

"Mum! Dad!" She ran into the living room and shook them. Neither of them woke, but her dad snorted, and gave a big, slightly dribbly grin.

"More cake?" he muttered. "Just one slice."

"Wake up!" she shouted.

"You're wastin' your breath," said the voice from the tent. "They're out for the count."

"What have you done to them?" she said, marching back into the hall, her anger rising.

"Me? Absolutely nothin'. Anyway, they're happy. Best just leave 'em dreamin' for a bit."

Suzy threw the phone down. "Come out!" she said, stamping her foot for emphasis.

There was a pause. "No."

"I'm not asking," she said, in her best imitation of her mother. She didn't feel half as fearless as she sounded, but the owner of the voice didn't seem to realize that. "Come out here right now!"

"Have it your way," muttered the voice. There was more movement inside the tent, and then something poked its way out between the canvas flaps. It was a nose: the longest, strangest nose that Suzy had ever seen – it was as long as her forearm, hooked, and flanked by a pair of enormous nostrils, which were filled with wiry grey hair. A broad mouth, as wide as a toad's, was pulled into a sneer beneath it, while two small yellow eyes squinted at her over the top. This strange face was set in a round, bald head, with skin as dark and knotted as old tree bark. A huge pair of pointed ears stuck out on either side. Even

more grey hair sprouted from inside them.

"Well?" said the creature, stepping out into full view. "Here I am. Take a good look, why don't you?"

Suzy realized her mouth was hanging open, and shut it with a snap.

The creature, whatever it was, stood almost a head shorter than Suzy, and wore orange overalls on its squat body. A name badge pinned to its chest read *FLETCH*.

"What, I mean...who...? I mean, what are you?" stammered Suzy.

"I'm behind schedule, that's what," said Fletch, elbowing her aside and snatching up the hammer from the floor. "They'll have my ears for slippers if I don't get this connection finished. Out of my way." He slouched past her to the kitchen door, where he stooped and gave the nearest rail an experimental tap with his hammer.

"You put these here?" she asked, coming up behind him.

"Course I did," he snapped. "An' in record time, I'll have you know." He pulled a tuning fork from the pocket of his overalls, flicked it, and set the stem down on the rail. The fork emitted a high keening note, and Fletch nodded, apparently satisfied. "Back in the day, I'd have had a whole crew with me, and we'd have been in an' out in five minutes flat. Blinkin' cutbacks. This job gets harder every year."

Suzy listened without really understanding. "But what are they for?"

Fletch looked as though he was about to reply, but paused with his mouth open. "Never you mind. You've already seen too much. You're not even s'posed to be here."

"Excuse me?" She stamped her foot again, and meant it this time. "I *live* here."

"Which is why you're supposed to be fast asleep and leavin' me in peace," he said, getting to his feet. "I don't know how the prep team missed you. They got those other two." He waved a hand in the direction of Suzy's sleeping parents in the living room. "They're normally very thorough."

"What are you talking about?" she said. "What prep team?"

But Fletch just spun on his heels and marched back to the tent. "I'd make meself scarce, if I was you," he said. "Just go upstairs and pretend you didn't see anythin'. This'll all be gone by mornin'." And before she could respond, he had ducked inside the tent and disappeared.

She stood there until her anger finally overcame her confusion. "Listen," she said, "you can't just turn up in my house in the middle of the night and start telling me what to do. I don't even know what you are! And what about my parents? I demand you wake them up!" But if he heard her, he ignored her. She could see his shadow moving back and forth across the inside of the tent, and heard the sound of rummaging.

She considered following him into the tent, but she was still cautious enough not to want to be stuck in a

confined space with a...whatever Fletch was. A gnome? A pixie? Maybe an elf? But that was ridiculous. Those things didn't – *couldn't* – exist, and she shook the thought off immediately. All she knew for certain was that Fletch was an intruder, which meant he had to be up to no good.

This thought drew her eyes back to the railway tracks. She moved to the kitchen door and pulled it open, wanting to see how far they reached. She was a little surprised to see that they stopped dead, right on the threshold to the room. The kitchen floor was untouched.

"Scuse me."

She was elbowed roughly to one side by Fletch, who had reappeared carrying a black cylindrical rod, about the length of a pencil but much thicker. He swung the door shut again with a crash, and began tapping the end of the rod against the door frame.

"What are you doing now?" she demanded.

"Concentrating," he said. He pressed an ear to the wood. "Not my finest work, but it'll have to do."

Her patience finally at an end, Suzy leaned over his shoulder and plucked the rod from his fingers.

"Oi!" he shouted, jumping to snatch it back.

Suzy held it over her head, out of reach. "I'm not giving this back until you tell me who you are and what you're doing here," she said.

"That's not a toy!" he said, still jumping and waving his arms. "You're stealing. Thief!"

"Intruder!" she countered, and raised herself up on tiptoes.

"That's not fair," Fletch whined, finally coming to a breathless halt. "It's sizeist."

"It's perfectly fair," said Suzy, trying to maintain some composure. "Just tell me, and you can have it back. I promise."

Fletch shut one eye and peered at her sideways. "Really?"

"Really. But neither of us is going anywhere until you cooperate."

Fletch sighed, and his shoulders sagged in defeat. "Alright, you win. But I hope you realize how much trouble I could get into for this."

"You're already in trouble," she said. "With me."

He gave her a resentful look and scuffed a foot back and forth on the carpet. "I'm an engineer," he muttered. "I maintain the lines, and build new ones when they're needed."

"What lines?"

"What lines d'you think?" He indicated the tracks. "These lines. The railway lines."

Suzy blinked. "But the nearest railway line is miles away. And anyway, this is a house. You don't get railway lines in houses."

"Well not normally, no," said Fletch, in a tone of voice that Suzy had only ever heard used on other people. It made her feel a bit stupid, and her skin prickled with embarrassment. "But we're in a bit of a pickle, y'see. The Express got held up at those new border controls in the Western Fenlands, and she's got to make up the time

before her next delivery. Going by the normal route would take an age, so this is a shortcut." He tapped the side of his great nose. "Strictly unofficial, of course. We're not really allowed to set foot in this neck of the woods, but here we are, for one night only, sort of thing."

Suzy didn't grasp most of what Fletch had said, which only made her more frustrated, so she seized on the one nugget that she felt sure she'd understood. "Railways can't just appear and disappear overnight," she said hotly.

"They can when I'm around," said Fletch, with a proud smile. "Fastest in the business, me. Although, at my age, I'm starting to feel it a bit."

"Why? How old are you?"

Fletch puffed his chest out and affected an air of great dignity. "A thousand and ten," he said. "And still two centuries from retirement."

"Don't be silly," she said. "Nobody's that old."

"Really? And how old are you, exactly?"

"Eleven," said Suzy.

"Ha!" Fletch's laugh was so explosive that it rocked him back on his heels. "So I s'pose you know everything then?"

Suzy felt a fresh rush of embarrassment and, hot on its heels, a surge of anger. She was so angry that she could hear her blood singing in her ears. Perhaps her feelings showed on her face, because Fletch began backing away from her towards the safety of the tent, his eyes widening.

"Don't walk away from me," she demanded, but he plunged a hand into his overalls and pulled out an old-fashioned pocket watch. He flipped it open.

“Crikey, where’s the time gone? They’re here!”

Only then did she feel the tremor beneath her feet, and realize that the singing sound she was hearing wasn’t coming from her ears at all – it was coming from the rails.

A rush of cold air barrelled down the hall, and she turned, thinking that the front door had opened. Instead it had vanished, and in its place stood an archway of old stone bricks. She just had time to realize that the world that should have been visible outside it – the street, the houses, the neat little gardens – was missing, replaced by an echoing black void, before she was blinded by the glare of a huge light, racing towards her through the darkness. The scream of a whistle filled the hall, metal ground on metal, and Suzy threw herself backwards as the train bore down upon her.



THE IMPOSSIBLE POSTAL EXPRESS

The last thing Suzy saw before she hit the ground was a train erupting in a whirling mass of wheels, rods and pistons from the tunnel mouth. Then she screwed her eyes shut and, for a second, the world was dark and full of noise. Hot steam gusted over her face, metal screeched and clashed, a whistle howled. She gritted her teeth and clapped her hands over her ears.

The scream of brakes reached a crescendo, and suddenly died away. There was a last outrush of steam, like a sigh of relief, and everything went quiet.

Suzy risked opening one eye.

She had fallen at the foot of Fletch's tent, her feet just centimetres from the track. Rough hands grasped her shoulders and she looked up to see Fletch standing over her, pulling her into a sitting position. She was too shocked to resist.

"What were you thinking?" he said, hopping from foot to foot in agitation. "You almost became an Incident!"

"A what?" she said, her ears still ringing.

"An Incident on the Line! The worst type of Incident it's possible to be."

Suzy looked at him blankly, and wondered what to say. His tone made her want to apologize, but she wasn't sure he deserved it. In fact, didn't he still owe *her* an apology? She was just gathering her thoughts to say so when a new voice called out from somewhere high above them.

"Fletch? Is that you, old chap? What the dickens is going on down there?"

They both looked up towards the source of the voice, and Suzy almost fell backwards in surprise. A mighty old steam locomotive towered over her, hissing and shuddering, and belching yellowish steam from its chimney. It was bigger than any locomotive Suzy had seen before – at least, bits of it were. To her eyes, it looked like a large train had smashed into several smaller ones, and maybe a few buildings along the way, and the parts had all got mixed up and stuck together; its chimney was too wide, none of the drive wheels quite matched, and the cylindrical belly of its boiler was too fat at the front and too narrow at the back. The driver's cab was nothing less than a neat little red-brick cottage, complete with tiled roof, window boxes and a bright-red front door, which stood open on the near side of the boiler.

It was from here that the voice had come and, as Suzy watched, a small figure scampered out of the cottage, and

onto a narrow gangway that ran along the length of the locomotive's flank, a metre or so above the wheels. The figure carried a lantern and shone the light directly down on Fletch, like a spotlight. "Fletch? We didn't just have an Incident, did we?"

Suzy tried to make out the figure's face, but it was just a black patch of shadow behind the glare of the lantern.

"It's worse than that, Stonker," said Fletch. "Look." He hooked a thumb in Suzy's direction, and the light swung over to cover her.

"Good grief, a local! And it's awake."

"Looks like someone on the prep team messed up," said Fletch. "Who was on shift tonight?"

"Not a soul, old chap," said Stonker. "Didn't you get the memo? They did it all remotely."

"Pah!" Fletch spat. "No wonder. What do I keep telling 'em? This remote spell business is all well and good, but you need people on the ground if you want the job done properly. I mean, it's just a sleeping spell. A common tooth fairy could do it."

"Quite right, old boy, quite right," said Stonker, clearly distracted. "But given that it's here, what do you suggest we do with it? We're still behind schedule."

Fletch scratched his scalp and looked Suzy up and down. "I should put a call in to HQ, I s'pose. See if they can send someone to reset 'er memory."

"Don't you dare!" Suzy said, jumping back. "You can't go poking around inside my mind. It doesn't belong to you."

"It's probably for the best," the shadowy figure of Stonker told her. "We're not really supposed to be here, you see. Outside our jurisdiction and all that, and it won't do to have you giving us away. Although having said that, it might take HQ a while to get somebody out here. Couldn't you put a spell on it yourself, Fletch?"

Fletch sucked his breath in through his teeth. "I dunno, Stonks. Memories are fiddly – it's like unknotting spiderwebs. You never know which bit's connected to what. Maybe I could do a confusion spell instead."

"No you won't," said Suzy, backing away. "I'm confused enough as it is." She squinted into the circle of light hiding Stonker. "And I am not an 'it', I'm a 'she', thank you very much."

"Female of the species, eh?" said Stonker. "Afraid I'm not really well versed on the fauna in these parts. Do you have a name?"

"I'm Suzy," said Suzy. "Suzy Smith. And I'd like to know who you are and what you're doing here, please."

"I suppose we do owe you the courtesy." The light bobbed and weaved as Stonker grappled with the lantern, then it flickered out entirely. It took Suzy a few seconds to blink away the red and green smudge it left on her vision, and then she saw him.

He was the same sort of creature as Fletch, though his skin was a flinty grey and less warty and wrinkled. He wore a smart blue uniform, with a coat that reached his ankles and a peaked cap with silver piping. He looked down at her past both his enormous nose and an

equally impressive salt-and-pepper moustache, as thick and lustrous as a badger, which hung down almost to his knees before the tips curled back up into rigid little spirals. His blue eyes twinkled as he spoke.

"J.F. Stonker," he said. "Driver of the Impossible Postal Express. The finest troll train on the rails." He reached up and gave the locomotive's boiler an affectionate pat.

"You're trolls?" she said. "How is that possible?"

"We hadn't intended to stop," said Stonker, "but I'm afraid you wandered onto the tracks. You're jolly lucky the brakes have just been serviced."

"But that wasn't my fault," said Suzy, feeling the temperature rise in her cheeks. "The tracks aren't supposed to be here. None of this is supposed to be here. Including you!" This was all starting to feel terribly unfair.

"Fear not," said Stonker. "We'll be on our way again momentarily, and Fletch will have the tracks up and everything back to its normal proportions in no time. You'll never know the difference."

"*Normal proportions?*" For the first time, Suzy realized there was a question she hadn't asked herself: how could such an enormous steam engine possibly fit inside her house? She looked up past the locomotive, and saw the hall ceiling, impossibly high above her head, the purple light shade like a distant hot-air balloon. The hall had grown to the size of a cathedral without her even noticing.

"What happened?" she said, wide-eyed. "What did you

do?"

"Not really my department, I'm afraid," said Stonker. "Fletch here is the technical genius."

Fletch sniffed. "I try my best."

Suzy hardly heard them. She was running back and forth, trying to take it all in. The living room door was as tall as a cliff now, and she would have to stand on tiptoes if she wanted to reach the top of the skirting board. The kitchen door had vanished altogether, replaced by another enormous stone arch. The tracks didn't end there any more, but ran on into the blank darkness beyond. Her voice echoed in the cavernous space as she cried, "You shrank us!"

"Nah," said Fletch, cocking his head to one side and plucking at the hair in his ears. "I just gave the hall a bit of a stretch, that's all."

"You mean you made everything *bigger*?" Suzy gaped at him, horrified. "But that's worse! How big's the house now? It must take up half the street."

"What sort of a fly-by-night merchant do you take me for?" said Fletch. "I didn't make the outside any bigger, and I haven't touched any of the other rooms. What would be the point of that?"

"Wait a minute." Suzy fought to digest this new information. "You mean the house is still its normal size, even though you've made the hall bigger than the house?"

"That's right." Fletch grinned, warming to his topic. "It's pretty standard stuff, really: your basic meta-

dimensional engineering, a dash of magic and a few bits of double-sided sticky tape. Job done.”

Suzy looked again at the living room doorway. She could still see her parents beyond it, fast asleep and normal-sized, but the doorway itself seemed to flicker and stretch when she focused on it. It only took her a few seconds to realize she was seeing it as both sizes at the same time, but by then it had started to make her feel seasick and she had to look away. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, but that’s impossible.”

“Is it?” said Fletch, feigning surprise.

“You can’t just make something bigger on the inside than the outside.”

“Course you can. It’s simple fuzzics.”

Suzy frowned. “You mean ‘physics’.”

“No,” said Fletch. “Fuzzics. Like physics, only fuzzier.”

“Physics can’t be fuzzy,” said Suzy, indignant that something so precious to her should be treated like a bit of a joke. “It’s either right or wrong. It won’t let you break the rules.”

“That’s why fuzzics kind of saunters past ’em,” said Fletch. “It’s easier than doing everything by the book.” He gave her an infuriating grin, and she was drawing breath to argue her case further when Stonker cleared his throat.

“This is all jolly nice,” he said, twirling the end of his moustache around his finger, “but I’m afraid we really must be leaving. We’re already late and I want to get under way before—”

“Mr Stonker! Mr Stonker!” The voice came from the

direction of the carriages.

“Too late,” sighed Stonker, pinching the bridge of his enormous nose. “Here he comes.”

The train’s locomotive pulled a tender behind it, which was like a large oblong skip on wheels. Suzy assumed it must be full of coal, or whatever fuel the locomotive burned. Behind that were two carriages; the first was big, bulky and cylindrical, like an armoured petrol tanker, but with a row of small portholes in the side and a knot of tubes and chimneys sprouting from the top. The letters *H.E.C.* were stencilled down the side in large white script. The carriage at the rear was smaller, and looked like an antique goods coach, the red paint peeling from its wooden panels.

It was from this rear coach that another troll had emerged, and he was now hurrying towards them, waving frantically. He looked quite different from both Stonker and Fletch; his arms were long, and bent in strange directions, and he seemed to have no legs at all, just a pair of large feet attached directly to his body. Only when he tripped over and landed flat on his face did Suzy realize why he looked so strange – he was wearing a uniform that was several sizes too big for him.

“Aren’t either of you going to help him?” she asked, as the new arrival floundered in a confusion of sleeves and coat-tails, trying to get back on his feet.

“I suppose we ought to,” said Stonker from the gangway above them. “Fletch, be a good chap and help the Postmaster up, would you?”

“Not in my job description,” muttered Fletch. “Why don’t you do it?”

“Because I’m all the way up here,” Stonker said. “Besides, I helped him up last time.”

Suzy shook her head and hurried over to the flailing bundle of clothes. It was hard to tell which bit of the troll was which, so she just reached out, hauled him up and deposited him on what she hoped were his feet. His uniform wasn’t the same as Stonker’s, she saw – it was red instead of blue, and it looked older, more ornate. A tarnished gold medal dangled from the chest, and an old-fashioned horn or bugle was embroidered on one of the shoulders, although the thread was badly frayed.

The bundle shook itself, and another huge nose, followed by a small, wide-eyed face, poked out from above the collar of the coat. This troll’s skin was a pale lichen green, and hardly wrinkled at all. Suzy guessed he was much younger.

“Thank you,” said the troll. And then: “Oh no! A human!”

He leaped into the air in fright, but his feet were already moving by the time he touched down, and he took off like a bullet, swerving around Suzy, and heading for Fletch and Stonker, where he promptly tripped over the hem of his coat and went sprawling once again.

“It’s alright, Postmaster,” called Stonker. “We think she’s harmless.”

The fallen troll said something in response, but his words were muffled by several layers of cloth. Neither of

the others made a move to help him, so, with a weary sigh, Suzy retraced her steps and set him back on his feet. He shrugged the uniform away from his face and gave her a suspicious look. “Are you sure, Mr Stonker? She looks like she might bite.”

“I promise I won’t,” said Suzy.

“She’d have to chew her way through all that uniform first, Wilmot,” said Fletch. “You know they come in smaller sizes, right?”

The Postmaster sniffed and turned his nose up. “I’ve told you before, Fletch, this was my father’s uniform, and his father’s before him. I have a legacy to uphold.”

“The legacy needs longer legs, boy,” said Fletch, with a sly grin.

Wilmot flared his nostrils in response.

“What exactly did you want, Postmaster?” said Stonker. “As you can see, we’re a trifle busy.”

“I came to see what was causing the delay,” said Wilmot. “Our next customer is waiting for us.”

“I’m aware of that,” said Stonker.

“And I can’t just leave the package on her doorstep and run,” Wilmot went on, jiggling from foot to foot inside his uniform. “It needs to be signed for! I don’t want to be the one who rings her doorbell if we’re late.”

“We’ll get there as quickly as possible,” said Stonker. “I’m just waiting for... Aha! Here we are.”

Yet another figure had emerged from the driver’s cab and was ambling along the gangway. Suzy could tell immediately that it was not like the others – it was bigger

than she was, and loped along on all fours. It wore faded blue overalls but was otherwise covered from top to toe in vivid yellow fur. Only when it came to a halt beside Stonker, and reared up onto its hind legs, did Suzy realize what she was looking at.

"Is that a *bear*?" she exclaimed. The creature spared her a curious glance.

"A brown bear, to be precise," said Stonker. "*Ursus arctos*. A bit of a departure for a troll train, I'll admit, but she scored top marks in all her entrance exams. Ursel here keeps the firebox stoked and the wheels turning."

Ursel flashed a set of startlingly white fangs at Suzy, who wasn't sure if the display was meant as a greeting or a threat. She tried not to show her discomfort.

"How are we looking, Ursel?" said Stonker.

"Growlf," said the bear, in a voice so deep that Suzy felt it as a shiver in her bones.

"Jolly good. Well, stand by the valves and be ready to give it plenty of welly. I want to get out of here before anything else goes wrong."

"Grunf." With a last glance down at the assembled audience, Ursel turned and loped back towards the cab.

Suzy felt the question well up in her throat before she had time to stop it. "If it's a brown bear, why is it bright yellow?"

Everything stopped.

Stonker and Wilmot stared at her, looking mortified, and even the train seemed to have quietened its hissing and clanking. Fletch winced. Then, very slowly, all eyes

turned to Ursel.

Suzy clapped her hands over her mouth, as though she could stuff the question back inside. She could tell from everyone's reaction that it had been the wrong thing to say, but it *shouldn't* have been. This whole stupid situation – trolls and bears and trains and just *all of it* – was starting to upset her. Because, while she never would have admitted it, she had always been secretly proud of her ability to understand the nuts and bolts of reality. Now though, it felt as if that reality was tilting underneath her, threatening to throw her off. She just wanted to make sense of it again.

Ursel turned and padded back towards them, dark eyes fixed on Suzy, who was now too terrified to move. *It's going to eat me*, she thought. *Eaten by a bear, in my own house*. But the thought that made her saddest was this: *Now I'll never get to understand what's happening*.

Ursel reared up and leaned over the railing. A string of saliva hung from a large incisor. "Growlf," Ursel grunted. "Grrrrunf orf nnnngrowlf!"

Suzy stood to polite attention, not daring to take her eyes off those fangs. "What did it say?" she said, with a pleading look towards Stonker.

He gave a knowing smile, and his eyes twinkled again. "She said, she's not an 'it', she's a 'she', thank you very much. And it's none of your business if she happens to prefer being blonde."

Suzy looked again at Ursel, with a mixture of shock and relief. "You mean you're a girl?"

This was met with a guttural roar that made everyone jump back.

“What?” said Suzy, trembling with shock. “What did I do wrong this time?”

“It’s a common mistake,” said Stonker, rubbing his ringing ears. “She prefers the term ‘woman’. Something to do with being a responsible adult who pays her taxes.”

Ursel flexed her shoulders and gave a decisive nod, before turning and lumbering back towards the cab. Suzy wasn’t sure it was possible for bears to wink, but she was sure Ursel gave her one as she went.

A few seconds later, steam hissed from between the driving wheels. The boiler rattled and the whole train lurched forward a few centimetres, straining against the brakes. Wilmot turned and dashed back towards the rear coach, his coat-tails flapping behind him.

“I’m sorry there’s no more time for pleasantries,” Stonker called over the rising noise. “I’ll leave you in Fletch’s capable hands.”

Fletch grunted.

“But I still don’t understand what all this means,” Suzy protested. “Where did it all come from? Where are you going?”

Stonker drew himself up and puffed out his chest, as a proud little smile crept onto his face. “From Trollville to the five corners of reality, my dear. No package too big, no postcard too small. Come rain, shine or meteor shower, the Impossible Postal Express will deliver.” He whipped off his cap and gave a theatrical bow as the

locomotive strained forward again, the carriages rattling behind. “Farewell,” he called, steadying himself against the handrail, “and try not to worry. Fletch really is jolly skilled.” He turned and hurried back along the gangway to the cab, slamming the door shut behind him. A second later, the brakes unlocked with an almighty *clunk*, and the huge driving wheels ground slowly forwards.

“I s’pose we’d better get on with it,” said Fletch, cracking his knuckles. He reached to his tool belt and paused. “Where is it?”

Suzy had no idea what he was talking about, but some nervous instinct told her to start backing away as the train lumbered into motion beside them.

“I can’t do the job without it,” said Fletch. He patted his pockets and looked around in confusion. Then his head snapped up and his eyes fixed on Suzy. “You!” he exclaimed. “You took it from me.”

Suzy broke into a backwards trot as Fletch advanced on her. “What?”

“You said you’d give it back. Where is it?”

Before Suzy could answer, she stepped on something hard and narrow, which rolled out from under her, taking her foot with it. She felt a moment of weightlessness before she landed flat on her back.

She sat up, nursing her head with one hand, and looked down to see what she had stepped on. It was Fletch’s metal rod. She must have dropped it when she threw herself clear of the train.

He saw it at the same instant she did, and pounced for it. He was fast, but she was faster – she snatched it up and sprang back.

“Give it back!” he shouted.

“No,” she said. “Whatever it is, you need it to do the confusion spell on me. You just said so.”

Fletch crept towards her, his hands up as though she was pointing a gun at him. “I know how to use it properly. You don’t.”

“I don’t want to use it,” she said. “And I don’t want you to either.”

The engine slid through the archway and was swallowed by the darkness. The huffing of its chimney, the clank of its wheels, the hiss and gush of steam echoed back out of the darkness as it continued to gather speed. Suzy felt a sudden tug – a fear that something very important was right in front of her, but was slipping away.

“Are there really five corners of reality?” she asked.

Fletch stopped, surprised. “Course there are. Don’t they teach you anything useful at school?” The tender slipped through the tunnel mouth and out of sight. “Now give back what’s not yours.” He started forward again.

Suzy didn’t realize she had made her mind up until she started running; not away from Fletch, but towards him. She saw the startled look on his face as he spread his arms wide to catch her, but she was too quick. She heard his little yelp of shock as she rushed past him, and felt the slight tug on her dressing gown as he tried to snatch at

her.

She was running level with the train now, but it was still gathering speed and steadily outpacing her. The tug of anxiety felt stronger, but clearer as well; the world made no sense any more, because of this train and the things that were on it. If she ever wanted to understand it again, she couldn’t afford to let the train go without her. If she did, they would make her forget she’d ever seen it, and she’d live out the rest of her life in blissful ignorance, never knowing any better – and that scared her. That scared her so badly that she put her head down and carried on, with her heartbeat in her throat.

The strange cylindrical tanker that bore the letters *H.E.C.* entered the tunnel, leaving only the old red coach at the rear. It was close enough to touch, but the tunnel mouth was fast approaching and she was running out of ground. She had no idea what would happen to her if she ran on into the tunnel, and she wasn’t keen to find out.

“Stop!” bellowed Fletch.

The carriage slid past her, the leading wheels vanishing over the threshold. The door through which Wilmot had disappeared inside was gaining on her fast. Last chance. She put on a final burst of speed, swerved towards the coach, and jumped.

Her hand closed around the coach’s door handle in the same second that the world around her went dark. The deep echoes of the hall were swept away by the noisy rush of the tunnel. Cold wind tugged at her hair and clothes, and she planted her feet as securely as she could on the

narrow metal step below the door. Looking back, she was just in time to see the tunnel mouth shrinking away into the distance. Framed inside it was the tiny figure of Fletch, standing in the hallway, shaking his fist in anger.