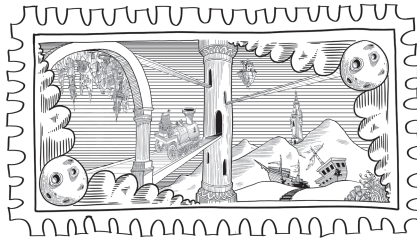


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## THE IMPOSSIBLE POSTAL EXPRESS

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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 hands and 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 died suddenly 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

inches 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 thinkin’?” he said, hopping from foot to foot with 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 toward the source of the voice, and Suzy almost fell backward 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 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 redbrick 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 it and onto a narrow gangway that ran along the length of the locomotive's flank, a few feet above the wheels. The figure carried a lantern and, when they were directly above Fletch, shone the light down over the gangway's safety railing, 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," 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 do it yourself, Fletch?"

Fletch sucked his breath in through his teeth. "I dunno, Stonks. Memories are fiddly, 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 gray, and less warty and wrinkled. He wore a smart blue uniform, with a coat that fell to his waist and a peaked cap with silver piping. He looked down at her past both his enormous nose and an equally impressive salt-and-pepper mustache, 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, clearly misunderstanding her, "but I'm afraid you wandered onto the tracks. You're jolly lucky the brakes have just been serviced."