

“It’s just a thought, but when I popped out earlier to buy the honey wart I happened to notice a magical transportation store at the top of the hill. Perhaps we could stop by there and have a look around?”

“A magical transportation store,” Sarah repeated, her eyes shining brightly. “Oh, we have to go and check it out, Monty - even if we can’t buy anything.”

“That’s settled,” said Monty jumping up to help the creaky old waitress, who was struggling desperately beneath the weight of the tray she was attempting to carry. “Let’s tuck into our cream teas and then we can head on over there.”

Monty poured out steaming hot cups of tea for everyone, which they sat back and enjoyed whilst watching the strange and wonderful people that frequented the uneven and precarious streets of Tumbledown Town file past the café window.

They even bumped into the indomitable Sadie again, who simply insisted that they spend another night at the Serpents Broth when she discovered they had to wait until tomorrow for Jack’s growth potion to be ready.

They left the café soon after and Monty led the way up a horribly steep – especially after a plate of warm scones, whipped cream, and strawberry jam - and winding hill. However, after a short but exhausting climb, they soon found themselves standing outside the rather grand entrance to *Ernie’s Emporium of Magical Transportation*.

A tall, thin man greeted the tired group warmly as they entered the store, and Sarah assumed that he must be Ernie. He had ruddy red cheeks and the most unfortunate mousey brown comb-over atop his peanut-shaped head. He had quite obviously been losing his hair for some time now, but instead of shaving it all off he simply insisted on basting down the few remaining strands he had left clinging to the top of his head in a shocking attempt at covering up his shiny bald noggin.

“Welcome, welcome,” he cried, shaking Monty and Sarah vigorously by the hand. “And how may I be of service today?”

“We were hoping that we might have a little browse around your fine store,” replied Monty, slowly removing his paw from Ernie’s tight, sweaty grip. “You see, my friends and I are on our way to the Silent Forest and we were hoping you might have something to make our journey a little swifter.”

Ernie grinned, revealing stained, yellow teeth. “Hope no more, sir,” he exclaimed. “You, sir, have come to the right place. I ‘ave every form of magical transportation you can imagine under this ‘ere roof, and I’m certain I’ll be able to find something to suit your needs or my name’s not Ernie Specklesworth III. I assume we are looking at a mode of transportation for just the two of you?” he inquired, peering closely at Monty and Sarah.

Monty coughed nervously. “Actually, it would need to accommodate three,” he said, carefully removing Jack from the front pocket of the knapsack and setting him down next to a colossal brass scale on the counter.

“I *see*,” said Ernie, eyeing Jack up and down with suspicion. “Let me ‘ave a think,” he muttered to himself as he began to cast his eyes along his well-stocked shelves.

Each square inch of Ernie’s emporium was covered from floor to ceiling with every imaginable type of magical transportation. Long boxes of broomsticks were stacked in great piles right up to the top of the roof, and a series of dark mahogany cabinets next to them housed a variety of different wands in varying sizes and colors. A round wooden barrel located at the front of the store was filled with beautifully woven flying carpets which, as luck would have it, were on sale and marked ‘*Half Price*,’ sitting next to a row of shelves that held hundreds upon hundreds of tiny glass vials labeled either ‘*Traveling Dust*’ or ‘*Flying Powder*.’

Ernie stopped pretending to take stock of his inventory and launched into his well-rehearsed sales patter.

“Now, a journey to The Silent Forest is not for the faint hearted,” he began. “So, you will need something far weightier than your average blinking spell or chimney ticket. Those options, while good value for money, I grant you, are really not viable in your particular case.” He paused for a moment. “Now, I would normally be tempted to suggest that you enlist the services of one of my fine flying

carpets, but the last batch I purchased from the traveling market seem to be a somewhat temperamental bunch and I wouldn't like to be responsible for this little fella 'ere being hurled off midair." Ernie smiled condescendingly down at Jack.

"Actually, Jack should be back to his normal size by tomorrow, so that shouldn't be a problem," Monty quickly interjected, before Jack had a chance to say something rude to Ernie.

"Well, now, that changes everything," exclaimed Ernie, looking terribly excited. "You can literally take your pick from my extensive stock of flying unicorns or perhaps an enchanted carriage might be more up your street? In fact, I had a brand-new carriage delivered just yesterday, complete with a team of six flying horses, which would be just perfect for a journey to the Silent Forest, in my humble opinion, of course."

Sarah's eyes grew wide with delight. "Oh, Monty," she sighed. "Can you imagine, flying horses!"

Monty, who knew only too well how terribly expensive these types of things could be, cleared his throat. "So, tell me, how much would something like that cost, Ernie?"

"It's an absolute steal is what it is," enthused Ernie, almost beside himself at the thought of actually making a sale. It had been a particularly quiet month in the magical transportation trade and Ernie, who desperately wanted to get away and have a vacation this year, knew he had to make the most of these eager punters. "A brand new enchanted carriage, with a team of six flying horses and two footmen, will set you back a mere fifty gold coins, my friend."

Sarah's face immediately dropped, and she looked crestfallen. "Oh dear," she said, glancing in Monty's direction.

"I'm afraid that's a little out of our price range, Ernie," said Monty looking rather embarrassed.

Ernie desperately attempted to hide his disappointment. "What sort of budget are we talking about 'ere, if you don't mind me asking?" he inquired, smoothing down his sparse, not to mention awful, comb-over.

"Not a great deal, I'm sorry to say," Monty replied turning an even deeper shade of crimson. "The most we can afford to spend is one gold coin."

Ernie's mouth changed from an eager smile to a slight scowl. He was beyond disappointed and could feel his vacation to the Blue Mountains rapidly slipping away from him. He was not a happy camper.

"You won't find much available to you for *that* kind of money," he sniffed rather dismissively. "I think you are out of luck, matey."

Sarah stared down at the floor feeling utterly crushed. She had allowed her hopes to spiral at the prospect of possibly reaching the Bookkeeper's cottage within the next few days instead of weeks. But judging by the peeved expression on Ernie's face she knew that hope was fading fast.

"If you don't mind me asking, why would you want to be dragging this young lass on a journey to the Silent Forest anyway?" Ernie asked Monty, staring at him with deep mistrust. "Seems like a rather foolish thing to my mind."

"I'm not *dragging* anyone anywhere." Monty puffed up defensively. He then proceeded to explain why he and Jack were helping Sarah locate the Bookkeeper.

"And, you see, we've just lost so much time, what with one thing and another," Sarah said trying not to allow her disappointment to get the better of her. "I'm so worried about my mum and brother and I just want to go home," her voice suddenly broke.

Ernie couldn't help but feel sorry for Sarah, and he decided he just might be able to help her out after all. It reminded him, all too painfully, of the day his own father had walked out on him and his mother. Ernie was only a young lad, around eight years of age, when his beloved father stood up one day, packed a suitcase, and never came back again. He remembered how much he had missed his pops and the tremendous amount of guilt he had experienced, so he could fully empathize with Sarah's plight.

"Tell you what," Ernie said after a short pause. "I just might be able to do something to help you folks out today. Follow me out the back and I'll show you what I have in mind."

Sarah's eyes lit up as she gratefully followed Ernie inside his big, dusty storeroom.

The place was in a bit of a sorry state, with piles of old boxes and wooden crates strewn everywhere, as they made their way towards a small door, located way in the back, marked *Private*. Opening the door with a flourish, Ernie ushered Monty, Sarah, and Jack outside into the large courtyard.

But as her eyes slowly adjusted to the bright sunlight, Sarah had to blink and rub them several times to be certain that she wasn't just seeing things. However, judging by the shocked and horrified expression on Monty's face, she came to the startling realization that her eyes were not, in fact, playing tricks on her at all.

She gulped nervously before taking an enormous step backwards, because there, right there, lying in front of her on a mountain of golden hay was a gigantic, terrifyingly scaly red dragon.

The dragon, who was at least twenty feet long and almost as wide, was lying on its back, fast asleep, snoring its gargantuan and frightening head off. Every so often small bursts of red hot flames would shoot out of the snoring dragon's mouth during a flurry of snorts, which singed everything it came in contact with; including the few remaining strands of hair on top of Ernie's shiny, bald head, causing him to leap forward brandishing a handy fire extinguisher.

"It's his allergies," explained Ernie. "They always play him up during the summer."

"That's a bloody *dragon!*" exclaimed Jack, staring at the beast's gigantic feet, which housed a set of claws that glinted like razor sharp knives in the sunlight.

"Well spotted, young sir," Ernie chuckled. "Let me introduce you to Tiberius: a very rare breed of fire dragon."

"You don't seriously expect us to fly on that *thing*, do you?" Jack asked incredulously.

"Why on earth not?" Ernie snapped, sounding slightly affronted. "I've been doing it for years. And I think you're forgetting, young man, that beggars can't exactly afford to be choosers, now can they?"