

“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’d 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 locomotive even fit inside the house? She looked up 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 tip-toes if she wanted to reach the top of the baseboard. The kitchen door had vanished altogether, replaced by another enormous stone arch. The tracks didn’t end there

anymore, 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 in that?”

“Wait a minute.” Suzy fought to digest this new information. “You mean the house is still its normal size, even though the hall is bigger than the house?”

“That’s right.” Fletch grinned, warming to his topic. “It’s pretty standard stuff, really, your basic metadimensional engineerin’, 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 in 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, “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.

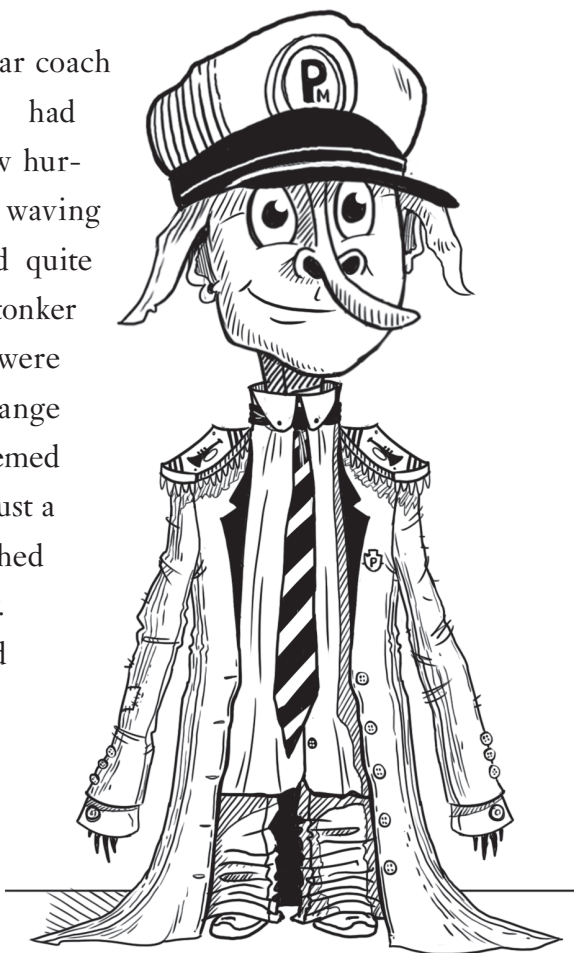
“Too late,” sighed Stonker, pinching the bridge of his enormous nose. “Here he comes.”



The train’s locomotive pulled a large tender behind it, which Suzy assumed must be full of coal, or whatever

fuel the engine burned. Behind that were two carriages; the first was big, bulky, and cylindrical, like an armored gasoline tanker, but with a row of small port-holes in the side and a knot of tubes and chimneys sprouting from the top. The letters H. E. C. were stenciled 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 was now hurrying toward 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 and landed flat on his face did Suzy realize why he looked particularly



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 coattails, trying to get back on his feet.

“I suppose we ought to,” said Stonker. “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 part 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 both 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 than the others.

“Thank you,” said the troll, and then, “Oh no! A local!”

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 all right, 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."

A second figure had emerged from the driver's cab and was hurrying along the gangway; Suzy could tell immediately that it was not like the others—it

was bigger than she was, loping along on all fours in a powerful run. It wore faded blue overalls but was otherwise covered from top to bottom 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 gesture 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 with 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 pep. 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 began loping back toward 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, mortified, and even the train seemed to have quieted 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 it. She could tell from everyone's reaction that it had been the wrong thing to say, but it *shouldn't* have been. This whole 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 toward 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 toward Stonker.

The driver 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 blond."

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 toward 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 an inch, straining against the brakes. Wilmot turned and dashed back toward the rear coach, his coattails 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, eyes twinkling. “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, its carriages rattling. “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 forward.

“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 started retreating slowly as Fletch advanced on her. “What?”

“Where is it? I need it!”

Before Suzy could answer, her foot came down on something hard and narrow, and it 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 away.

"Give it back!" he shouted.

"No," she said. "Whatever it is, you'll use it on me. You just said so."

Fletch crept toward her, his hands up as though she were 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 locomotive slid into the archway. 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, drawing the carriages ever closer to the tunnel mouth. 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 toward 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 bathrobe 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 anymore because of this train and the things that were on it. If she ever wanted to understand the world 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 she put her head down and ran until she could feel 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 was gaining on her fast. Last chance. She put on a final burst of speed, swerved toward 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.