

# *The Enchanted Masterpiece*

*By Reyansh Chandra, grade 7*

As my bike rattled along the sidewalk, I sighed. It was just like me forgetting things at the last minute. Now I had to give up my weekend and scramble to find a reliable birthday present for my mother as soon as possible. I looked from left to right and then straight ahead. I wasn't even out of the neighborhood yet, and getting to the market complex would take a while. That was when something caught my eye. It was sign taped to a lamppost beside the sidewalk on which I was riding. I ignored it at first but made a U-turn when I saw the word *sale*. The sign said there was a garage sale happening just a few blocks to the right! I knew garage sales were places where you could possibly get neat stuff at a steep discount from the original price, so I considered it. I changed course again and pedaled towards the direction in which the arrow on the sign pointed.

I soon arrived at the sale and lay my bike in the bushes that lined the side of the owner's front yard. My bike didn't have a stand, so finding a place to lean it against was always a relief. As I looked up, a messy sight greeted me. The so-called *sale* was a jumble of tables thrown together in odd orientations. I saw one completely upside down! The stuff that these people were selling was not very interesting and I thought about turning away but it didn't. Though many of the items included chipped mugs and old gardening utensils, some of the things looked inviting. There were not a lot of people around, and I couldn't even see the owner. I thought about swiping something but then stopped as the owner rounded the corner and came out from the back, rubbing his nest of curly blonde hair stretching down to the bottom of his neck. He had on a baseball cap and a stained white T-shirt with rough looking jeans. He was clutching a rake and tossed it aside when he saw me. I wanted to ask why he needed a rake in the middle of July but stopped myself. I straightened out my shirt as he acknowledged my presence.

"How's it going, sonny boy?"

“Good,” I said with a small smile. I stepped to the side and pretended to examine an old stack of pencils rubber-banded together.

“If you see anything you like, you can find me right over here,” he said, patting a lawn chair with broken straps. “Anytime.”

“Sure,” I said, but I was really rolling my eyes in my head. Did this man actually think I was going to buy something from this heap of absolute *junk*?

I walked around some more, but saw nothing, and the man disappeared into the house. I then came upon a part of the setup that was really close to the gate to the backyard. I noticed a painting and strolled over casually. I picked it up and gawked. It was an *amazing picture*!

It depicted a scene of a village under a sky of pink and purple clouds in the evening. The small huts were arranged in a circle surrounding the central area, where there was sand glistening in the sunset. There were pine trees beyond all this and an endless forest behind the hut facing me. My mom would love this!

She was always talking about how she had grown up in a village far north and how she had loved it there but had been forced to come down to the city when she had to get a job. She planned on going back when she retired. I had always thought, *never consider taking me with you*, but after seeing this. *Count me in!*

Of course, one of the downsides in those places would be the lack of physical and mental comfort. No TV, no electricity, and no cars to get around, but my mother said amazing people lived there, and they made up for all the comfort you could possibly need. I never understood that part of the conversation.

I turned around and went to look for the man who was running this ordeal. I found him back on the lawn chair, a glass of lemonade clutched in one hand and a doughnut in the other. He looked up when he saw me holding up the bulky item.

“Let me take that for you,” he said with a chuckle, and set it down on the grass beside the chair.

“How much?”

“20 dollars.”

I took out a twenty from my pocket and handed it to him wordlessly. I thought that was a bit expensive, but nothing compared to the other paintings I had seen before. I once went to an art gallery where the ones in the bargain section were \$2000 each!

“Thank you,” I said and shook his hand, as if this was a business deal that could change the course of our lives.

He grinned. “Glad to help.”

I got on my bike and looked back at the painting I was planning on taking home. I paused. That painting was taller than my bike and was heavy with the metal frame surrounding it. The man noticed my expression and laughed.

“Got no idea on how to take it home? Let me help.”

He went back inside the house and came out minutes later with a large hiking pack. Looking at it made me feel unsure. Would the painting fit in a bag that was meant for carrying water bottles and trail mix?

The man was aware of my uncertainty. “Then again, I could call your parents and ask them to get you,” he said with a friendly smile. “It would be easier that way if you ask me.”

“No thanks,” I blurted. The last thing I needed was my mom to show up and see me buying a last-minute gift. I had told her I was going to head over to the convenience store to grab a slushie. What would I tell her? Is this the newest *flavor*? I took the bag and found that the painting just fit, but with 3 quarters of it sticking up and out. I took some doing, but I finally got stable on the seat of my bike.

“Thanks,” I said, but it came out as a muffled squeak. The painting was heavy!

“Anytime,” he replied.

I took off down the street at an incredibly low speed. It was hard going at first, but I soon got the hang of it. I got some strange looks from people walking their dogs and little kids with their mothers, but I finally made it to our house. I carefully got off my bike and walked up to the porch. My hand stopped on its way to the doorbell. If my mom saw me carrying this, she would get suspicious and I *did* have a key, so... I took my key and twisted it into the lock. The door popped open.

The first thing I noticed was the silence. Absolute silence. I took off the pack and put it on the couch and it felt as if a giant weight had been lifted off my shoulders, which it had. I looked around once again and heard nothing. It was not something to pull my hair out for, so I decided on my first task. Hiding the painting.

It was a large one, and our house was not the largest, there was no room to keep it anywhere, so I settled on hanging it on the wall as a surprise for my mom when she came home from wherever she was right now.

I unzipped the pack and took the massive piece of artwork out and marched it upstairs towards my mother's room. *Almost there*, I thought to myself after every agonizing moment of climbing stairs holding a heavy metal frame. I finally made it to the top, which was carpeted, so I set the painting down and put my hands on my knees. *How was I going to hang it up without ripping the wall right off the side of the house?* That was a *major* question. I realized it wasn't possible, and I had to have it lose some weight. I could probably fit it with a lighter frame later.

I slowly started to separate the canvas blanket from the frame and was satisfied when it came out without as much of a small tear. I grabbed a few nails and got to work hanging it on the wall. It did not look its best without the frame, but my mom would still be happy. She was happy with the smallest of things these days. I leaned back to enjoying my hard work.

That was when it happened. It all went black. I could hear nothing. See nothing. Smell nothing. It was absolute nothingness for an unimaginable amount of time. The next thing I knew, I was lying on a patch of long grass flat on my back, panting. I lay there for a few minutes but got up when I heard footsteps coming my way.

It was a man in his mid-forties, and he was whistling a jolly tune as he swung his axe round and round like it was a feather. He had on a large coat and a pair of jeans and was holding a bundle of logs in his other hand.

"Sir!" I called out as he passed, but he paid me no heed. "Sir!" I said again.

This time he turned around at looked me straight in the eye. He looked confused and bewildered, but there was no sign of happiness on his face at all. He ran at me, axe at full tilt, and I would have been clocked in the head if it was not for my amazing reflexes.

If this was an alien planet, I knew exactly what to say.

"I come in peace!" I yelled.

The man did not stop. If anything, he was coming at me faster and faster, with the blade of his axe so close I could hear it cutting through the air with a swooshing sound. He seemed to be yelling somewhat of a battle cry, and it was quite alarming. I rolled on the grass with my eyes closed, writhing and hoping that the silver blade would not reach me. *Please. Please. Let it stop.*

It never did stop, and I realized I had to do something to protect myself and not leave my life in the hands of mere chance. After miraculously avoiding slashing blows for another few seconds, I somersaulted backward and stood, poised like a cowboy in the west. The man stood panting, sweating beading up on his wide forehead. He stared at me with a sort of fire in his eyes. Uncontrollable anger. I tried to explain myself.

“There has to be some sort of a misunderstanding...” I blurted, but did not have time to finish my thought as the man spoke first.

“Where are you from?”

“Calgary.”

“What!” He looked annoyed. “Don’t play games with me, I know exactly where you are from and am willing to put an end to that terribly vile place of residence!”

“I am not from around here,” I said, trying my best to be diplomatic. “I myself have no idea where I am at this moment.”

The anger seemed to fade from the man’s eyes as his features softened. It was an improvement from the murderous look he had possessed not very long ago.

He stood up with his back straight and looked around with pride. He puffed out his chest and spoke in a tone that seemed to rumble throughout the entirety of the forest.

“The land on which you stand is that of Merlin. There is freedom, justice, and peace.” He then bowed his head in surrender. I felt to do the same so as to not anger this being.

After about 30 seconds, he looked back up at me and said, “I will take you the leader of the land and its people. Follow me.”

I said nothing and started to follow him through the brush wordlessly. He seemed to know the way like the back of his hand and would use his axe to cut through the tangled vines and shrubs that would stand in our way. After what seemed like forever, we cut through the last of the trees and into a clearing about the size of half a soccer field. The man whom I assumed was a lumberjack went ahead and promptly knocked on the door of the only hut that stood at the edge of the clearing. I followed, but he beckoned for me to stay back.

A minute later, the door opened to reveal a frail man in old, ragged clothing and a sailors cap. He had a walking stick that seemed to be made of gold, and he had very few teeth left in his mouth. He greeted us with his eyes half closed and his mouth agape.

“Hello, I would like to introduce you to a fellow traveler,” said the lumberjack, stepping aside to reveal me.

“Hi,” I stammered, looking at the man’s flowing white beard whose tip just about touched the gravelly floor of his hut. He made no change in his expression.

The lumberjack seemed to sense my confusion, so he decided to get the conversation going. “He seems to be lost. Will you tell him the way to his land? He mentioned it, but I seemed to have forgotten.” He looked at me expectantly.

“Calgary,” I exclaimed instantly.

The old man spoke, “I have never heard of such a place, but maybe the portal has.”

*The portal.* I was getting somewhere. “What portal?”

“Come, I will show you,” said the man. “But first let me introduce myself. I am Old Man Frey, and I will gladly show you the way back to your land that is unheard of in these parts.”

“Ok,” I said. The lumberjack gave a timid goodbye to both of us and turned on his heel to walk away. I made me uncomfortable seeing him go but decided to hold my ground.

“I am the one who founded this amazing land on which you stand. *Merlin*. It is truly beautiful. Look at the greenery around you, the spectacularity!”

“Agreed,” I said.

“Now let us get down to business,” he said with a chuckle. “Would you like some tea?”

I wanted to tell him I was just a teenager and did not drink tea that often, but I wanted to have the best impression possible, so I said, “Yes please.”

“Very well.”

He walked over to a small rack of pots and pans and a small cabinet, and I finally got a good look around the old man’s residence. It consisted mainly of a woven grass rug, a few chairs, and a rack of pots and pans. There was a small rack of firewood at another side of the hut, and the cabinet seemed the only interesting thing, but when the man opened it, it only contained some bread and many jars of herbs.

I wanted to get right down to this portal and regretted having asked for tea because the man walked painstakingly slowly even with the support of his walking stick. When he seemed to have collected all the herbs that he needed, he beckoned me to follow him outside.

Once outside, I noticed there was a small firepit at the center of the clearing and he led me there and pointed his walking stick in the direction of the hut.

“Wood.”

I obeyed and came back with my arms full to the brim with firewood. The man chuckled and took one log from me, and he placed it in the middle of the pit. Then he grabbed 2 stones that lay at the side of the pit and started to hit them against each other at regular intervals. Soon, a small flame had sprang up at the center of the pit and the man put the pan on it. He then ordered me to go to the well at the other edge of the clearing and draw out some water. When I came back, the pan was sizzling with the herbs already in it. After pouring the water in, a sort of magical scent filled the air, and I sat down on the small boulder beside the fire. The man smiled at me as he sat down.

“Now, about the portal. Making it is quite a heavy undertaking and can only be done once a month on the day when there is a full moon. Lucky for you, there is a full moon coming the day after tomorrow. Of course, all your materials must be ready by then. The light of the moon only activates the portal, but the physical portal itself must be made before that.”

“Ok, so what materials am I going to need?”

The man picked up the pot and poured its contents into 2 different mugs. He handed one to me and kept one for himself.

“You will need the following materials, 12 bundles of tolling grass, 5 ml of water from the sacred lake, a piece of rock from the cliff at the edge of the land, and wood from the Gray Tree,” he said with his eyes closed, as if remembering a very old memory. “That is all. I will tell you how to make the portal once you have gathered what I have told you to.”

The names of these items caused complete bewilderment to me. I had never heard of *tolling grass* or *Gray Tree* before, so I had to ask for clarification.

“How exactly do I acquire these materials?”

“That is up to you. You will know when you go and see.”

The man then finished the last of his tea and went back inside, leaving me sitting by the dwindling flames. I got up and doused them with some sand and followed the man back inside.

I could see he had laid out two blankets on the ground and had already settled himself on the first one. He was fast asleep. I was worried if I would be able to get all of these materials by the time I needed them, so I tossed and turned all night. When the morning light streamed in through the bottom of the door, it was a relief.

I got up and saw that the man was still asleep. It seemed rude to wake him, so I got up as quietly as I could and stepped out of the hut and stared into the dense trees lined up around the clearing.

“Ok,” I said to myself. “Let’s do this.”

“Yes,” came a voice from behind me. The man had awoken and was standing a few feet behind me. “Do it.”

“Thanks,” I said, and was about to go, but then realized something. *What was I doing?* I was leaving in just a hoodie and jeans! Who knew what dangers lay in that jungle? I had to be more prepared.

“Could you give me some gear?” I ventured.

“Certainly,” the man said. He had not moved at all from his previous position.

He went inside and after a few minutes came out with a large overcoat, boots, and a small knife. He also provided a bag filled with items I realized I didn’t have time to check out.

“The pants will do,” he said approvingly. Then he went inside and shut the door behind him.

I stepped into the jungle and felt perspiration trickling down my forehead. I remembered the items but had no idea how to find them. I went deeper into the jungle, but always looking for small landmarks to mark my path in case I got lost and had to retrace my steps. *A fallen tree. A small black berry bush.*

As I went deeper in, I noticed the plants started to change. They became more widespread and larger if that was even possible. They scratched my face and limbs, but luckily the coat provided a lot of protection since it stretched the way to my knees. I started using the knife to move ahead by cutting plants that stood in my path and came upon another clearing. This one was larger than the first one where Old Man Frey lived, and it had multiple huts. I stepped into it, looking for directions and maybe even some food, but the second I stepped in, everyone stopped what they were doing to look at me. They stared at the overcoat that I wore. It was deep brown and rugged with many scrapes and was patched in many places. The people whispered amongst themselves and decided in the end to ignore me. I walked on, but they shuffled aside every time I got close enough to speak to one of them. Then someone shoved me onto the ground and walked on, unaffected. *What was it with these people?* Then I came upon a hut that was larger than the others and read the sign on the door.



*Merlineers Not Welcome.* I realized this was another town and it obviously hated Merlin, as he signs clearly stated. I had no idea what history had passed between these two places, but leaving seemed a safe choice. I skittered out of there at top speed, but someone grabbed me by the collar and yanked me back.

“Never try to pull something like that again,” he said into my face. He let go and let me fall to the ground. “Spies,” he muttered under his breath as he left.

That was when I realized why the lumberjack had attacked me, he probably thought I was from *this* town. A spy.

Soon I was back in the tangled underbrush of the forest, cutting through vines hither and thither and I soon came upon another problem. I went into a clearing where there was a small ledge which formed a sort of underhung. Under the ledge slept the largest bear I had ever seen. It had shaggy black fur, and its snout glistened with moisture. Its deep breathing seemed to echo all around the clearing with a faint rumble. I did not intend to wake its slumber, for I knew that would lead to trouble. I slowly sidestepped the ledge and walked across, barely daring to breathe. When the bear rolled over, I almost had a panic attack. In a few more seconds, I was out of earshot, and I sighed with relief. That was a close one.

That was when I realized where I was. I was standing at the edge of a plain of grass with a lake beyond that. A large cliff stood at the other end of the lake. How was I going to find *anything*? It was late afternoon, and I had found nothing but trouble for myself. There was no way I could leave this place tomorrow, and staying here for another month was a terrifying thought.

I sat down on a rock and sighed. That was when I heard the grass sway for a solid 10 seconds, but there was no wind. I looked up in fear of an animal lurking in there, but there was nothing. *Tolling grass. Tolling grass.* I checked my watch. It was 4 pm on the button. Was this grass a kind of natural *clock*?

I found myself running through, gathering grass at top speed. I found some string in the bag the old man had given me, and I tied the blades together in 12 neat bundles. I was feeling more motivated and realized that the lake beyond must be the sacred lake! I left my bundles and dashed through the plain, clutching the large cork bottle I had been given for collecting the water. I took a lot more than 5ml, but the exact measurement could be taken later.

The next time on my list was a rock from the cliff I needed a way to get across the water, but as I looked around, I saw nothing. It was probably not very smart of me to think someone would just magically leave a raft for me here. *A raft*. I had seen all kinds of videos about how people build rafts in the wilderness all on their own. All I needed was a bundle of logs and some vines. Both things were plentiful. I took out the small hatchet and soon I had the materials laid out in front of me. I was sweating with the exertion, but I bundled everything together with a strong knot I had learned at summer camp. *Let's do this*, I thought to myself.

A few minutes later I was sitting on the small raft with a club-like stick in my hand to use as an oar. It was slow going at first, but as I approached the face of the cliff, I noticed another thing. It was a towering tree right at the very top of the cliff. Its sheer size stood out and it was gray with no leaves whatsoever. *The Grey Tree*.

When my raft bumped against the rocky shore of the lake, I jumped off. The sun was beginning to set, and I did not have much time to gather the last of the material needed. I also had to have time to make my way back to the old man's house because he was the one he could show me how to make the portal.

When I approached the cliff face, a small rock broke off and struck me square in the head. It hurt, but it was a part of the cliff. *A piece of rock from the cliff at the edge of the land*. Now that was done too and the only thing left pending was to find out how to get up to the tree that stood at the top of the cliff, looking over the land beneath it.

I realized I was going to need some kind of rope, so I looked around and saw a clump of bushes tangled together with vines that spread everywhere. I cut off the whole thing and made a sort of lasso and launched it towards one of the tree's branches. I missed the first few times but got it around one of the limbs soon enough. I started climbing slowly at first, but I got faster as I went. It was an odd feeling to have your feet directly in line with your face and it took some time to get used to. When I finally made it to the top, I stretched my arms out wide in victory.

Soon enough I had some wood from the tree with a few quick swipes of the hatchet. I mentally thanked it for holding my weight on the way up and giving me the wood. It deserved it. Soon enough I was back on solid ground and across the lake. The sun had set, and the moon had come out as I moored my craft to an old log sticking out of the water.

My journey back was quite similar, and I travelled through the night. Cutting brambles and vines, I approached the town, which I avoided this time around due to an unpleasant

experience in the past. It was tiring, but I continued, with getting back home as a central goal in mind. By morning I was back at the small hut where the old man lived. He was standing at the door, a mug of tea in his hands. He inspected my materials and gave an approving nod.

He then showed me how to weave the grass together with thin strips of the wood and I followed along. It seemed difficult at first, but soon I got the hang of it. I spent the whole day weaving. Blade by blade.

It was a good-looking creation. The grass blades melted seamlessly, and the strips of wood held the circular part steady. It was also quite large, enough to fit two people at once and I used the stone as a part of the weighted base. When I was finished the old man chuckled in appreciation. I felt proud and the moon was just coming out over the clouds.

“Quick, sprinkle the water!”

I did as I was told and the former nothingness in the center of the portal was filled with a swirl of colors as bright and jubilant as can be. The old man waved, and I smiled.

“Thank you. I could have never done this without you.”

“No problem, son.”

I stepped inside and felt as if I had jumped into a pool without getting wet. The colors revived my tired limbs and mind as I looked behind me. The old man disappeared in the few milliseconds it took for me to travel back. I ended up in front of the painting and smiled. My mom came at that very moment and looked at it.

“Happy birthday, mom!”

“Wow! That is quite a painting! Where did you get it?”

“A place.”

“Well, it’s ok if you don’t want to tell me. I am happy that you got it for me. You are such a responsible and caring young man!”

I smiled. *Yes, I am*, I thought. *Yes, I am*.