

When the Red Die Falls

Aria Song

I have three tests, one big project, and five homework assignments all due tomorrow.

The spring wind of a thousand colors rushes to and around my face as I step out of the glass doors of the counseling building. But that doesn't fix my annoyance. Everything is due at once! I roll my eyes. This is going to be a bad day.

I hear the familiar sound of the four-notes of lunchtime bell behind me, and the chatter of students. Lunch is in five minutes.

I start my way down the wooden ramp on the second floor. The giant, colored blocks on the pavement feel welcoming as I hop from one to the next. They are so huge that I usually take five big steps to pass one. My brain nags about deadlines, but the rhythm of my steps soothes me until a flash of red under a big oak tree stops me.

What is it?

It's hidden partially by dirt, which makes me curious. I walk over under the leaves and branches. I quickly brush away the dirt and reveal the little object.

A die. A twelve-sided die.

I've never seen one before, since I only use six-sided ones at school. I pick it up. Maybe someone lost it?

One thing I have observed over my 13 years of life is that humans, regardless of age, cannot resist popping bubbles. I can't resist rolling the die, just like anyone curious. I move my hand forward and

back. The die rolls, falls out from my hand, and onto the pavement.

The die is rolled, and comes to a stop.

The world around me shifts slightly. Before I can react, I'm quickly falling into the ground and away from my own body standing in the grass. I reach out, but catch nothing. I scream, but no sound comes out. The world fades away until it is only a spot in my vision. It is black all around me, like a lost galaxy entwined with puddles of ink. I see stars in my vision, but they are out of reach. I'm falling faster and faster.....Where am I going?

Suddenly, I feel concrete underneath my feet. I'm standing upright again. I blink. A new view comes into focus.

Is this still my school?

Maybe I was hallucinating. It's the same campus, but everything is blurry, like a glitchy screen with cracks, like the whole campus is shaking.

"Hello? Hello?" I yell, and my voice blending with the wind.

I peer around but see no one. All the sounds of humans and animals are gone, lifeless. I try to step forward but feel glued to the pavement. My heart starts beating really fast, and I can't help but start panicking. My hands start fidgeting. My eyes start wandering.

I need to get out of here.

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"Ok, take a deep breath, you got this." My eyes search frantically around as I try to calm myself. My vision lands on the red die by my feet. If rolling it brought me here, maybe rolling it again will take me back. This die has to do *something*.

I silence my thoughts and slowly drop the dice in front of me. It rolls and lands on a five. I stare at it, eagerly waiting for something to happen. But nothing. I crouch down and grab the dice in frustration, shaking it in my hand to try to get it to do something. Then my right foot suddenly lifts off the ground and steps forward.

I just walked. I'm not trapped anymore!

But my legs carry me like they have their own mind. I stumble back and forth and then walk steadily in one direction.

I stop on the fifth tile, a dark red.

My view changes completely. I'm home. Smoke blurs the windows.

Before I can even register what's going on, a hand grabs me. It's my mom.

"Aria, pack your things! We have to go!" Her eyes are filled with panic. Dad shoves clothes into a suitcase.

"What happened?" I cry, completely confused.

"The wildfires! They're spreading super quickly and might burn our house down. We need to evacuate to a shelter far away! Quick!" My mom says urgently.

I race into my room. There're way too many things I need to bring! I pack my computer and books, plus my mini-wallet and my iPad. I see my diary on the table and reach for it, but just then my dad enters the room.

"Aria, we don't have time for that, come on!" He drags me outside of my room. Outside, I see

blobs of red and orange in the distance, and I hear the sound of sirens.

We sprint to the car through choking air. My dad immediately starts driving faster than any speed I've ever experienced. I look behind and see the flames that are flowing closer and closer to our house and the neighborhood that I've lived in all my life. A lump forms in my throat.

We pass burning trees that emit flames that may crawl up to us at any second. We race past houses that are engulfed in fire, the flames cackling in laughter. I grip my suitcase tighter, thinking of all the things I left behind at my house.

"Are we going back? My stuffies and K-pop albums are still inside!" I cry.

Mom is silent for a second then says, "I don't think so, Aria. We're probably never returning."

Tears soon flood my eyes, washing away the scene in front of me.

I feel the world leaving me as my vision blurs even more. I blink hard and rub my eyes.

Then I'm back in the glitched world.

Was that real? It felt so real, the helplessness. I just stand there, stunned, not knowing what I should do. The die that I've seemingly been holding all this time falls on the floor and rolls a nine. I start walking forward again, uncontrolled, feeling empty.

I'm brought to the ninth tile, a half grey and half blue one.

The world fades. I'm in my room again.

Is it not on fire? All my K-pop albums, toys, and books are all on the shelf. I breathe a sigh of relief for just a second. Then I hear my parents' loud voices coming from the living room.

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I run out, seeing my dad holding a suitcase. They seemed to be arguing a few seconds before but now they've stopped. Their faces are written with a sort of expression I don't understand.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie, there's something we should have told you. We've been discussing this for a while now." My mom pats my shoulder.

"You know we've been fighting..." my dad looks away, "... and we've decided that it'd be best if we just...separate."

The world stops moving.

"Separate? You don't mean..." My hands start shaking.

"Sweetie, we've been trying to make it work, but we just don't think it's going to. I don't want that for you." Dad looks at his suitcase, full of everything he needs to be away from us.

Dad starts to take a step out the door.

"Come with me, Sweetie."

Mom responds quickly, "No! You can't just take her with you! She's staying here."

Both Mom and Dad are looking at me now. "You need to choose to stay with one of us."

"No!" I scream. "I don't want to! I want to stay with both of you!" I'm stomping on the ground. Tears start forming.

All my childhood memories flash back. They have my mom or dad, or both, with me. Some are upsetting, but most are joyful and amazing. They're too important, and they may not be perfect, but they're still my parents.

I can't afford to lose either of them.

"No! No! I don't want to! No one's leaving!" Tears are already doubling my vision, and I start screaming like a baby throwing a tantrum. I try to pull my parents' hands together, but my head starts feeling dizzy.

"Aria! We're sorry!"

"No! No! No!"

"Aria!"

Suddenly, my view starts chipping from the edges. The room is collapsing as well as my parents' faces.

And before I know it, I'm back at the glitched school.

I touch my face. It's wet with tears. I reach out but I don't feel my parents' hands anymore. I need to get home! I need my parents!

I roll the die, the only way that could get me out. It *must* get me out.

12 steps later, I stop on a dark blue tile. It is encrusted with deep cracks.

My view changes again. I'm in my history classroom. But unlike the peaceful classroom I normally experience, this one is in total chaos—teachers yelling, students sprinting. Then someone grabs my hand again. It's my classmate.

"Why are you standing there, run!" She yells.

"What's going on?!" I scream as my voice gets covered with a sound.

An explosion. A loud one.

"Come on, follow the teacher to the bomb shelter!" She starts running with a huge group of students and I follow her out of the building. We sprint out of school and down the streets, full of frightened people running in the same direction. We hear another explosion far away.

Finally, we arrive at the metro center that we always go to. My legs are killing me and everything is so loud. Huge amounts of people are piling into the metro entrance, and my teacher tells everyone to stay close. I look for my parents as we head down the crowded staircase into the giant hall. Hundreds of people are there, some sitting,

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some lying down, and some crying. Our teachers organize us into a group on one side. We stay there, frightened. I search the crowd for my family. The die is still in my hand.

Another booming sounds above and shakes the entire underground. I step around, trip, and fall on the hard ground. My friend pulls me up and we grab each other. Without time to breathe, more booms hit and the bits of rock on the roof of the station start falling. Crying and shrieking suddenly spread in the air.

"What do I do, what do I do?! Where are my parents?!"

One final explosion sounds so near us. The roof cracks. I watch with horror as the crack grows larger and larger.

"Mom! Dad!"

The crack reaches the end.

A piece of the roof tilts. Then it plummets down, straight towards the crowd where I'm standing.

I'm screaming until I can't. Then, I shut my eyes and wait to die.

Suddenly, everything goes silent. I can only hear my heavy breath. Bright light presses on my eyelids. Is it explosion light? Am I in heaven? I'm too stunned to open my eyes, and cold sweat rolls down my face. Finally, after a few minutes, I open them.

I'm back to the distorted, quiet world again. I sigh and hold the die tightly in hand. I'm still standing on the broken tile.

But within a few seconds, the crack starts to open, with a pitch-black underneath, and the whole tile starts to shake and crumble, just like the metro roof. The die! I toss it in my hand and it rolls a one. My legs fly off the ground, carrying me

off the tile, just before the whole tile cracks, breaks, then falls down into darkness.

My breath shudders. I could've just fallen. But now, I'm safe. I take a deep breath and look down at the tile I'm standing on. It's another broken tile but it is pink.

The ground starts shaking again, and pieces of rock jump on the floor and my feet wobble. Not having time to roll the die and jump, my eyes race around and spot a few plants in a small garden with soil and mud a few steps away. I fall to my knees as the shaking intensifies and grab a handful of mud with outstretched arms. I spread it out with my hands to fill in the cracks, hoping to hold the tile pieces together. My mind races in circles, then I brace myself for anything.

To my surprise, the rumbling stops all at once. The world stops spinning, and everything is quiet. The mud is slowly filling the cracks, almost fixing the tile. And this time, instead of being teleported into another story, scenes form in front of my eyes, blocking the outside world. But they're better stories.

I see a group of people smiling as they unload a car trunk brimming with donated food and clothes, and work together to rebuild a home. I see a family hugging, apologizing and talking things out. I see students happily drawing in a classroom, without fear. The visions become slower, less reachable, and then at one point they completely vanish. I'm safely standing on the fixed pink tile that I mended with my own hands, and with my own realization.

My vision blurs as I taste my own happy tears, salty and sweet. Maybe this is what the die wants me to feel. Maybe this is what hope tastes like after all the disasters.

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I almost wish that I could stay for a little longer in my own pond of peace, but I still need to get out of here.

I roll the die. It falls to the ground a few steps away, and I prepare myself to start walking again. However, instead of moving, I just stand there. I wait a few seconds more, but nothing happens. But then, a feeling of weightlessness spreads to my feet, so I hesitantly take a step forward. My left foot lifts up as I wish.

I just freed myself!

Without thinking, I crouch down and grab the die. I start sprinting, with my own control towards the lunchroom. My feet are stepping quickly over each tile. Soon, they step onto something familiar.

I'm standing in front of the lunchroom door.

Suddenly my head feels light and I feel myself flying up and up and up. I look back and see the glitched distorted world under me that's disappearing quickly.

I emerge from the cloudiness of my mind. I peer around and realize the world around me is clear, not glitched. It is normal and calm with the spring wind.

The real world.

I glance at the clock: only fifteen minutes have passed, though it felt like hours.

The die is still in my hand. I look at it for a second. I want to remember its red color and its shape. I want to keep it in my mind. I turn towards a group of trees on the campus, and throw it as hard as I can. The red die flies through the air and lands in the weeds with a rustle.

I smile. I'm truly free now, but maybe we will meet each other again sometime, in some other place. Or maybe it's off to be found by other people who haven't opened their eyes yet.

Thinking back to my three tests, one big project, and five homework assignments, none of it seems heavy now. I'll just finish the assignments. Because I have everything else that I need, and I'm lucky to have that.

Now I feel ready to step back into my own story, to go back to reality. To meet with my friends and get lunch, and maybe to run around the track. And to go back to a peaceful and lucky life.

I take a step forward.

My own step.