

# THE RED EXPRESS

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## Parameters Form

<b>Team Details</b>	
<b>STATE:</b>	VIC
<b>DIVISION:</b>	Middle School
<b>SCHOOL/GROUP:</b>	Box Hill High School (BOX HILL)
<b>TEAM NAME:</b>	WRITERS WRITE RIGHT?
<b>TEAM ID:</b>	906

## Parameters and random words

Parameters		Random Words
<b>Primary Character 1</b>	Council worker	ruby
<b>Primary Character 2</b>	Coder	melts
<b>Non-human Character</b>	Eagle	shiver
<b>Setting</b>	Train	tasty
<b>Issue</b>	Fundraising event	sponge

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# Prologue

A sudden rush of anger boiled through her as she started up her laptop. Glistening on the table to her left lay her creation. Glistening feathers covered up the mechanics allowing one to feel as if they were staring at a majestic wedge-tailed eagle. Sharp razor-like wings stood firm against the light brown feathers. The darker feathers along its tail created a stark contrast to the rest of the body. Beady, black, intelligent eyes stared at her as she waited patiently for the software to turn on. Her screen slowly loaded.

*70NY\_python.exe has been rebooted*, read a small box of dark green blocky text on her screen. A small smile replaced her straight mouth for a second, then disappeared.

"Okay. Ready, boy?" she said, looking at the eagle.

The eagle's head slowly glided upwards, the lifeless eyes staring towards its programmer.

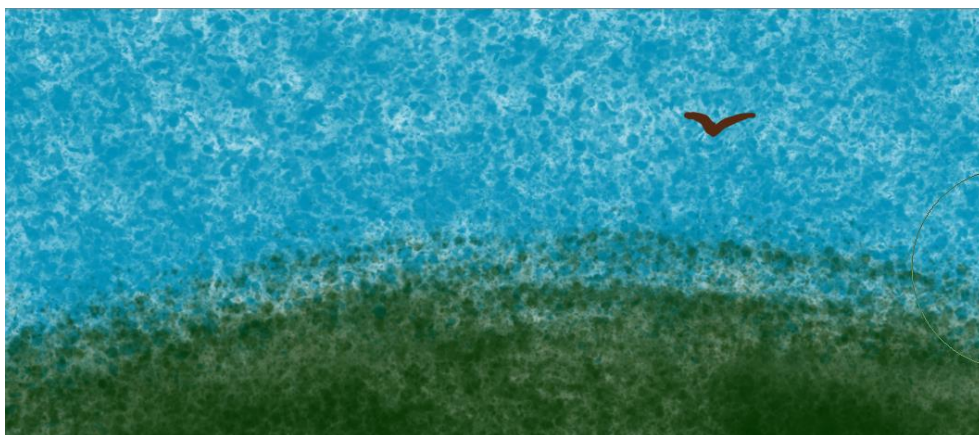
Two snaps from her fingers made the bird fly and perch softly and silently onto her shoulder.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she whispered, walking away from her glowing screen with the robot standing obediently.

The laptop dimmed, about to turn off. Instead, a screensaver flashed a name.

*Arata\_640*

It stayed for only a moment. Then it was gone.



# Chapter 1

"Two slices coming up."

"No sir, we don't sell that."

"Thanks for coming!"

"Hey, get back here!"

Dahlia sighed. Fundraising was possibly the second worst thing she had to do for her Council work, behind managing the small Australian town's sewerage. Her new assignment at the Annuello Council had been to raise funds to restore an old steam train and its station near the edge of the town; get it up and running again, a new paint job, etc cetera.

Fundraising may have been a boring job, but at least Dahlia got to work at the food stalls; this time, the cake stall. Occasionally, she got to take some **tasty** food home from the stalls. Today's choice was a slice of vanilla **sponge** cake.

"Hey, Lia!"

Dahlia turned. "What's up, Polly?"

"The magician we booked can't show up today. He's broken his toe, apparently."

"Another dropout? How many are we on now?" she muttered, rubbing her temples to soothe her headache.

Wincing, Polly replied, "Three, Lia."

"... the jumping castle guy showed up, right?"

Polly nodded.

"Thanks for the update." Her coworker walked away, leaving Dahlia slightly more stressed. Soon enough, another influx of customers came once again. Dahlia's voice mingled with the consumer's comments about the stall.

"Hello, how may I help you?"

"That'll be \$4.50."

"Have a nice day!"

An elderly customer approached Dahlia at the stall. After choosing a macadamia biscuit, he continued to ramble about a gem embedded in the train.

"A **ruby**? On the train?" Dahlia replied politely.

"You really didn't know? Back in the day my mates and I used to talk about it all the time. Some said that its worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Imagine that! Well, thanks for the biscuit."

He hobbled away, forgetting to pay for his food. Dahlia tried calling for him, but he had already disappeared.

"Another customer forgetting to pay, huh?"

Dahlia jumped. "Polly! Stop scaring me like that!"

"I guess people think that you don't have to pay at fundraisers," Polly continued waffling on, "I remember my dad once--"

Stressed, tired and migraine-abundant, Dahlia zoned out as Polly started her long speech and tried to calm herself before the next swarm of sweet-toothed people arrived.

## Chapter 2

After a few hours of selling cakes and pastries, Dahlia began to zone out. There hadn't been any customers for a while and her headache intensified.

She snapped back to reality at the sound of her phone buzzing besides her. She almost got excited, thinking that it must have been a text or a call, but when she looked at her phone, she found that it was neither. Staring at the notification, Dahlia tried to contemplate what was on her phone. Not because it was anything complicated or hard to read; it was quite simple, really. Just a notification like any other, except it was from an unrecognisable app and featured nothing but a short message.

*Stop the fundraiser.*

Dahlia froze. Who was this? Why did she get it? What did it mean? She got up and walked towards Polly.

"Hey Polly, I have to go... clear my head for a bit," she said.

"Lia, what do you mean?" Polly replied.

"It doesn't matter. Just look after the stall, please."

Once outside and away from the crowds, Dahlia grabbed her bike, put on her helmet and rode off. She wasn't sure where to, but she knew she had to leave. Before she noticed, she had ridden toward the edge of the town. An old-fashioned red train peacefully stood at its station. *The Red Express*.

She climbed off her bike, laying it down on a nearby tree stump. She jogged toward the entrance of the train, tying her wavy brunette hair into a ponytail as she went.

Collecting her thoughts, she slowed her pace, taking deep breaths to calm herself - and to make her thoughts more rational.

Maybe it was a silly prank? But then again... maybe not.

Her phone buzzed again in her pocket. Dahlia pulled it out, seeing a notification from the same unfamiliar app.

*Don't go in.*

Her gasp created an echo in her surroundings.

She glanced over her shoulder, but all she saw were grand eucalyptus trees and the odd magpie and crow. The trees rustled slightly with the wind. The sound of a

leaf crunching made her trip on the way up the train stairs, but when Dahlia turned around again, there was nothing there. Just her, nature, and the station. Thinking that she shouldn't fear a silly little prank, she boarded the train. And then her phone buzzed again.  
*I warned you. You're going to regret this.*



## Chapter 3

The message had been enough. Dahlia's heart raced. Thoughts upon thoughts. She had no idea of what was going on and felt completely bewildered. Trying to find a solution, Dahlia tried to steady herself and to stay relatively calm on the outside. Suddenly, her phone gave a little ping...

She knew she was probably going to regret reading the notification.

*Get out of the train and stop the fundraiser or I'll take the ruby.*

Glancing at this, Dahlia began panicking and started looking around for a suspicious person nearby. Then she remembered the man at the stall that mentioned a ruby on a train - was this the same train? She ran through the carriages, and out of the corner of her eye caught sight of a wedge-tailed eagle flying. It was soaring outside overhead the train's many carriages.

*I didn't know wedge-tailed eagles lived around here, Dahlia thought. And I didn't know they looked so shiny, either.*

The more she looked at it, the more it seemed futuristic; the feathers appeared to be covered in flashing steel, and in the sun, it glinted. Glinted. It almost seemed... metallic. Like a robot.

Returning to her own problem at hand, panic settled back in. Dahlia scanned outside once more, covering every area that she could possibly see. A flurry of movement made her eyes dart to that spot, but it was a shadow and her imagination getting the better of her.

Dahlia entered the first-class section of the train, and her eyes widened. She stood face to face with a beautiful, stunning painting; a painting that had an old, rich, wealthy lady posing. The lady almost seemed royal, the way she looked; a graceful poise to her. A necklace upon her neck had a pendant with an odd-looking gem, which caused Dahlia to go closer to it.

As she gently approached the bizarre painting, the eccentric gem seemed stranger. It seemed real, almost.

Like a proper gem.

It had a bright crimson colour, shape, and it glistened, which made it stand out. How could such a gem still be here, in a non-functioning train?



Dahlia kept thinking and started to become more suspicious. Her confusion from the messages continued and thoughts kept flying. After a moment, Dahlia made her decision. Stepping closer to the painting, she grabbed the crimson ruby. It fell out gently into her hand.

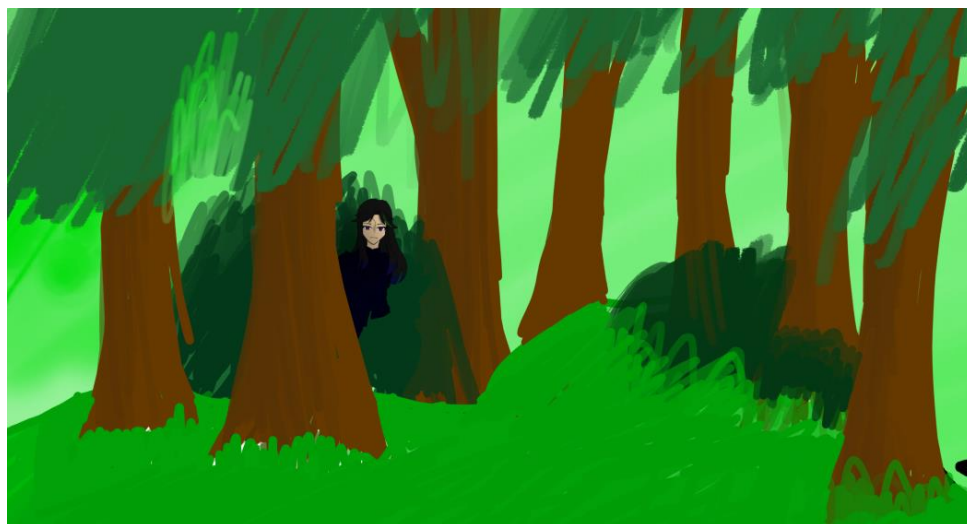
*It must be the ruby the old man was talking about, right? She wondered. Didn't he say it was worth a hundred thousand dollars? That's definitely something someone would want to steal.*

Dahlia glanced out the window again, making sure no one was watching, and then spotted the eagle. She saw it flying down into the canopy of the nearby forest, into near a dim shadowy figure.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps steadily approaching her. A **shiver** ran down her spine as she turned around, finding a girl with green streaked dark hair stood behind her. Her clothes were baggy and black, and hung loosely on her frame like elephant skin.

In a raspy voice, the girl spoke.

"Hello, Dahlia Andersson. My name is Arata."



## Chapter 4

Without thinking, Dahlia ran out of the first-class carriage and kept running straight.

While running away, she turned back to check whether the girl was running after her. There was no one behind her.

Dahlia entered the bathroom in the third carriage and took a deep breath. All these bizarre scenarios were fitting together. The text messages were from this girl, Arata. Was she some kind of hacker? She must've been the one threatening her, and somehow, she knew about the ruby that even a member of the council didn't know about before.

Dahlia eventually left the bathroom stall and checked around for the hacker. Suddenly, a huge eagle with a wingspan of over two metres swooped into the train carriage. It seemed like it was mechanically programmed, due to the light clunks its wings made and the scraping noise of metal against metal.

*This is the eagle I saw before,* she remembered.

The bird started flying towards Dahlia and in response she started to run away. The ruby was still in her hand, and it clicked in her mind: the gem was being targeted. If she was the prey, it would've already attacked. But it was waiting. *Waiting.*

Running was not her strong suit and she started to lose her breath. She quickly shoved the gem into her pocket to leave her hands unoccupied. Dahlia checked behind her to see if the eagle was still following her, but instead of outrunning the eagle, the huge bird seemed to keep getting closer and closer.

Dahlia was panicking, her heart beating faster and faster. She could both hear and feel the rapid thumping in her chest, but she tried to push herself just a little bit more.

The eagle caught up to Dahlia, with the grip of its claws pulling tightly onto the maroon hoodie that she had pulled over her work uniform. Dahlia lost her balance and slipped with the amount of pressure that was being applied onto her back.

The severe pain forced Dahlia onto her back and made her fall over. The ruby that was hidden in the inside of her pocket was hitting against her ribs as she fell over, and somehow it slid out from underneath her and under one of the train chairs.

Not that she could get up and grab it; her head was spinning, and her vision was blurry.

With her sight impaired, Dahlia could still see the figure of Arata crouching down and reaching underneath the rows of chairs. A brown blob of eagle robot perched on top of another chair, its head staring at the hacker.

"There it is," breathed Arata, retrieving the red gem. She whistled, and the eagle took flight again. They walked out of the carriage and towards the front of the train.

A few minutes passed, but it felt like days. Dahlia's whole body ached, but she knew she had to get the ruby. Arata was evil, and she needed to stop her. Using all her strength, she pulled herself up and followed the path that the two before her took.

Dahlia limped through all the carriages she had ran through before. Her limp turned into strides, the adrenaline numbing the pain from the impact. Walking further and further to the front of the train, she realised there was only one place left that they could be: the train engine room.

Taking a deep breath, she flung open the door.

Arata was there with a glowing green laptop plugged into the old rusty computers. Her expression was shocked, but soon turned into a smirk.

"Too late, Dahlia."

With a press of a button, a huge *creak* came from outside, and suddenly the train surged forward. Dahlia was thrown off balance and fell to the floor again.

"Not again," she grumbled, and got up just in time to see the hacker and her pet climb up a ladder outside up onto the train roof.

Dahlia sighed. "I don't get paid enough for this," she mumbled, following suit. She took off after them.



## Chapter 5

Dahlia ran faster, the red, rusted metal carriages flashing past below her. Had trains always been this long? Brushing her hair out of the way, she glimpsed at the girl in front of her.

Arata's long, dark hair swayed as she ran, the eagle flying behind her. Suddenly, the train screeched to a stop. Dahlia jumped as the carriage shook, nearly making her fall off. The two kept running until they reached the very end of the train. Arata stopped running and glanced back toward her.

"Wanna go for a fly, Tony?" she said, looking at the robotic eagle above her. Two clanks of its beak signaled an agreement.

She and the bird leaped off the end of the train, past a small group of bushes, past the end of the train tracks and over a steep drop off a hill.

"Arata!" Dahlia screamed out in desperation. She fell to her knees, trying to look past the bushes. The rough shrubbery covered her vision.

*Get the gem!* She thought to herself.

*No! You're not going to try to get that, are you? Is it that important?*

Dahlia's internal battle distracted her for a few moments before she made up her mind.

Overcoming her (very strong) fear of heights, Dahlia jumped off. She shut her eyes as the wind blew harshly against her pale face.

After a few seconds of falling, she felt herself land on a cold, metallic surface.

She squinted, and almost slipped off her platform. She was still in the air, but atop the hacker's bird. The high altitude made her head spin, so she closed her eyes again and concentrated on holding on to the eagle as tightly as she could.

A high-pitched whistle pierced through the air. Suddenly, Dahlia's ride dropped - and so did her stomach. She screamed all the way down, hyperventilating as she saw glimpses of the ground getting closer and closer.

Her breathing started to level out at the same time the bird did. For a flying lump of metal, it was quite gentle. After a few moments, the eagle settled down onto a grassy, hilly plain, and lightly rolled its passenger off its majestic back. It silently hopped away.



## Chapter 6

Dahlia took a deep breath, taking in the cool mountain air. A couple of metres away from her was Arata and the robot-eagle.

"Tony! Where's the gem, you dumb bird!"

Dahlia spied it right next to her, and quickly snatched it up, returning to her resting position on the grass hill.

She closed her eyes, exhausted. *I could sleep here*, she thought.

"Hey, lady! Oi! Dahlia! Wake up!"

Opening one eye, Dahlia's vision blurred. A fuzzy mess of metal was staring right at her.

She jumped up like a grasshopper. "Woah, not so close, birdbrain."

Arata clicked her fingers, and the eagle flew back to her, landing on her shoulder.

"Who are you?" Dahlia asked, clutching the precious gem close of her chest.

Arata held out her hand. "Alexandra Saito. And this is Tony," she added, her head gesturing towards the metallic bird.

Tentatively, Dahlia shook Alexandra's hand. "Dahlia Andersson."

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "Yeah, it's not like it's written on your little nametag or anything, Dahlia."

"How old are you, Alexandra?"

"Nineteen. Why?"

Suddenly, Dahlia remembered the elephant in the room. She took several hurried steps back.

"Hey," frowned Alexandra, "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong with me?" Dahlia stage-whispered, her grip on the ruby tightening.

"What's wrong with *you*? Why are you trying to steal this? Why were you stalking me? And chasing me? *And* trying to attack me?!"

The teenager held up her hands. "Hey, it was just a little joke. If you give it here, I'll be on my way. You'll never see me again."

"Not a chance, Arata."

"Alexandra. And just let me have it, Dahlia. Nothing bad will happen."

"I doubt that." Dahlia scoffed.

Alexandra advanced towards the social worker. "Give. Me. The. Ruby."

"No."

A low whistle broke through the sounds of the cold breeze. Alexandra's eyes

gleamed, and suddenly Tony launched off her shoulder and deftly swooped down into Dahlia's arms. Yelping, she backed away, and loosened her hold on the gem. The eagle's sharp talons grasped the stone, flew back to his maker, dropped the ruby into her hands.

"Thanks, mate."

"You little- give it back!" yelled Dahlia.

"Not a chance," she said mockingly. Taking a small metal device out of her pocket, she pressed a red button and held the device onto the ruby.

After a few seconds, the gadget beeped. She glanced at the metal box, and her eyes grew wide.

"It's a fake," she murmured.

Dahlia stared at her. "Sorry? What was that?"

"It's ... a fake."

"Hah! Nice try, Arata. Think of a better excuse," Dahlia laughed, a little delirious after the adrenaline rush.

Alexandra's hands wrung hopelessly. "I'm not- I'm not kidding, Dahlia. It's not- I can't-"

"And how would you know that?"

"Because of this."

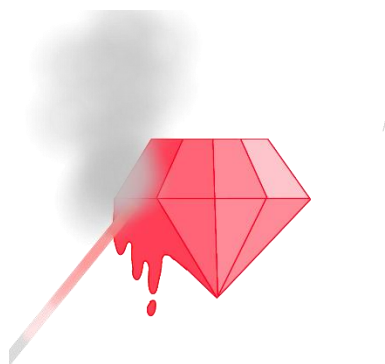
Alexandra's metal device extruded a red-hot metal rod, which got pressed against the ruby. Dahlia's scream echoed in despair, but it was too late. The moment it got touched, the gem - the priceless gemstone Dahlia was supposed to save and protect - liquified and gooped onto the grass.

"WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!" shouted Dahlia.

"Ruby **melts** at around two thousand degrees Celsius. This rod is only fifteen hundred degrees."

"So that means... there was never a real ruby? It was always a fake?"

"...no," breathed Alexandra. "Someone got there first."





# Chapter 7

"Wait, wait... hang on. Someone stole it before *you*?" questioned Dahlia.

"I don't... really know. But I'm guessing someone did?"

"Why do so many people want this gemstone anyway?"

"Leverage." Alexandra sighed. "Do you have any idea how many people the Council wronged, accidentally or purposefully?"

"I don't think we *mean* to--"

"That's just it," she replied, sitting down on the grass. Tony flapped down next to her. "You guys don't think. Because of you, I lost my job. I was homeless for a year."

"Oh."

Dahlia cautiously sat opposite her. "I'm sorry, Alexandra."

"That's what they all say. That's what the Council said when I complained. They never did *anything* to help me. I had to do everything again from the ground up." Lost in her thoughts, Dahlia stayed silent.

"So, I, and I'm betting a bunch of other people as well, decided to somehow take control of the Council, and the easiest way was to take something so important to them that they *had* to listen. I settled on the ruby. But *clearly*," huffed Alexandra, crossing her arms, "that didn't work."

"...I'll give you this, Alexandra," Dahlia said, smiling slightly, "It was a pretty good plan."

She returned the smile. "Thanks. You can call me Alex if you want."

"Tell Tony thanks for saving me, Alex."

Dahlia stood up, held out a hand for the young adult. Alex grasped her hand.

"You know," suggested Dahlia, "I think we could use you amongst our ranks. We need to find the ruby, after all. And you can also help steer the Council in the right direction—we all know we need it."

Alex frowned. "Are you sure? I just tried to steal something from you guys. I don't think I'm a *good* person."

"You're not exactly good, but you're alright."

"Hm. I'll take that deal, Lia."

# Epilogue

"Welcome to your first day at Annuello Council. You ready?"

Alexandra's face was determined. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Dahlia beamed. "Our first assignment is a big one, Alex."

"Find the ruby?"

"Precisely."

"Alright then. Tony?"

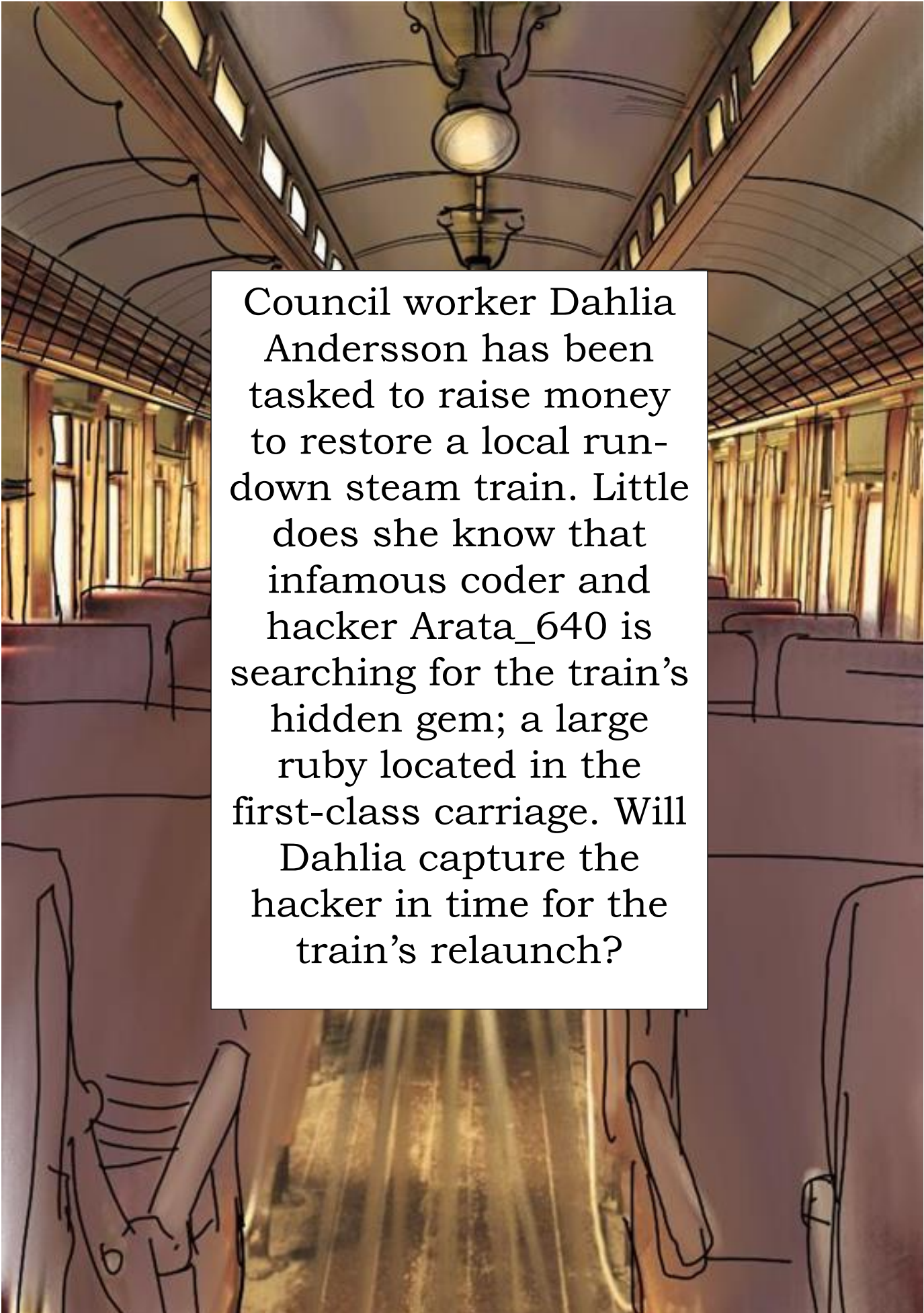
Alexandra whistled, and the robotic wedge-tailed eagle appeared at once, landing on Dahlia's head.

"Hi birdbrain. How are you?"

Tony clanked his beak in return.

"Let's get going, Alex," said Dahlia, walking out of the Council building.

Time to right some wrongs.



Council worker Dahlia Andersson has been tasked to raise money to restore a local run-down steam train. Little does she know that infamous coder and hacker Arata\_640 is searching for the train's hidden gem; a large ruby located in the first-class carriage. Will Dahlia capture the hacker in time for the train's relaunch?