

## Five Times Dead

by F.R. Southerland

The first time she died, she didn't. Not really.

There was an immense pain, and to her limited understanding, pain and weakness meant death. Surely, this was it. She stared at her arm, watching as sinew stretched and skin knitted itself together. The pain subsided, it was over. It had barely lasted a few seconds.

Her mother snorted derisively, having watched as well.

"Looks like you take after your father. Be grateful for that. Now you have the advantage." Sara stubbed out her contraband cigarette, and strolled away, leaving the child to wonder.

Death was funny.

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The second time Kat died, it was only on the inside.

Ten seasons had passed—years, she reminded herself, using the Earth measurement of time, like her dad had taught her. She was old enough now, to travel. Dylan gave his word that he'd come back. After being gone so long the last time—three years, she'd counted—he assured her he wouldn't be gone nearly as long.

It was a slow death. It took five years for the realization that he wasn't coming back any time soon—or at all, she was often reminded—to sink in. By then, she had grown numb to the pain.

At least, now, she thought she understood what heartbreak was. It was just a different kind of death.

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The third time she died, she lost a part of herself.

They left her broken and naked, thighs bloody. The demons hadn't snuffed her out, not entirely, but they'd killed something. Kat had gone numb, her mind retreating to somewhere far away, where the demons couldn't touch her. She still wasn't completely there, not even hours after they'd finished with her.

The shadows cloaked her. Their presence was hardly a comfort. Nothing was.

They had taken her body, not her mind—but something had still died.

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The fourth time she died was a real death.

She'd been negligent, barely paying attention. That was a mistake. The second she turned her back on the massive demon, he tore the spike right through her flesh. There was a crack of bone, a squelch, and when she looked down, she saw it protruded through her chest, wet with gore.

It didn't even hurt.

Everything was black for a while. A minute may have passed, might've been longer, but she healed and she lived, again. She woke up on the floor. Her shirt was ruined, blood sticky on the fabric and her skin. She was tired, weakened.

So that's what it was like.

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The fifth time she died, it was bittersweet.

Earth wasn't at all what she expected. She had seen books, films, television shows that her father had given her. They'd been fascinating, but nothing could've prepared her for the reality of it.

So many humans—so many hopeful humans. The world was not without its despair and sorrow and pain, but here it was not nearly as oppressive as Edaros. It was not buried and dimmed. All of their souls were humming—burning brighter than anything she'd ever seen. And they—they felt. They loved and they felt joy.

It hurt, deep down inside, in the hollow where Kat's soul was supposed to go, the place that was filled to overflowing each time she had to feed. Even though it made her feel too much, Kat knew she would never feel it as they did. And she never would. She thought she had understood the fluctuations of the human aura, the power of the soul, but she had barely scratched the surface.

It was an idea that died, the thought that she would ever really understand or feel something like this—to really feel it, to really know it. Accepting it killed her hope.

Kat smiled slightly and walked on.

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