



The tower was his retreat, the night his refuge.

During the day he was the subject of ridicule. The children stared. The old women whispered, shaking their heads as he passed by. He would curse them under his breath and pull his hood down.

Rune's days were harsh, soured by the small minds and cruel tongues of the villagers that called Wentletrap home.

But the nights were his.

And most nights, by candlelight, he would shape with knowing fingers a crude little figure, a man, out of the red clay he gathered from the rolling hills just beyond the shore. He would thrust two arched sticks into the clay man's back, and to these he carefully attached feathers. Albatross, gull, and osprey.

His ancient books kept him company, and they had taught him the right words. Whispering them into the sour-salt air, the wings of his creation would beat once, twice, and then the clay man, his homunculus, would fly. It would soar over the moonlit ocean until the morning came and the cruel sun cracked the clay, wilted the wings, and stole the magic away.

But before the blasted rays of daylight destroyed them, the homunculi would return to Rune's tower bringing back ingredients from their journeys. Leaves, hair, teeth, sand, among other things. Most common enough, some rarer than rare. Occasionally, if Rune was lucky,

clutched in one of the creatures' tiny fists would be a shell. Always white, but of different sizes, shapes, and textures.

When the shells came back to the tower, Rune's stern face would soften just a touch, and the barest hint of a smile would play across his lips.

Last night had been one of those delicious evenings.

And so, from his day amongst the rabble, he had recalled the particularly hateful sneer of Old Lady Turnbull, the baker's wife. He hadn't forgotten that brat Bilga and the mud she'd kicked across his shoes either.

With his lips nearly pressed against the chest of his little winged man, he'd given it one last set of instructions, breathing mischief into its heart. Then, as the homunculus zipped not east out to the sea but west into the village, Rune had walked down the spiral steps that ran along the curved wall of his tower.

At the bottom he repeated his route, but this time slowly. His fingers bumped along the shells that covered every inch of the wall, the intricate patterns glowing softly at first and then more brightly the further up his keep he went. From floor to floor he climbed until he stood once again on the uppermost story.

To the casual observer it would appear that here, too, the wall was carpeted with shells, but just above the casement of the large window overlooking the dark sea, a space no longer than a finger remained.

He held the shell to the wall and spoke the words he knew so well. When he took his hand away the shell stayed put, glowing so brightly along with the others that Rune could hardly bear to look.

The shells' light reached its zenith and then dimmed, but an afterimage of the swirls and whorls Rune had so carefully rendered on his tower walls remained, dancing across his vision and filling the rest of his night with reveries of years past and lost love.

Now, as the first tepid rays of sun slid through the perpetual fog that surrounded his tower and the sorry little village nearby, he crossed to the western facing window and opened it wide.

Directly below him the curve of his tower plummeted to a rocky piece of land. As the tide was in, the sharp rocks and weather-beaten keep formed a tiny island half a mile or so from the shore.

High tide was Rune's favorite time of day. He could rest peacefully knowing that none of Wentletrap's citizens would disturb him. During low tide the swirling eddies of the black ocean would recede, revealing a greasy spit of land just wide enough for a single footpath. More often than not a shucker or fisherman or some other human flotsam would shuffle out of the godsforsaken village to cross the spit and stand at the bottom of his tower, shouting out in graceless tones for assistance, occasionally, or retribution, more commonly.

He expected Old Lady Turnbull or Bilga's father would be paying him a visit later, dirty and grey and cursing his existence. Although it might be difficult for Old Lady Turnbull to make the trip herself, what with the swelling and the stink, not to mention the boils, so perhaps it'd be the baker himself. Rune might even give him the antidote if he came bearing a conciliatory basket of scones. Bilga's father, on the other hand, was on a fool's errand, for while baked goods might temporarily melt Rune's cold heart, nothing could move him to offer a cure for the terminally obnoxious teen.

Smiling now, Rune stepped away from his territorial view of Wentletrap and its miserable environs. He was about to descend the stairs for a well-deserved cup of tea and early morning nap when a strange movement caught his attention out the opposite window. Quickly crossing the floor he tore open the casement and leaned out, certain he was seeing things. But no, there it was, flapping its smoking wings erratically as pieces of its legs and torso began to break off and plummet into the sea below.

It was a homunculus he'd sent out a few days prior. It hadn't returned, which happened occasionally, and he'd given it up for lost. It should have been ashes by now, turned to dust beneath the sun's merciless rays. Rune's face hardened with concern.

As he watched, the little creature gave one last flutter of its wings and disintegrated, red dust and feathers blowing out to sea, but not before Rune reached out and caught the bundle the homunculus had been clutching in its tiny hands.

Wrapped with a black ribbon was a nosegay of purple flowers. Examining the sweet-smelling bouquet at a safe distance he saw the dusty spears of lavender, the dark hoods of wolf's bane, and the round petals of oleander.

"Troubling," Rune muttered to himself. "Quite troubling." Then, "I wonder."

He turned from the window and crossed to the stairs, holding onto the ominous flowers with just his finger and thumb pinched around the ribbon.

Leaving the uppermost floor, Rune circled round the stairs to his library. He quickly bypassed seven of the eight tall, double-sided bookcases that bisected the circular floor at regular intervals. Stopping in front of the last, he crouched down and used his index finger to pry a slim volume covered in red velvet from the bottom shelf.

Carefully he cracked open the cover of *A Compendium of Flowers* and flipped the pages, coming first to lavender. When Rune saw its traditional meaning his brows furrowed. When he got to the symbolism of oleander he gritted his teeth. And when he turned with dread to the page describing wolf's bane he snapped the book shut, strode up one flight of the curving stairs to the kitchen and tossed the nosegay into the fire smoldering under a crusty pot of stew or potion. He couldn't remember which.

As he watched the blooms crackle and blacken, his mind buzzed with the message his homunculus had delivered. Caution, beware. Future misfortune. All in the color purple for royalty.

Had the king discovered his plan? Rune was sure he'd been discreet, but Zeno had eyes everywhere, the suspicious bastard. Then again, the message was rather oblique, and subtlety was definitely not his majesty's strong suit. As a rule, he skipped warnings altogether and went straight for punishment, harsh and swift.

No, this didn't seem like the king's doing. Maybe the color was just a coincidence, but something told him that whoever decided sending a message via flower would be the best means of communication would certainly never ignore their shade in terms of conveying intent or meaning.

Rune went through the names of the king's various associates in his head, dismissing all of them as either too brutish or too dull to be the origin of the troubling flowers. He was still pondering the odd dispatch when a harsh voice calling his name blew in on the dank ocean breeze filtering down from the still-open window upstairs.

"Rune! You bloody mongrel! Show yourself!"

Ah, Bilga's father. Was the tide out already?

Rune tossed *A Compendium* onto the podium that stood near the base of the stairs before vaulting them two at a time. Never one to back down from a colorful exchange, he didn't want to keep the man waiting.

“What do you want?” Rune bellowed on his way up. “I hope it's to apologize for afflicting the world with your brutish progeny.”

Mysterious messages would have to wait; verbal abuse heavily peppered with colorful insults was what passed for entertainment around here. Besides, he was almost done with his shells. One more and he could leave everything behind: the tower, Wentletrap, the whole stinking kingdom along with any and all parties dealing in floral threats.