

An early spring breeze stirs the delicate buds on the trees as I gaze out over the ancient walled city of Carcassonne, deep in the south of France. Adjusting the vintage sunglasses I picked up in Milan last week, I take a final sip of my chocolat chaud before heading back to the bustling market where Vincent is waiting for me, all floppy French hair and—

“Attention all passengers. The *Banebury* will soon be arriving on platform thirteen.”

The announcement crashes into my dream. I flip my glossy magazine shut with a grin and shove it into my backpack. The article I was reading is titled “Secret Escapes”—which is fitting—and soon that will be *me*, lapping up the scenery as I make my way across

Europe. My phone's already bookmarked with historic sites I'm dying to see and directions to all the best beaches. Clicking my phone to selfie mode, I force a smile and shake back my curls, appraising myself. I *got* this. Lara Williams, reinvented. Lara Born Anew. My fresh start (Lara's Version). I'm friendly, professional ... *relaxed*. If I say it enough times, who knows, maybe I'll start believing it. Picking up my Frappuccino, I tug my case toward the platform, weaving between hordes of distracted commuters.

I'm expecting the *Banebury* to be grand; after all, it's five-star luxury accommodation. But though I've checked out the glossy photos on the website countless times, I audibly gasp as the train slides into Cardiff Central station. I mean, okay, I knew it wasn't going to be anything like the crappy commuter train I used to take to school, all crazy '80s prints on the seats and perfumed with stale piss, but this ... *this* is an entirely different beast.

It glides effortlessly along the platform like some magnificent stallion, its sleek black paintwork glistening, its windowpanes glittering like diamonds in the February sun. And for a moment, I think I must have got it wrong, that this is an entire echelon above the train someone like me is due to work on, but no, there's the name, painted on the side of the carriages in glorious golden, looping letters:

The Banebury

Through the windows, I spy plush crimson seating, acres of polished wood, and delicate crystal light fittings.

This is some fancy shit.

I'm early—I always am—wanting to scope out my surroundings and the people I'll be working with in advance. As the train finally stills, I wait to see if anyone disembarks, but the doors remain stubbornly closed, with no sign of any passengers within. I hesitate outside the carriage nearest me, wondering if I should knock. But seconds later, there's movement behind the window, and a tall, serious-looking woman with neat black braids opens the door. She squints down at me.

"Lara, yeah?" Her accent is pure South London. I smile, relaxing immediately—the image of the sneery old posh guy I'd pictured as my boss thankfully dissolving.

"Hey! Yeah, that's me."

"Recognize you from your photo. I'm Shoshanna. Well done for being early—good start." She steps aside and, with a flourish of her white-gloved hand, gestures into the darkened interior of the carriage. "And *welcome ...* to the *Banebury*."

At her invitation, I climb on, clumsily hauling my suitcase behind me.

"Leave that here a minute," she says, gesturing at my case, "while we wait for the others. I'll give you a quick tour so you can orient yourself. Follow me."

Together we step into what must be a dining carriage, the air expensively fragranced with a fresh floral scent. Roses, I think—my grandparents are big gardeners. My shoes sink deep into a plush carpet that is the color of ripe plums. What I notice first is how *warm* everything is, how welcoming. From the yellow-toned gold of the fixtures to the amber-colored wooden surfaces, all polished within an inch of their life, everything in this carriage glows with its own internal light. Elegant crystal glasses stand regimentally on mirrored shelves below fussy glass lamps that peer out from the walls like curious, long-necked swans. Upon a magnificent sideboard, inlaid with mother-of-pearl in checkerboard patterns, are several etched-silver champagne buckets. Velvet-padded seats in a vibrant peacock print sit politely beneath tables draped in white cloths, each bearing its own delicate little Tiffany-style lamp.

"*Wow*," I say, my voice hushed with awe. I genuinely have no words. Shoshanna snorts. "I know, right?"

As she leads me through the train, the luxury seems to increase with each subsequent carriage. Through the dining room is a shimmering bar topped with milky, gold-veined marble, behind which is an expansive art deco mirror etched with candy-pink stained-glass feathers. Rose-gold stools topped with plump cushions in a playful shade of watermelon stand in a perfectly spaced arc about the bar.

“So this is the Dahlia Bar ... and then through here ... the Cedar Lounge.”

The lounge is a cozy but opulent space crammed with pillowy burgundy couches and low tables stacked with pricey-looking tomes on fashion and architecture. Arched windows framed in gold are accentuated with tapestry drapes, and the floor is a carpenter’s marvel: upon it, delicate polished stars interlink, each composed of three kinds of wood.

“Next, we’ve got the Azalea Coffee Lounge.”

Shoshanna’s meager words do not remotely do justice to this sumptuous homage to dark academia, complete with an antique, globe-style drinks trolley and artfully disheveled leather armchairs. A fully stocked coffee bar is discreetly hidden within carefully crafted bookshelves, each stuffed with leather-bound tomes imprisoned behind delicate gold filigree mesh, presumably to prevent them from flying off once the train starts moving. Gazing balefully down from the higher shelves are several slightly eerie, although well-kept, examples of taxidermy.

In sharp contrast, the following carriage is a sleek, airy viewing lounge in cool shades of cream, sage, and heather. Delicate settees and chaise longues face crystal-clear picture windows. In the next and final carriage, a lustrous black grand piano dominates, surrounded by a scattering of chic golden tables and black-leather stools. A gold-etched sign decrees it the Orchid Lounge.

Shoshanna stops here and gestures about. “So ... as you can see, we’ve got all the usual things you’d expect on a train like this— dining carriage, bar, couple of lounges ... there’s an onboard chef, so you don’t have to worry about making meals or anything like that. As we make our way back through the train, I’ll show you the sleeper cars and the staff quarters, where you can dump your suitcase and get changed.”

At the other end of the train, past the communal areas, is a series of darker, narrower corridors carpeted in gold-flecked navy. On one side is a row of closed doors set into glossy dark wood, each bearing some ridiculously convoluted name engraved onto a brass plaque: the Amaryllis Suite, the Jacinda Suite, the Oleander Suite.

Shoshanna unlocks a door at random and gestures for me to look inside.

“Pretty swish, huh? You’d want it to be ... for the price.”

It’s like peering into an intricate jewelry box. A bottle-green leather couch faces an enormous picture window, beside which is a low glass table bearing several crystal decanters in the shape of swans. Beyond that, half obscured by the swoop of an emerald-velvet drape, is a king-size bed that takes up the entire width of the room. Crisp white sheets peek out beneath an embroidered coverlet. For a moment, I’m outrageously jealous that people are allowed to travel like this.

“I’ll tell you how to make up the cabins once everyone’s here. For now, let me show you where you’ll be bunking.”

We pass through another carriage of passenger suites until Shoshanna unlocks a door leading to a more utilitarian-looking area. Here the space is much plainer, the walls a dirty off-white. As in the previous carriage, there is a row of closed doors to our left, although the gaps between them are noticeably narrower. Shoshanna stops outside the first door, gray and unadorned. No brass plaques here.

“And this is you. You’re lucky, actually. Usually, staff have to bunk together, but as you already know, *this* is a limited journey—skeleton staff, fewer passengers than usual—until we get to Tallinn and pick up the regular staff and full-paying customers.”

Her words send cold reality crashing over me—a reminder that this was the only reason I managed to score such a good job. I applied for the opportunity the very first moment I heard about it last fall, along with some of my old school friends. Back then, it seemed like the perfect way to spend our first summer after graduation—working for the first few weeks but in *luxury*, then backpacking home across Europe.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, due to my complete lack of any relevant experience, my application was almost immediately rejected. Until a few weeks ago, that is, when, several dull months into an unexpected gap year, I was contacted by the company and offered a similar position on one of their off-season trains. Two weeks’ work for a pretty decent sum of money—enough to get me back home in

style. I accepted mere seconds after opening the email. To quote my friend Casey: For once, the planets seemed to have aligned. After a long run of nothing but bad luck, here was the perfect opportunity to turn things around while I waited to re-sit my exams in May. It wasn't as if I had much else to do, and I hoped that working would take my mind off the fact that my social life had recently dwindled to nothing, leaving me festering in my bedroom watching *Supernatural* reruns and consoling myself with the odd tub of ice cream.

Anyway, *off-season* actually sounds much more my speed than the original offer. From what I can gather, I'll be strictly making up the numbers as the *Banbury* ambles across Europe to its official starting point, Tallinn, where the professional staff get on, along with all the millionaires. I'll be leaving the train there and traveling back to Wales, hopefully catching some early spring sun on the way.

"Right, then, I'll leave you to get sorted while I look out for the others," Shoshanna says. Once I've retrieved my case, she hands me a neat stack of monochrome clothes and checks her watch. "Team meeting in the Cedar Lounge in about half an hour, okay?"

Opening the door, I shrug off my heavy backpack and scope out where I'll be staying for the next couple of weeks. There's a narrow, metal-framed bunk bed that gives me prison vibes, a chipped fold-down table beneath a meager slit of a window, and a slim built-in armchair. Opposite the bunk, a door leads to an imaginatively small bathroom containing a toilet and a mini sink. No shower—but I assume they're shared—and at least I have my own toilet. Besides, anything is going to look disappointing after the opulence I've just walked through.

Heaving my suitcase onto the bottom bunk, I splash my already sweaty face with water, apply a quick slick of mascara, and pull my unruly blond curls into an approximation of a neat bun. Next, I get changed into the uniform Shoshanna handed me. It isn't exactly something I'd *choose* to wear: a black knee-length pencil skirt (that, in all honesty, is probably a size too small) and a starched-collared white blouse, all topped off with a fussy burgundy scarf that conveniently matches a lot of the train's upholstery. A badge declaring my name is the finishing touch. Tucking a loose strand of

hair behind my ear, I smile, close-lipped, into the mirror, barely recognizing the professional-looking person staring back at me.

"You *got* this," I remind my reflection sternly.

A loud bang comes from the cabin beside mine—the sound of a door being flung open too exuberantly—and I jump. Attaching the old-fashioned set of keys Shoshanna gave me to my belt loop, I go to see what the noise is all about, narrowly avoiding walking directly into a tall, rangy figure with a tangle of dark hair shoved beneath a baseball cap. Immediately, I catch his eye, and time seems to slow.

"Oh," I say, momentarily lost for words. "It's you."