

Prologue: A Strange Discovery

Charlie lifted his water bottle and drained the last drop. He hadn't realized how thirsty he was. Placing the water bottle back in his pack, he retrieved the small compass his father had given him a few months ago for his thirteenth birthday. The clasp clicked open, and the silver needle wavered back and forth, eventually pointing north. The trail he had been hiking continued in the same general direction. It was almost mid-afternoon, so he knew he had to get back to town before the sun set and he lost his way in the darkness.

He walked another 10 feet before taking a rough dirt trail that headed east back toward Devon Grove. Charlie preferred the deer trails over the well-worn official paths that crisscrossed the foothills---you never knew what sort of wildlife you would encounter.

A noise stirred in the brush ahead, and Charlie crouched down to see what it might be. It was not unusual to find deer, coyote, and even the occasional mountain lion searching for food this deep in the foothills. *Probably just a deer*, he thought, adjusting his baseball cap over his dark brown hair.

Out of the side of the trail, a deer's head appeared, its nose twitching, catching the scents in the brisk mountain air. Large brown eyes passed over Charlie as the animal surveyed its surroundings and took a hesitant step onto the trail. First one leg, then another, and then another and another, and so on, until eight legs were clear of the brush.

Charlie gasped in shock, causing the deer to sprint off into the trees. "E...e...eight legs?" Charlie stammered, grabbing his water bottle and twisting off the top, preparing to pour the contents over his head. There was none left. He couldn't have seen what he thought he had. Perhaps it was just his imagination---a mirage caused by lack of water and the altitude?

A loud cawing brought his attention back to the trail. The sound had come from the direction where the deer had appeared. Pushing the branches aside, Charlie stepped off the trail and into the thick undergrowth. He walked around the trunk of a large pine tree and ducked out of the way as another deer trotted past. The deer reared back in surprise and leapt into the air. Instead of landing back on the ground, the deer kicked its back legs and rose higher, crashing through the treetops as it disappeared overhead.

"What's going on?" Charlie exclaimed as he rounded the trunk and found himself in a small clearing. First a deer with eight legs and now one that could fly? Magical talents were part of life in Devon Grove, but that did not typically extend to the local wildlife.

In the middle of the clearing a dozen ravens cawed and pecked, flapping their wings wildly. They appeared to be fighting over something, but he could not see what it was.

“Yar!” Charlie yelled, and the ravens scattered into the air.

Black feathers fell around him as he knelt down in front of a pile of odd-looking apples, lying half-eaten on the ground. The apples reminded Charlie of a pile of marbles with swirling colors of reds and blues and of purples and yellows. These were no ordinary apples, though. They were talent apples. The talent apples would explain the deer and their strange appearance and abilities, but what were the apples doing here so far from the Grove?

Charlie took last look at the pile of discarded apples and carefully marked their location on his trail map. He headed back to the trail and rushed home to tell his father what he had found.

Charlie never imagined that tomorrow would be the last day he'd ever see his father alive.