

In Death - Is Life

*Extradited to the gods of chance, the deities of all things random
Alive, multicolored
Twitching in their dead monochrome world*

Allison wakes up to the all too familiar beeping of the machines that keep her barely alive. The grey that haunts her existence every day permeates the room, mixed with the smell of molten wax from the candles above her head.

She tries to kill every single thought forming in her head. She doesn't feel like thinking, like feeling. She desires to become one with the grey; to dissolve, disappear into it. Given enough time, it oughta happen. Sooner or later, it doesn't matter. Time is inconsequential. She drifts along its currents like a leaf on a river. Directionless. Decaying. Dissolving.

Allison feels the mattress by her feet tilt under a shifting weight. She lazily lifts her head to look past her feet. A small figure sits there, smoking, frowning. The figure's tail whips softly onto Allison's soles. Allison leaps up.

"Cio?" she gasps. "Cio, is that you?"

"Aye," the figure replies. "It's me, lankylegs."

The candles behind her flicker as Allison leaps onto her. She embraces her tightly, clutches onto her back, her shoulders, her arms, she inspects her.

"But, how?" she cries. "I thought you died. I saw you die."

She looks at the devil's pained expression.

"I watched you die, Cio," she sobs.

"Tha did," Cio whispers.

Allison leans back, studies her. Touches her hands again.

"You're not real, are you?" Her voice drops, saturated with exasperation.

"Nay," Cio shakes her head. "Thy mind has conjured me."

"Of course," Allison sighs. "One more torture my own brain throws at me." She drops back onto her pillow. "Be gone, now." Allison's tired voice cracks.

Cio lies down beside her, propping her head up on her arm. "I don't think so," she says, looking at Allison. Staring at the ceiling, Allison closes her eyes.

"Allison, what are tha doing?"

"Trying to make you disappear."

Cio's fingers slowly trail from Allison's palm over her arm, settling on her left forearm.

"Tha has grown so thin. Tha's barewise skin and bones."

As Allison says nothing, Cio places her hand on her cheek and guides her head to turn to face her.

"Allison. What are tha doing."

"Still trying to make you disappear," Allison replies coldly.

"I mean this," Cio swipes her hand through the air, "all of this."

"Nothing." Allison's voice remains distant. "I'm doing nothing."

"To live is to do. If tha does nothing, tha will die."

"So be it."

"Thickenskull. Tha thinks death will release tha from thy suffering?" Cio probes calmly.

Allison hides her face underneath her hands. "No... Maybe. I don't know. I don't care. I don't care if I live or die, Cio. It doesn't matter anyway."

"So, what do tha want? If not to die?"

"Nothing. Just... nothing."

Cio nuzzles into her neck.

"Tha lies, Allison," Cio speaks softly. "Tha want not nothing. Tha want many things. But tha's scared. And hurt. And paining. So much that tha don't even permit thaself to think of it."

"Leave me," Allison says but doesn't let go of her.

" 'tis alright to be scared. 'tis alright to be hurt," Cio whispers, stroking through her long white hair. " 'tis alright to take thy time to lick thy wounds and heal. But Allison, tha has never been a coward."

"So what do you want me to do?" Allison yells, getting up. "Get out there again? Fight and slay the demiurges? To take a good long look at all the destruction and death they've sown while I was out?" Pained tears follow her screaming.

"Nay," Cio calmly shakes her head. "That fight was never thine to begin with."

"Of course it was! I was given the key of kings. It was my fight. It was given to me."

"Nay," Cio shakes her head again. "Tha has *chosen* that fight. Tha has *chosen* to enter it. To stay in it. To chase after thy boyfriend. To enter the tournament. That was tha own working, Allison."

"So you're saying it's my fault?" Allison shouts with full lungs. "Is this why you're here? To tell me it's all my own goddamn fault? That you died because of me?"

"Nay," Cio whispers.

Allison slumps together as sobs escape her. "Do you think I don't know that? I

know I got you killed. I know,” she wails.

Cio moves closer and takes her cheeks into her hands, wiping her tears with her thumbs.

“I’m so sorry, Cio,” Allison’s voice breaks, laden with sorrow. “I’m so fucking sorry.” She can’t get herself to look her in the eyes.

“I know,” Cio kisses her forehead.

“I can’t do it again, Cio,” Allison says. “I just can’t. I’ve got no fight left in me. I’m done.”

“Tha don’t has to,” Cio replies. “Tha don’t have to wield swords and slay and conquer. Tha don’t need to be what tha is not.”

Allison, exhausted, lets herself fall back onto the mattress. “So what am I, then?”

“Tha’s Allison, wobblebrains,” Cio smiles, laying back next to her and stroking through her white hair. “Tha’s always been Allison.”

“Am I not still Allison?”

“Nay. Tha’s trying to be someone else. Tha’s trying to become nothing. Tha’s doing it wrongwise.”

Allison rolls her eyes. “You sound like Jadis now.”

“Tha cannot *be* nothing, Allison. For nothing cannot be. If nothing were, then nothing would be something and not nothing.”

“Spare me the philosophizing,” Allison groans.

“Jadis wants tha to give in. I want tha to be tha.”

“So who is ‘I’, then? Who should I be?” Allison’s tone gains an aggressive note.

“Tha should be who tha is. Which is not nothing.”

Allison rolls her eyes again.

"The Allison I knew was a human I loved," Cio says, caressing Allison's cheek. "She was kind and gentle. She asked me about the tales I'd read and write. She'd cook meals with barely any spices whatsoever. She'd share my bed and make love to me. The Allison I knew made me happy," Cio smiles and kisses her.

"But the Allison I knew would also work hardsome. Train day and night. She was the Heir of the Conquering King. She would fight and maim and kill, returning homewise in the eve in tatters, bruised and bloody. The footprints of a king are drawn in blood. The Allison I knew followed those footsteps. And I loved that Allison too.

"When I met tha, tha was a witless girl scared out of her mind, shaking and clobbering pitysomely. Tha needed time to get to being Allison." Cio smiles and plays with Allison's earlobe. "Tha reminds me now of the witless scared girl tha used to be."

"Cio, I -" Allison gasps for breath.

"The wheel keeps turning, Allison," Cio continues with a serious tone, the smile vanishing from her lips. "Whether tha wants it or not. Tha don't want to admit it, but tha's fighting the wheel again. Before, tha wanted to smash it. Now, tha's trying to keep it from turning. Tha's trying to hold it still. 'tis a fool's errand, Allison."

Cio leans in close to her face. "Let the wheel go, Allison," she pleads in whispers. "Let it turn, and turn with it. Cry. Grieve. Mourn. Lick tha wounds. Kill the 'I' that wallows in its pain and suffering. And then, let Allison be."

"I... I can't," Allison's voice trembles. "It's too hard. It hurts too much. Sometimes I can't even breathe."

"Tha can and tha will," Cio replies sternly. "Tha was Allison. Tha is Allison. And tha will be Allison." She looks deep into her eyes. "Whoever tha wants Allison to be. Be it the Allison I loved, or someone entirely new.

"But maybe this Allison will realize that not every breath need be drawn to battle. Maybe this Allison will understand that not all strings of fate need be cut and severed. Fate can be fought, but fate can also be drifted with, as a leaf is carried by the

river's streams into the sea."

Cio holds Allison's cheeks. "But tha need permit it to flow, Allison. Tha cannot hold back the river endlessly. Tha cannot hold the wheel in place. It will drown tha eventually. For no reason aside for thy clobberish stubbornness, voidskull."

The concern written all over her face weighs heavy on Allison.

"The Allison I loved was kind and gentle," Cio continues, leaning against Allison's forehead. "Do me a favor and be kind and gentle to thaself for once, gobmonkey," Cio shoots her a gentle smile. "Tha deserves thy own kindness too."

Allison hugs her tightly.

"I miss you so much, Cio," she whimpers through tears.

"I know."

Clonk.

The clang of the servant setting down a new metal platter with fresh food on the bedside table echoes through the chamber.

Allison wakes up, recognizing the incessant beeping of the machines that keep her barely alive and the smell of molten wax. She notices her hands are claspings tightly onto the bedsheets. She relaxes them and wipes the tears in her eyes, taking deep breaths. Allison feels the wheel turning underneath her with a nauseating speed. She doesn't fight it; She lets it go. She lets it turn.

With every breath, the suffocating grey fades into depressing greens and blues.

Kindness, eh?

For the first time in months, Allison reaches for the food.