



Die by Kieron Gillen & Stephanie Hans

[Fantasy]



“We can survive anything but our past.”

Blinding in its multi-layered brilliance, this will suck you in then leave you sweating vicariously as much for the protagonists’ sanity as their safety. It will also have you pondering upon reality, fantasy, actions, consequences, rules, restrictions, friendship, loyalty, the power of persuasion, collaborative creation, cooperative action plus the weight of adulthood and its responsibilities in comparison to our earlier years... whose interactions may have been far more complex than we’d originally assumed.

Writer Kieron Gillen (THE WICKED + THE DIVINE etc) describes Stephanie Hans’s visual prowess as “mixing epic romance with operatic intensity”. Hers is a playlist of songs rich in carefully composed colour and artfully controlled tempos arranged so as to manipulate your mood and hit you in the heart.

1991, and six teenage friends gather together for a role playing game which one of them, Solomon, has created. As well as their Dungeon Master he’ll be participating because as he says, “We’re all in this together.” Each in turn describes who they’d like to be, and Sol accordingly assigns them both a role and a unique die. The 20-sided die is reserved by Sol for himself; the 4-sided die for Dominic who’s chosen to be the group’s Dictator (spokesperson, negotiator) and play as a woman called Ash.



They start to play. Two hours later, Sol's Mum discovers her son's bedroom empty.

Two years later, five of the six reappear on a roadside, one of them minus an arm, *all* of them minus Sol. And when questioned by the police, by their friends – even by Sol's Mum – “Where had they been? What did they do? What happened to Solomon?” ... they simply cannot say. They truly cannot say. They *physically* cannot say.

Twenty-five years later (we're still in the prologue) the survivors are now in their forties. Some have married, had kids, some divorced, and one has found success as a writer of fantasy which has gone multi-media, netting him a small fortune. That would be Chuck, the one who never took any of it seriously. He played the Fool, rewarded by recklessness. Dominic and his sister Angela, not so much: she's the one missing an arm... and now a husband whom she left for a woman who ditched her. Angela's fighting a custody battle for her kids which she's unlikely to win, and the siblings are both exhausted. While drinking in a London pub, they're presented with a package found on its doorstep; in it is a box, and cradled within that box lies Solomon's 20-sided die, gleaming but covered in blood.



The subsequent page is one of Hans's most accomplished: the light at night from the street lamps and closed retail outlets still emanating come-look-at-me-luminosity cascades through the deluge onto the rain-soaked stone. Both impressionistic and *expressionistic*, there is so much carmine carried over from the blood-bathed, 20-sided die. In spite of the devastating, war-torn spectacle later on, it's possibly the most violent page in the comic as Dominic savagely tries to smash the die to pieces.

Unfortunately he fails. The die is a lure, a trap, and when the five estranged friends reluctantly, worriedly gather to confer, they fall right into it. And suddenly they're not in Kansas anymore.

They're back on Die, the majestic, mist-shrouded fantasy world which they barely escaped 25 years ago, and they are *all* very much altered. They've resumed their former roles which they played out for two whole years: Dominic is Ash the Dictator, Matt is the Grief Knight, Isabelle's back in her Godbinder armour and Angela is Neo, once more with two arms, albeit one cybernetic. Chuck is the only one who seems remotely happy to have returned, but then Chuck is the Fool.



So what did they do during those two years, rendering the rest of them terrified, fractious and full of mutual recriminations? And whatever happened to Solomon?

DIE is many things: a war, horror, fantasy comic, an exploration of how we treat each other and, as you many have gathered, a Dungeons & Dragons interactive role playing game made manifest. By which I mean, instead of sitting down with tea, biscuits or a fridge full of bevises to collaboratively create your own conversational narrative, our six participants have – and will yet again – be *living* it. But, vitally, the rules of reality still apply. It's still a negotiation, especially in its bartering sense, for there are heavy prices to be paid and costs extracted for every move made or ability utilised.

Matt as the Grief Knight is the harshest example. Just as Chuck the Fool relies on recklessness to empower his fortune, Matt's hack-and-slash frenzies are powered by "grief" and that's such a *specific* word. What Matt endured as a teenager (no clues) made him the most monumental, self-charging kicker of Orc ass 25 years ago. Since last on Die, however, Matt has delved deep to conquer his mental health demons and created for himself a new loving and stable family. That he's been torn from that is cruel enough, but if he's to be more use than ornament *now*, his hard-won optimism or at least equanimity must be stripped bare, destroyed, not just by reminding him of his past, but manipulating him into reliving that same sorrow and suffering. That would be a vicious thing for any enemy to do. It would be infinitely worse if it came from a friend.



Moreover, if the terror of DIE is the annexation of reality by fantasy in the form of friends trapped there, the genius of its execution lies in the indissoluble bonding between fantasy and reality so that ordinarily consequence-free fantasy – played so as to give one a *break* from reality – has, as I say, real repercussions for both. I cannot overemphasise the "both".

"We have no idea how real Die is. So we have to treat it like it is real. If it's fantasy and we treat it like reality, there's no loss. If it's reality and we treat it like fantasy, we become monsters."

Immediately, their failure to recognise that profound truth last time comes back to haunt them.

DIE is a comic which will threaten to pull both you and its cast apart. What is your tensile strength?

Additional resource: Gillen has procreated DIE as an actual RPG: www.diecomic.com/rpg

Also recommended: USER by Devin Grayson & Sean Phillips, John Bolton. More immaculately conceived reality twisting and its impact. Remember when games were but words on a screen? *That*.