The Great Brain Robbery - Extract

Suzy's rucksack was packed and ready, and hidden under her bed. She pulled it out and hurriedly double-checked the contents. She had a water bottle, a notebook and pen, a towel and a small first-aid kit. But, most importantly, she had a large book bound in dark red leather.

Its cover was scarred and pitted, with several deep slashes running across it, but the title, embossed in gold, was still legible: *The Knowledge: An Instructional Handbook for Impossible Postal Operatives*. She pulled it out and flipped it open to the handwritten dedication on the title page:

Dear Suzy,

No one ever became a Postie without a copy of The Knowledge *to hand, so I've sent you mine. Take its words to heart and they won't let you down. It's also thick enough to use as a shield against angry Thrippian bowmen (in case you were wondering about the state of the cover). See you soon!*

Sincerely,

Wilmot x

As always, Suzy smiled at the words. Wilmot was a troll. He was also her boss, the Postmaster of the Impossible Postal Express, and her best friend, and she had missed him more than anyone else these past two months. The book, like all her correspondence with the Impossible Places, had magically appeared on the doorstep one morning, probably via a remote spell of some sort. She knew it couldn't have been delivered by hand, as the Express was out of action. But all that was about to change…

She flipped through the book until she found her invitation, kept flat between the central pages. It was printed on thick, cream-coloured paper and, in elaborate, looping handwriting it read:

His Trolltanic Majesty, King Amylum III, ruler of all Troll Territory, cordially invites you to attend the inauguration and re-launch of the Impossible Postal Express at Platform 100 of Grinding Halt Station, Trollville.

Formal dress required.

She replaced both the invitation and the book in her bag and hurried to her wardrobe, throwing the doors wide.

It was stuffed full of winter coats, old jumpers and shoes, but she reached through them, feeling for the secret hanger she had suspended from a nail right at the back. She found it, and pulled out a uniform of smart red felt and glimmering gold brocade. She paused to pick a bit of fluff off the sleeve of its long coat and run her thumb over the lettering of the badge pinned to its lapel:

The Impossible Postal Express

Deputy Postal Operative

Suzy changed quickly and took a moment to soak up the feeling of finally being in her postal uniform. It felt very good indeed – the uniform consisted of black trousers with gold piping down the seams, a white shirt with a red waistcoat, and a red greatcoat that fell to her knees. The coat had the same gold piping as the trousers, large circular gold buttons embossed with the Impossible Postal

Service crest, and satisfyingly large pockets. There was also a red cap with a black peak and, last of all, black boots. After a moment's thought, she left the boots in the wardrobe and instead pulled on her trainers, which were also black. They were more comfortable than the boots and, on her last visit to the Impossible Places, Suzy had done a lot of running – mostly for her life. *It certainly beats pyjamas and slippers,* she thought.

Suzy had barely laced her trainers up when there was a knock on the door and Fletch let himself in without waiting to be asked.

"Ready to go and be a Postie?" he said.

Suzy shouldered her rucksack and gave him an enormous grin. "Absolutely!"

Suzy could feel the excitement running through her as she followed Fletch downstairs and along the hall to the cupboard under the stairs.

"Here we go," he said.

"What, in there?" she said, surprised. The cupboard was small, and crammed full of cleaning equipment and spiders. At least, it had been, because when Fletch opened the door, she saw a dark and cavernous space, as big as her school assembly hall. It was lit by a lamp standing on an old-fashioned pump cart – a simple rectangular platform on wheels, powered by a large see-saw handle mounted in the middle – which in turn stood on a pair of tracks that ran to the dark opening of a tunnel mouth ahead of them.

"I made a few adjustments," said Fletch, starting towards the pump cart. "You know how it is."

As an interdimensional engineer for the troll railways, it was Fletch's job to lay new tracks when they were needed. Sometimes that meant squeezing them, and the trains they carried, into spaces that were never designed to take them. In those cases, a little stretching of the local dimensions was called for.

This was all possible thanks to fuzzics, the strange collision of science and magic that lay behind most troll technology.

"At least you didn't take over the whole hallway this time," Suzy said, climbing up onto the pump cart with him.

"Yeah, well," he said. "I'm being discreet." Fletch released the brake, and the cart began rolling towards the tunnel mouth. "Next stop, Trollville," he said, giving Suzy a wink.

Suzy trembled with excitement from her cap to her trainers. After two months of waiting, she was finally heading back to the Union of Impossible Places.