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## The Soul Rots On

by Mia Sundby

The forest was alive with colour, a kaleidoscope of rich greens, browns so rich she could fall into them, the speckles of blue flowers which dotted the mountainside around the rolling estate. It all seemed to spin around Hamsa, and she gasped as though seeing it for the first time. In the back of her mind, she noted that the gasp itself was little more than reflex; she no longer needed to breathe.

The air around her seemed full and clear in a way she had never previously known it -- she smelled the verdant growth, tasted the scents of animals in the distance, heard the scraping of a beetle's wings and felt the richness of every breeze. She was alive in her undeath, in the way she had always hoped.

Hamsa grinned, feeling the newly-grown fangs in her still-aching gums.

Echoing in the distance, she heard his voice.

"Hamsa," he called. She could hear his smile in the way he said her name. It was one of his good days, then. Still smiling, she raced onwards through the thickly-grown trees, running to meet his voice. Her legs were so strong, filled with a new-born vitality. Her steps were sure and light. Moss bounced beneath her heels, the dirt clinging to her toes. All of it was glorious. The world became a blur around her as she ran, though it was over too soon as she saw Kandar waiting for her by a tree. The tree was ancient and gnarled, and Hamsa found her attention captured by it. She could stare at all manner of things for hours, rediscovering them in ways she had never seen them as a human. Yet as she gazed at the tree, its bark seemed to shift and squirm, like worms, like worms burrowing into her undead flesh—

"Hamsa," his voice brought her back. Kandar was smiling at her. Warmly, indulgently, lovingly. His beautiful hands reached out to cup her face, his fingers trailing across the marks on her throat. She lost herself in the warmth of his touch, her ears ringing with the deeper depths of his voice. She hadn't been able to appreciate until this moment how many layers of sound made up his voice. She could have listened for hours.

"Hamsa," he said again, smiling at her like she was an easily distracted child, "Let's hunt."

"Hunt?" She echoed. Her mouth salivated at the thought, her new fangs aching.

"Whatever you wish, my rabbit," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Hamsa leaned into the touch. She thought of hot, red blood gushing from an open wound and almost drooled. She jolted as a snap of a twig sounded to her left. She focused her attention on the sound, as it was accompanied by a huff of hot breath from a velvety muzzle, the scrape of hooves on the forest floor and the shushing of antlers against spring leaves.

She took off at a sprint, not waiting for Kandar, though she felt him on her heels. She had never felt so sure of herself. The fears she had carried around through all of her mortal life seemed to have left her, sloughing off like an old skin. Fear seemed only to exist in her imagination, a vague concept without any real meat on its bone. The stag froze, its head tilted in her direction, and Hamsa let it see her. She wanted to give chase, she wanted—

She stumbled. Her legs, beautiful and milky pale only a moment ago, were now grey and spongy in texture. Hamsa reached out a shaky finger to touch the skin, and her finger went right through the flesh. She screamed, then screamed louder as a maggot came squirming out of the puncture. Her head spun. She didn't feel right. The forest, which had spun in a dazzling dance only minutes before now seemed to spin in a jolty, cavorting wash of mud browns and vomit greens. She scrabbled desperately for purchase but found that she could not feel her body.

Kandar appeared in her vision, beautiful and pale, as though carved from marble. She tried to scream, to tell him that something was wrong, but her mouth wouldn't open and she realised it was choked with soil. His beautiful hands cupped her face, and he shushed her, as one might shush a frightened dog in a thunderstorm.

"Hush, my pet," he murmured, his voice distant and devoid of its richness, "it is all part of the process."