

Harriet rushed into her rooms, arms full of scrolls and tomes stacked far past her head. Long apprentice robes tangled around her legs, she nearly tripped over in her haste, and for a handful of seconds she danced an embarrassing jig trying not to lose her balance. It was no use; by the time she stopped moving she had dropped most of her burden anyhow, the floor around her covered in dusty parchment papers and heavy books.

Sighing, she carefully set down the meagre pile of reading material still pressed to her chest, and looked around mournfully. Open books stared back at her, their pages folded and torn, or wearing a boot footprint. Harriet found herself fighting back tears. This would no doubt earn her the ire of her tutors, let alone the fearsome chief librarian. Their disappointed faces and words of condemnation came to mind all too easily, familiar from the trouble she'd gotten herself into in the past.

She lost the uneven battle and launched herself onto her bunk, wet eyes streaming. She was likely facing expulsion regardless. The College of Artificers had rejected her final paper twice already; a third time would be unheard of. Even if she did manage to pass this semester, the junior classes were already pointing and laughing behind her back. It was humiliating.

Things would probably be best if she just snuck out one night and never looked back. At least that might spare her the long walk of shame towards the school gates, cruel heckling following each step.

The sun had begun to set by the time she had composed herself, the tall hat on her bedside table casting a long shadow into the room. Truthfully, Harriet didn't know why she had picked it up from the flea market down in Addicts Alley, or even why she had gone to such a notorious location in the first place. Such bold behaviour was completely unlike her, better suited to the daring and extroverted girls in her classes than nervous little Harriet.

The young Engineer barely had the purse for such frivolous spending, but thinking back she was sure the old hag at the stall hadn't charged her much. She vaguely recalled a pair of grubby hands thrusting the hat towards her all too well, but no part of haggling over the price.

Harriet rolled over to consider the strange headwear.

It was quite unlike anything she'd seen before, in the style once worn by pompous old gentlemen, but all proportions exaggerated. The brim was too wide and the trunk projected up into the air comically, flaring outwards like a trumpet. The material seemed to be stitched together from multiple sources, a patchwork of messy fabric that didn't match in the slightest.

Her nose wrinkled. From the damp smell, clearly it had been for a swim, too.

She snickered, despite her foul mood. What would the other girls say if she turned up to class wearing such a silly thing? One hand snagged the hat as she rose from her cot, padding over to a tall mirror set in the corner. The hat in her hands seemed even more extravagant in the distorted glass, far larger than life. It tingled to the touch, warm from sitting in the sun all day.

Grinning impishly, she took hold of the thick brim in both hands and pulled it on, over her head.

'Harriet? Harriet!? Answer me at once if you're hiding in there!' The voice came from the other side of the door, accompanied by the loud drum of bare knuckles on wood. Without waiting, the owner of both rudely swept into the room, pausing on sight of the sprawling mess covering the floor.

'What on earth do you think you've done, young lady?!' The chief librarian's face had turned purple, glasses slipping rapidly down her patrician nose, veins standing out against pale skin at her temples.

'Young lady?' Harriet looked down at herself before returning the older woman's stare. 'Why, I suppose I am at that.' She twisted her shoulders, marvelling at how narrow they were. 'Such novelty! I must admit haven't been this short for quite some time - I'd fair forgotten how close the ground really is.'

The librarian looked at her quizzically. 'What are you babbling about?'

A wide grin crept over Harriet's face. 'Don't worry, old girl. It would take far too long to explain. You could be a charmer though and tell the dean that I'll be clearing out later today - after all, the Hat must step where she must, and where her inclination may take her.'

Exasperated, the librarian threw up her arms and stalked away.

The young Engineer looked at herself in the mirror. 'Well, Harry, it looks like you're back once more. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Think I'll even take the name myself, if you don't mind.'