

Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine

Preview #7

Now I want to tell you about what it's like to live in Fortitude. Now I want to tell you the *essence* of the place, the things about it that make it worth telling stories in, the reason I wrote a book on Fortitude as the first supplement to this game and followed it up with a Fortitude-centric campaign.

I wrote this story originally as a guide to an artist, who'd asked me to capture the feel of the place.

You can believe that it really happened, if you like. Or, if you'd rather, that it never could.

A Fortitude Story

Fortitude is definitely the hardest place to do my laundry that I've ever lived in.

In America it used to be pretty easy. It was harder in this little place I lived in in Kenmore, because the dryer was really slow — like, “four hours and three button-presses to dry a little load” kind of slow. Back then I had a lot of clothing and so I fell relentlessly behind over the course of time because I simply couldn't dry it fast enough.

And then it was a little hard sometimes, too, when guesting with friends later, because of laundry machine clashes and stuff. Sometimes I made it easier by doing everybody's laundry. Sometimes that wasn't a feasible way to go.

China, though —

I watched my wardrobe slowly dwindle into ruination over the course of my time in China because I simply don't know how to hang things out for drying properly. It was an issue!

And then there's Fortitude.

In Fortitude I have clothing again. Real clothing, a full closet of it, though not a big closet or anything. It's a bit of a nice fantasy for me. And I know how to hang it, properly, here. It's the least impossible that laundry's been since I was young.

But difficult.

It's definitely the most physically difficult!

I have to put it in a sack and haul it for an hour and a half to the laundry machines; less, if I want to go to the river, but — I'm sorry. Even in Fortitude I don't have time to do laundry in *a river*. Even here, where it's taking me two years to get this game release started because everything has to be done slowly and I keep getting into trouble, I am not languid enough to accept spending hours pounding laundry with stones or —

Or — or, whatever?

I don't actually know how to do laundry in a river. I don't know how to actually get things clean with stones.

In my head it's kind of romantic, rustic-romantic, there are dragonflies hovering, then darting; the river is musical; rushes go back and forth. In my head doing laundry in a river is sort of beautiful. And I could find out how to do it. I could ask practically anyone. They'd . . . just tell me to use the

laundry machines, mostly, but if I *had* to know, really really wanted, anyone would show me. Maryam would. Or Mrs. Smirnov. Even Evans.

Instead I haul it for ninety minutes in a sack. I sweat, oh, do I sweat, it gets in my eyes, it trickles down me. It's mostly a healthy sweat. Most things are kind of healthy, here. But I keep waiting for it to go completely easy and it doesn't. It's like basic training, only, for wimpy writers.

It's really rough!

I walk past retaining walls of colored stone. I walk under the spreading leaves of trees. The wind whispers sometimes, and that's all numinous: like suddenly the rustling leaves, and the pattern of sunlight through them, and the sound around me isn't a thing of the real world at all but of something spiritual, someplace extraordinary, instead. In the distance a weathercock spins.

It lasts a moment.

Then things are ordinary again except for the taste of — ice? A taste, a feeling *like* ice, anyway, lingering against the back part of my tongue.

I don't bother going home while the laundry does its turnings. I read a book.

You can get a lot of books here. They're not very discriminating — I mean, the bookstores here don't carry a treasure trove of wonder as bookstores go. They're a bunch of bestsellers and old standbys, if you know what I mean, stuff that's everybody thinks that everybody is buying, rather than books loved and bought by the booksellers for the books themselves. But there's something that you get in exchange. You won't find your Diane Duane books here, your Gordon R. Dickson, your delightful little books that nobody's ever heard of, no, but the mass-market bestselling and classics collection is from *everywhere in the world*, and beyond it; and you can read it all.

It doesn't matter if it's Lucia Etxebarria, Li Ke, or Higashigawa Tokuya; it doesn't matter if it's an untranslated Koran, Proust, or the Dream of the Red Chamber. In Town you can read it all.

I don't know if I can express how amazing that is.

You go through life being really, really confused at how strange not even knowing what language you're *speaking* is; and then you suddenly have the Tao te Ching in your hands, the original, the untranslated version, and you can *read* it. Directly. No mediators, no translators, just the words.

...

But I still miss having tacky, trashy marvelous books tailored to *my* tastes, and not to just "what sells."

Anyway.

So I kick back on an unused machine, or out front if the day's the kind of day for it, and I read, and I take my laundry afterwards back home. It's . . . heavier on the way back home, of course, but at least most of that's downhill.

This isn't a laundry story, for clarity. There are laundry stories but this isn't one of them.

This one is a story about Death.

He was walking there beside me, one day, his shadow with my shadow. I came back from zoning out and staring at the shifting light through leaves and he was there. I was gathering my thoughts, and hefting and resettling the bag of laundry, and going forward up the hill and I realized that Death was with me. Death was beside me. Death walked, and his footsteps matched my own.

I didn't say anything. I didn't do anything about it. But at the halfway point, where I tended to stop and drop a coin in the vending machine and get a bottle of Ramune to drink, I asked him, "Like one?"

And he said, "Thanks."

His eyes were night and falling stars.

So we sat down on the broad clay steps going up to some neighbor's house and we had a drink.

"I didn't realize," I said, "that you guys were here."

People like that. With eyes like that. Riders. Excrucians. Whatever you want to call them. The enemies of the world.

"They try to keep me out," he said.

He smiled. His teeth were white.

"It doesn't do any good," he said, "of course. It's like keeping water from the clouds. Like locking the sun in a world of night. There's too much permeability in the world."

I could hear the birds singing. Others, squabbling. He didn't put their lives out.

I could feel a cloud passing between Fortitude and the sun.

"You shouldn't come here," I said, "if they don't want you."

"No?"

He was looking at me. I wasn't looking at him. I shrugged a little.

"I like it," he said. "If you've ever tried to do laundry out beyond the world, you'd understand."

I guess that makes sense, doesn't it?

It's got to be hard, right? Laundry, out beyond the world, in the chaos? Though, I wouldn't think — I wouldn't think it would be like that *actually*. I can *imagine* how hard it should be, but it seems silly for it to *really* be that way. It's easy to think, oh, the residents of the seething void must spend all of their time glaring at their laundry piles and holding up their dirty tops and saying, "Dang it, if only the washing machine hadn't grown tentacles and started gibbering again, I'd show this filth what for!"

But I wouldn't think that'd *actually* be how it works. I'd think they'd have magic. I'd think —

I'd think they'd solve the laundry problem within the same paradigm that they *acquire* their laundry problems from, whether that means a magical chaos washing machine or just glaring their clothes clean with their night-rich eyes.

So I think —

I never really asked him this directly. I never pinned him down on it, at least, not for sure. But I think? I think that he must have liked something about it. He must have wanted to do this *one thing*, at least, in the Fortitude way.

I don't know.

He only ever really hinted at it, like, when the machines were rattling and spinning beside us, and he'd said, "I liked it here."

I didn't know he was Death. Not at first.

You have to understand that I'd met creatures like him, but not *exactly* like him. Genseric had something of his look; Iolithae too — I don't want you to think I was *casual* about meeting someone with those eyes, but I wasn't *too* wary either. I figured he'd kill me if he wanted to kill me, of course, or torture me, or turn me into something awful, or give me superpowers, or whatever; I mean, I was at his mercy from the moment I met him, but I've always been at the mercy of the world.

There's never been a moment when I *couldn't* have been beaten by an out-of-context horror or exalted by something unexpected from Outside. I mean, that's just how living works. That's *life*.

And in another sense —

I mean, if I've lived this long, even in the company of monsters, then maybe they're not as bad as they seem, right? Maybe the next bit of unexpected awfulness isn't going to be any worse than the last one. Maybe all my hefty philosophy about the dangers of chaos, the unbounded limitless

potential for good and evil in the unexpected things, maybe all that boils down to pap, and the truth is, the world just goes on and on and mostly in a kind of peppered sweetness, and things are things, and they are themselves, and it is always, pretty much, OK.

I don't know.

It wasn't like that once, twice, once, maybe it wasn't like that once, I do not know.

But, you know.

Things might be bound to stay at least as much OK forever as they are right now.

So —

I knew he *could* be death, my death, everybody's death, he could probably detonate and wither at least three blocks, maybe all of Fortitude, but it wasn't until I got to crying over something in a book that he admitted Death was *he*.

"My fault," he said.

I blinked away tears. I looked at him.

"Death, right?" he said. "Partings?"

"I guess."

He grinned, abashed. "Sorry."

"It's a good story," I said.

"It's good, in stories," he agreed.

The laundry rattled.

"I think," I said, "that —"

I actually didn't know what I thought. The light of the ceiling lamp glittered on the floor. There was a great big day outside full of sun and summer sweetness.

"You don't get to take credit for death in stories," I said. "That's like —"

I told myself that I'd be more articulate if I ever wrote this up, but then I guess I wasn't. As for he, he just leaned back in his rickety metal folding chair and said:

"I made the world such that the things in it must end."

I didn't believe him.

"Things had to end anyway," I protested.

“They didn’t,” he said. “They could have gone on and on, and gotten ever and ever brighter. But then I would have dwindled and passed away into nothingness — a waking dream — and there would only be a life that I do not know.”

He has different faces, I think. Death isn’t the same for everyone. He didn’t sound like the King Death of the rats to me, anyhow, or any other Death that I’d heard before.

“A long time ago,” he said, “there was a tree that grew in nothingness; and autumn came, and its leaves fell away; and the wind caught one up, a little rusted leaf like me —”

“Just stop it,” I said.

I got up. I went out. I tried to go out. He was between me and the door. I didn’t want to look at him. I didn’t want to push past him. He wasn’t wearing his cloak. He wasn’t naked or anything, but there was still a barrenness to him, a *lack of barriers* to him, there, and I didn’t want to just push past.

“I don’t want to do laundry with Death,” I said. “Your clothes could run. Then I’d have icky Death germs.”

“That’s not how laundry machines work,” he said.

Then he squinted at them. I think. Like maybe he wasn’t sure. Like he was just a little bit adrift, here in Fortitude; like he couldn’t be 100% and absolutely sure.

So I went out, anyway, because I didn’t see him in my way any longer, and I stood in the heat and it was really hot, and I licked my lips which had gone all dry because I am not very good at using chapstick, and I listened to the birds crying in the air over Big Lake, and I looked down the hill at the rooftops and the light that glinted off the rooftops and the trees, all red and green.

“There are stones,” he said, one day, “that they moved into place to keep me out.”

“They’re called walls.”

“No,” he said.

I didn’t like him once I knew that he was Death. I think that I couldn’t.

“They look so lonely,” I accused.

I think he knew as soon as I said that what I meant. He turned away. He didn’t justify himself, or even look guilty; he didn’t even look like he really thought it mattered, that they mattered, I mean, but I think that he knew immediately that I didn’t mean walls; that I meant the dead.

He didn’t look like he wanted to argue or justify himself; like he wanted to talk at all.

He made a sound, instead.

I don't know what it was, I can't know, I can't guess what it was, I couldn't, because there are no languages in Town:

Just, the sound that Death makes, when you mention loneliness, I suppose.

And somehow for me, right then, it was a little green bird; it was Zoe, who lay there at the bottom of her cage and she did not move. And it was wrong. And it was lonely. And it was wrong.

There had been so much life in her.

There was something *wrong*, when she wasn't up, when she wasn't flying, when she didn't bite the hand of Death when he came for her, but simply fell.

You could substitute some other story for that, if you wanted; but in that moment, that was mine.

How could I like him? How could I forgive him?

He was Death.

"You could tell me," I suggested, after a while, "that they're all fine and safe with you out there. That Death isn't an ending. That it's just a parting. That would be really sad but it would be different. It would be new."

He got out his laundry.

He shook out his cloak. He put it on. He dumped the rest into his laundry-bag, folded his laundry bag into halves, quarters, down into the size of a single penny; he put it under his tongue and it was gone.

"I'm not your pet, Jenna," Death told me.

He clicked his tongue twice. His horse rode through; its hoofbeats sounded metal on stone and they echoed off of distant walls that I could not see. He caught its reins as it moved past, pulled himself up onto its back, ducked under a door that didn't seem to be quite exactly where it ought to be, and he was gone.

It was really hard to find my place in *Murder by Melody* after that. I kept reading the same page of it, over and over again, because I'd reach the end and then I'd realize that I hadn't actually absorbed any of the bits I'd read.

Winter came and winter went. Spring faded, too.

They brought in a great dead hulk of fish one day — a *kaiju*. It was self-searing; its fin was fire and its nose a spear and it was larger than the boats that dragged it. An air of festivity followed it in; they raised a tent over a dozen blocks for days, and left the red and white poles up from it up at night. The docks were abuzz with trade, and children ran laughing and wearing masks through the street; there were little flags, and there was street art and posters of the fish, it was a three-day celebration; they made little rabbit cakes, for no particular reason that I'm aware of, and you couldn't go hardly anywhere without someone selling a bit of the *kaiju*, because after all, this was your only ever chance. There was only one of them, would only ever be one of them; even if there were other fish out there that were *sort* of like it, the *kaiju* were individuated, self-creating, and unique.

It was good. It was pretty good. It was more like flounder than like halibut, I guess; more like both than snapper. It was tough and flavorful. I took a skewer and I clambered up to the edge of a low roof —

I guess I'd been hanging with Lilith and Evans a bit too much —

And I sat there, and I ate, and I kicked my feet; and I saw the stone.

It stood out. It filled my range of vision. It was just a kind of ordinary stone, if you get me; it wasn't anything extraordinary in and of itself. It was half a human's height and rounded and pocked and it was sitting in the middle of some neighbor's wooden fence — the fence bowed out around it like a crate to hold an egg —

And I understood.

That was one of the stones that held *him* out. It was a barrier, a ley-stone, a way-stone, a *something*, anyway, I wouldn't know what to call it, not formally, but it was real and hard and cruel and true and Death couldn't get past it into Fortitude.

It was an anchor. It was a real, true thing.

And I understood for the first time that Death was not real; or that *this* Death wasn't, anyway, *my* Death wasn't, not in a world where the grey was so grey and the blue was so blue and people could hunt down leviathans, the great beasts of the distant waters, and haul them into Fortitude as meat. Not in a world where you could *touch* things, roofs and such, and they'd be rough and smooth and real under your hands.

The hour was late but the sun was not yet down.

The sky was full of golden clouds; and then, purples, pinks; then dark.

“They moved stones into place,” Death said, “to keep me out; but they didn't get them all.”

“That's lax.”

“People get distracted,” he explained.

“Oh.”

“They were really angry,” he said. “When I killed the sun. It was a slow, brutal anger, and they turned it over into work. But the sun came back. And then it was rougher on them. The heart of anger in them that drove their smithcraft — their masonry — their . . . stone-moving — it faded away. After a while they weren’t locking out their hated enemy any more. They were just moving around the stones. And that left cracks, a stone here, a stone there, bits that were out of place, so that Death could still slip through.”

“And do your laundry,” I said.

“And do my laundry,” he said.

He looked off down the hill. We were outside. It was that kind of day. He shaded his eyes against the sun.

“And keep my garden,” he said. “And pick up an ice cream, now and again.”

“And kill people.”

“People die,” he said.

“It doesn’t seem like them,” I said, meaning the people of Fortitude, “to just leave it unfinished. Are you sure they’re not still stone-moving?”

“They thought it was done,” he said.

“Oh.”

He looked at me. You never get used to the eyes. It was like at any moment I’d look away and the whole world would be drowned in night. He said, “It was done, I guess. They *were* done, but it didn’t matter. They did it right, they finished it up properly, every last detail, but it didn’t work, because they’d started it in hate and finished it in propriety, in care, in *craft*. That doesn’t work. You can’t do that. You can’t start in fire and end in stone. They’d hated me when they started, and they didn’t hate me when they finished, so where was the truth in it? It was sloppy and haphazard and it left a gap. That’s the problem with growing up.”

“But you shouldn’t be here,” I said.

A cloud went over the sun.

“I should be everywhere,” he said. “I’m hope. I’m the future. I’m the best.”

“That’s not what you said earlier,” I protested.

“Oh,” he said.

He looked away.

The world went normal, again. Well, mostly normal. I think I’d lost an hour in there somewhere; that’s what it felt like. The sun was red as an apple in the sky, amidst the clouds, and the wind was cold.

“I guess it isn’t,” he said. “My bad.”

“You don’t really need to do laundry,” I accused him. “You’re just here to subvert or kill me or something.”

“No,” he said.

“No?”

“I have to do laundry,” he said. He waved his hand at the laundry machines. His laundry poured itself out of the machines and the doorway like a river; it flowed around him; it faded into the aura of him and was gone. “I have to talk to people in the wind and the smell of flowers. I have to drink Ramune and look off at the lake. I need that.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I need that,” he said.

The branches of the trees beside us had blossomed; they were raging with unseasonable flowers, spills of pink and red and white.

“I have to have that,” he said, but then his cloak was around him, and his sense of desperation faded, and he added, “Besides, it’s mine to have.”

And the movement of the cloak aligned for just a moment with the stones of a low wall off that-a’way; and the shadows; and the reddened sunlight; and the sweep of flowers. He stopped *being there* in a process of re-conception: like the end of an optical illusion, like realizing that the monster in the closet *isn’t* a monster, but just old clothes, his body became the flutter of a hanging garment, his foot became a shadow from the leaves, there was grass growing between the white slabs of the sidewalk and when I looked up to catch his eyes there was just an eave.

My laundry was done, anyway. Somewhere in there it had gotten done.

I loaded it up.

I took it home.

It wasn't that long ago that I found Death's garden.

I was poking around in one of the communal gardens and I found this bit and it was . . . well, *his*. I could tell it was his even though there was no name on it because it was so hemmed in, so very much constrained by the weighty presence of the stones. There were even two of them right there, stones like monoliths with the attitude of great dogs, a *looming* of them, like wolfhounds pressing in to greet their master or to terrify some sort of beast.

It wasn't much of a garden. It wasn't a big thing.

It was just some snow peas and their trellises; with scattered sunflowers rising over and a handful of carrots in the ground.

It was dry. It seemed so dry I watered it. There were weeds so I pulled them too.

I hope I didn't do that wrong. I thought maybe that he was raising the weeds; or that I'd done a harm to him, maybe by over-watering, but honestly, it was Fortitude. Work doesn't go for nothing. Not honest work. Not in Fortitude.

I could have done wrong, I think; I worried, some; but that's a thing that I doubt that Fortitude would have let me do.

I'd known him almost a year before we actually talked about it.

"I don't want things to die," I told him.

"Stinging bugs," he answered.

"Stop being cute," I said.

He sighed.

"I mean it."

"OK," he said. He leaned back. He was sitting on a laundry machine, like you do, even if you're Death. He spread his hands, like he was stretching yarn between them. He didn't say anything. He just looked like he was gonna, for a really long time. Finally, he put his hands down and used them both to brace his lean.

"I think that that thing with the world that is immortal and doesn't have you in it," I said. "I think that that sounded good."

"That's reasonable," he said. "Though it sucks for me."

“Yeah,” I said.

“I don’t want things to suck for me,” he belabored.

“Then be something else!”

“What?”

“Be not Death. Be . . . Ramune, instead. Or Morning Rescue.”

I waved off in the direction of the vending machine.

“Be you laundry. Be you Life. Be part of World.”

“I can’t,” he said. There was a sharpness in his tone.

“Can’t you?”

“No!”

“. . . oh,” I said. And after a while, “. . . sorry.”

“It’s just,” he said. “Just . . .”

He snighed, then. Can one snigh? It was like a snarl, it started as a snarl, only it was a snigh or a sort of sighing by the end. It’s hard to do. I can’t do it, anyway. It’s the sound Death makes when he’s just, just, . . . that.

“I think,” he finally said, “that the world is a test. The whole world, you know?”

“A test.”

“It’s there to try to break you,” he said.

“That sounds like projection,” I said.

His hair grew down a lanky lock before his eyes so he could blow it out the way. It fell back down, was blown away again, and it faded and it was gone.

After a while he decided, “Not projection. Maybe a contextualized perception. Like, when I do laundry, I divide the world more into dirty and into clean. But it’s not like the world is suddenly *not* a place of clean and dirty things.”

“It’s not,” I agreed. Then I hesitated. “I mean, it’s not not. Not. Something.”

“The world’s the world,” he said.

“Right.”

“But it’s a test for me,” he said. “It’s a test for everybody. It’s a gauntlet.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“What?” he said. Then he flushed a little. Death’s really pale. You can tell. “No. No. I’m not, you don’t have to say that.”

“OK.”

“You’re just lucky,” he said, “to get to stay here. But you’re so messed up, because it’s in the world.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Here,” he said.

There was a detergent and water spill on top of the machine beside him. He scribbled in it with his finger. He drew the slippery, shiny, colored water out, scribbled a little map of Fortitude in it, with it, kind of, and then he got angry and he scrubbed it all away.

“Here,” he said, “you’ve made something good. Something I even like. But it’s a part of . . . tragedy. It’s like flowers growing on corpses. It’s like . . . flowers growing on starving people, with their hollowed eyes, chained down underneath the earth. It’s like carrots sucking their nutrients from starving peoples’ brains.”

I knew that that was not what his garden actually was.

Look.

I mean, I did check it, after. I . . . sank a needle into the soil, later. I was worried that I’d mess up his carrots, but I checked. That is not how Death gardens. It’s how he thinks *we* garden, maybe, but if he thinks so, he is wrong.

Neither so does he.

“I think it’s cool that you can make little peaceful places among all the abominations,” he said. “But I can’t be part of it. I shouldn’t be part of it. I should go.”

He got up. He left. Just like that.

And . . . gone.

He was not as confident of his awesomeness as he seemed, I guess.

I mean . . .

He’d left his laundry there, is what I mean.

“It’ll go sour,” I protested, to the air.

An hour passed, after the laundry’d finished, and Death’s cloak was still just sitting in there in the laundry machine, Death’s cloak and his magisterial garments, one after another all in black. An hour!

They were going to get all moldy, left like that.

“That’s bad for other people who want to use the laundry machines,” I told myself.

It wasn’t anything to do with helping Death, I told myself.

However I knew that this was dishonest. The problem was that my dislike for him was only conceptual. I was under a definite impression that he was a bad thing. That he was a wrong thing. I believed that I hated him. But I couldn’t make a proper go of it because I didn’t really know him all that well.

I hated what he was supposed to be; but I’d never actually managed to really hate *him*, to have anything more than a vague simmering resentment for what he was theoretically about.

I mean —

It’s not like he *radiated* it, he Death. He gave you enough, just looking at him, to know he was Death, sometimes, that he was the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy as Town calls him, “the lord of Death’s dominion he,” but it wasn’t like you could just look at him and pare down through all the layers of perception and conception to the heart of the true thing underneath.

He came with a secondary cluster of perceptions, images, bits of knowledge, things that made me think of my experiences with death and thus resent him; but it wasn’t like I could say, “Oh, this is what he is, this is his crime.”

I didn’t know him as Death; I knew him as the Name of Death. If that makes sense. The thing named Death.

And I couldn’t hate him just for that, not all the way. He’d never killed *my* sun.

He’d never ridden up on his black horse and shot *my* sun with a bow and arrow. I hadn’t been there for that. I hadn’t seen.

I remembered a little bird on the bottom of her cage, all green and shaking, but I hadn’t seen that Death come and go at all.

So I took out his laundry and I added it to mine and I took it home with mine and I hung it up.

In theory laundry is best hung in the sunshine. I think that's why we were so often alone at the laundry, just the two of us, because I couldn't hack that bit, and maybe neither could he.

I think a proper Fortitude person would have started that hour and a half walk before the sun came up, and done the laundry at 8 or 9, and come back with it with the sun still bright and high in the sky above and hung it up. That's my theory.

It's me being a spoiled or a foolish foreigner, I guess, that I hang it up in the evening. It's the kind of thing that people who come to Town from other lands will do.

You can't even put a standard laundry line *up* if the sun is down, you know.

There's this stuff, floatstone, that they have in Town, that rises in the sunlight. People anchor their laundry lines with it. They make their laundry lines like . . . kites. I can't do that, though, because half the time when I get back home with my laundry the sun is already down. There isn't such a thing as a night stone — or rather, there is, but you don't want to use it. It's the kind of thing that the scientists of Horizon, with their overly elaborate goggles and their unnatural ways, might use. It carries with it a certain tang of desperation, obsession, folly.

For your Fortitude laundry — it isn't good.

So I hang my lines between the trees instead.

It's warm enough for this, you understand. For drying laundry at night. I mean, the sun is best for wet clothing, but when you have nights in the mid-twenties most of the year, you get used to the idea that the sun itself is not essential. You can go outside and it'll be warm and pleasant enough to dry your clothing, so you just hang the clothes there where they *will* get sun, when it gets around to rising, and to start the drying process you just trust the night.

In the night his clothes hung there beside mine; the tattered cloak of Death fluttered in some night-born breeze; it was full of night's rich colors in the morning, black and purple, and sometime after that, I don't know when, his clothes were gone.

I was getting dinner one day when I found a stone that was out of position.

It was meant to hold him back; I could see that. It lumped there, at the entrance to an alley, and it was placed along the flows of life and death. It was meant to keep him out; but it was out of position.

The alley was closed by it, when it should be open.

The way of Death's passage was open, where it should be closed.

I stared at it for a while.

I figured I could probably move it. I mean, it was way too heavy for me, but I still thought that I could move it. That it was lightly balanced, or that I could get some help in, or something of the sort. I could push it just a little ways over, and then Death would be sealed away from Fortitude.

I thought maybe that I should.

I even told him about it, later.

“I think I’m supposed to fix it,” I said.

“Are you?”

“It’s out of order,” I said. “Isn’t it? It’s wrong. It ought be fixed.”

His face twitched. He looked off westward. “Well,” he said, “I wouldn’t say that impulses like that are wrong.”

“No?”

He wouldn’t look at me.

“I’d — I’d do something else,” I said. “If I knew to do it.”

“Would you?”

I waved my hand in the air. “I mean, there’s leaving it out of order,” I said, “and that doesn’t seem right at all. And then there’s moving it. But I don’t know anything else.”

“Listen,” he said.

He licked his lips.

“Listen,” he said. “I’ve been cheating. I know that I’ve been cheating.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t have a home here,” he said.

I wanted to hug him suddenly. I wanted to hug him, then, and say something, but I’m really awkward. I mean, you have to understand that. If I’d grown up proper, if I knew how to deal with people right, and Deaths, and stuff, then I’d have hugged him. But I didn’t. And the more I didn’t, the more ridiculous that notion sounded, because I didn’t even like him, and also, that seemed an awfully good way to die. Instead I looked at my fingers and I thought really hard about how the physical details of getting up and hugging him would work, if I could have done.

“I had one once,” he said, “but not any more.”

It was like there was a stone in my own head, on my own tongue, to keep out the words that would welcome him.

“So you do, Jenna, what you ought.”

“I —”

“It’s not like I won’t be back,” he said, “when something dies.”

I gave him the finger. He didn’t react to that. I think that maybe that gesture doesn’t have any actual meaning in the world outside of life.

Then I went out.

It was done out of hate, back when, and so it was left unfinished; done out of hate and anger. But this wasn’t hate or anger. This was just —

It had to be done.

Somebody had to do it. Somebody had to finish it.

It sounds good to think that you should tear them down. I thought of that. It’s what a protagonist, I thought, would have done. Move all the stones out of the way. Leave it all a’jangle. Make a statement that you can’t lock Death out of a place just because you hate him. Say that here in Fortitude even Death must have a home.

But it was wrong.

It was a fine and airy ideal but it broke down against the solid truth of stone. The rock was hard and real and cool and bumpy on its edges. You could rest your hand on it and you could feel the world. So I pushed it back into place, that stone, instead; set my back against it and shoved and pushed and scrabbled, took off my shoes and dug my heels in, then turned and dug my toes in while my arms were shoving, and eventually when I was covered in sweat and halfway to giving up completely, it groaned a bit, and rocked a bit, and moved.

And I did it again every time I found one. Every time there was a stone that was out of order.

There wasn’t anything else for it.

From the beginning until the ending.

I did it until it was done.

It's weirdly lonely doing my laundry now. It's like, sometimes Mrs. Smirnov is there, or Thomas Kichi, but never Death. Sometimes Lilith or Evans will hang around and talk to me, but not the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy. That time is gone.

I kept hoping for some strange miracle but there was no miracle.

I kept hoping for answers but there were just the stones.

The sky, and the lake, and the hillside and the trees. A bunch of laundry to wash and hang. The sun; the stones.

Once or twice a year, I think, I'll move a stone again. Just a little bit out of order.

Just for a day.

Then I'll push it back.