body with bold admiration. His stick-like legs no longer stumble over rotting branches but gracefully guide him while dancing. His yellow fur is replaced with tawny, gray feathers, aiding his camouflage in the dying bush while foraging his meals. The beady black eyes are now surrounded by a vibrant orange ring, like the deepest sunset, granting him a keen vision.

Increasingly, the tawny juvenile gazes at the bluebird sky with longing. He yearns to feel the warmth of southern winds graze over his underbelly, to defy the laws of gravity and soar with the weightless clouds. Intuition, partnered with his parents' assistance, bring him to spread his wings. A series of practicing flaps launches him inches off the ground. He croaks exuberantly; the ground fades farther below.

It is the final day of the season. The spotted female, amber-eyed male, and tawny juvenile bid farewell to the hidden riverbank: filled with love, life, and death, the nest became home. The family takes to the sky in a final push. Greeting their flock amidst the clouds, the Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes trill welcomingly. The young juvenile takes a look at his valley, his sanctuary. He looks forward and is guided home, following the twining river and hidden sky trails.

