

A photograph of a young deer in a field with a forest in the background. The deer is on the right side, looking left. The background is a dense forest of green trees. The foreground is a field of tall grass and some red leaves.

The Last One

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In a cozy gray forest cave, a domicile of ancient rock formed years and years ago in the wood with an olden brown earth floor, sat a deer in her dwelling. Like a big, plush lump, she gently lay on the floor with her long, graceful legs tucked beneath her, so delicate that her body seemed to barely make a dent in the dirt. Her fuzzy upturned tan and white tail pointed up toward the cave's low ceiling, which was barely high enough for her to avoid hitting her head, her poised face holding a dainty mouth and big, tender brown eyes looking out at the world with a gentle, almost understanding expression.

Now, she glanced at the cave's entrance, an opening covered with long intertwined leaves hanging down like a flap to hide the deer's home.

Tiny glints of sunlight poked in through the leaves, which had been woven together by her owl friend, Omnisha, and some other birds of the woodland years ago upon her birth. As the deer peered at the bits of penetrating sun (which she also noticed brought much warmth into her normally dark, gray cave), the bottom of cave entrance spread apart a bit, just enough so that the aardvark came in, dragging in his mouth the end of a device that he said humans call “rope.” As he walked, the aardvark pulled the rope so that it ran under his neck, between his legs and under his tummy, running back alongside his tail. At the rope’s end was an old piece of flat bark with a flattened middle—filled with grasses from the forest. The aardvark dragged this bark plate to the back of the cave where the deer, Remmant, was beginning to stand. Remmant’s large brown rabbit friend, who was about Aardvark’s size, came hopping in behind Aardvark.

“Thank you,” said Remmant in a mellow voice, bowing her head down to look the aardvark directly in the eye. “You did not have to bring me such a huge feast today, for you brought much for me at midday.”

The aardvark's tapering mouth upturned into a small smile. "I chose the longest grasses only, Remmant," he said, quickly. "That's why it looks like so much." He then turned around and scurried shyly out the door.

Remmant's huge dark eyes looked warmly after the aardvark, who was kind enough to bring her grasses at midday and evening, as she was not able to leave the cave. As she folded her legs beneath her to relax and dine on the grass off the bark, the rabbit, Softa, hopped up and settled into a puffy rabbit ball beside her.

"Hello, Softa," said Remmant, in her delicate voice. "Is there any news in the forest today?"

"Ah, hmm," said Softa quickly, in her rather high-pitched voice, as she chewed the remains of grass in her mouth. "Just Cobal's mate laid eggs. That's about all, I think." She sighed, though, as Remmant's large eyes seemed to expand upon hearing the news. "More young jays to teach to fly in the spring...again."

Remmant's face, however, was lit with an encouraging interest, for although she had heard this news every springtime, she never ceased amazement at the unveiling of new life that went on outside her little cave. "More young?" she asked.

"Yes, more, more, more," Softa replied, hastily, going into her fast, gossipy speech. "I've had so many young in my lifetime I can't even bear to think...." She stopped, looking at Remmant as her sweet deer face seemed to sink, and she lowered her head. "Oh, Remmant," Softa said, "I'm sorry."

Immediately, Remmant's face started to brighten again, and a little smile appeared on her mouth. "It is all right, Softa," she said. "If I had as many young as you, well, I would not be able to keep up with them all hopping that quickly!" Softa emitted a little rabbit chortle. Then, Remmant sighed, looking toward the leafy entrance of her cave, her eyes softening into brown pools of sadness as they reflected the little spots of sun coming through into her cave. "I have accepted that I will never have young," she said. "Only...I wish I could go into the warm sunlight. It must be so

beautiful—“

Instantly, Softa the rabbit jumped up. “Never! Never!” she said quickly, her voice in a panic. “Oh, I know it must be so difficult for you to sit around in this cave all day and not be able to go into the forest—but you have to stay here, or there will be no more deer left in the forest!”

Remmant sighed and looked sorrowfully at the ground in her cave—a cave she had hidden in her whole life. “I know,” she said, with a depressed sigh. “I know.” Then, she turned to Softa innocently, hopefully. “Are you sure they do not eat their kills?”

“Of course I’m sure!” Softa claimed.

For Remmant had been told many times how if she ventured out from the safety of her cave, one of the human people might kill her—not even to eat her, as the other animals ate for nutrition and to survive—but to take them away and use them as trophies in their homes. This was all according to Omnisha the Owl, who like other birds, could stay hidden in trees while humans below them spoke while venturing through the forest.

trees, and she could see its beams shooting down among the trees with the forest's first daylight, though her cave was still damp and chilly. Her eyes widened as if to let in as much sun as possible, while the rest of her face felt some of its heat settling onto her snout. Grass, like the green grass that Aardvark brought her, teemed on the ground in abundance, tall grasses that could be formed into a nest, much like she knew birds made nests of fur and other soft discarded stuffs found in the forest. Huge trees with green needles that always stayed green towered all around—and she knew nothing of what was beyond them.

All of a sudden, she heard a bristle on the grasses nearby. She yanked her head back in and nimbly trotted with her long legs to the side of the cave, where she stood frozen, for the bristling sounded extremely heavy—too heavy to be Softa or the aardvark's feet. However, curious about the approachers, she turned toward the entrance to see if her ears could pick up any other sound.

Then, she heard the heavy footsteps bristling through the grass again, seeming to pound down on the earth, along with two sets of other

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Then, she heard the heavy footsteps bristling through the grass again, seeming to pound down on the earth, along with two sets of other

footsteps that seemed lighter. She calmed a bit then, more curious than anything else, for the footsteps sounded of a familiar sort.

“In here,” said a gruff voice, “is something very precious: the last deer.” There were two more high-pitched gasps and more shuffling feet in the grass. The rougher, older voice continued, “You must never enter this cave or harm the animal inside. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mama,” said the two high-pitched voices in unison.

More scuffling ensued, and when Remmant sensed the passers by had left, she dared to stick her eye through an opening between the leaves to look out. She saw the backs of a large brown bear and two little bears walking slowly away into the woods.

Somberly, Remmant lowered her head and drudged her way back to the cave’s rear, her usual resting area, where there was a very shallow depression in the ground where she settled every evening and during napping times. It was a huge burden being the last of her kind, for she was not really like the other animals, which could go out and not only enjoy

the sun and adventure through the forest, but could also fight for their own survival. She hated to see, for example, the aardvark taking time from his busy day of eating ants—which are so small that one surely must have to suck hundreds of them up to obtain any nourishment—just to come drag her plate of grass in so that she might eat. And her other friends whom she loved dearly would come to visit regularly in their kindness—or was it their pity?

Remmant had spoken to the other animals, bringing up that if the human people did not kill her, surely she would die eventually, perhaps becoming injured or drowning like her father. However, the animals insisted that she remain secluded—at least until by chance another deer were found, if the birds in their all-seeing travels happened to be wrong about Remmant being the last; then, perhaps she and the other deer could have fawn, repopulating the deer once again. And so it was settled that Remmant would live her entire life in her cave.

Later, Remmant's blue jay friend came to visit. While Remmant lay quietly in her rear-of-the-cave spot, the blue jay hopped back and forth

enthusiastically while telling his story, his small body like a blue blur dotting back and forth before Remmant’s eyes.

“And they’re very light greenish with brown speckles,” the blue jay said of his eggs, which his mate had laid recently. “And there are four. Four more hatchlings this year!” he twittered, excitedly.

“They must be beautiful,” Remmant said, politely, though she had never seen any eggs and knew not what they truly looked like. “And you have such a beautiful voice, surely your hatchlings will sound like you and the other songbirds.”

“Oh, thank you!” the blue jay answered gratefully. “Oh, I forgot to mention some rather sad news, I’m afraid. Reddy’s kit died today. It was sick for a whole week, though—it fought to stay alive a long time.”

Remmant’s eyes softened, and she tilted her head at the blue jay. “Oh, no! Please tell Reddy I am sorry about her kit. But she shall have another next year—or maybe even this year.”

The blue jay, however, was still, staring with a petrified look at the cave wall. “The vultures came quickly again, she said.” He shuddered, causing his feathers to briefly puff out and wiggle. “Thank goodness I’ve never been around to see that myself.”

For no particular reason other than the blue jay staring at the wall, Remmant also fixed her gaze upon the wall, then looked down with a rather odd, shy look, as if she had some embarrassing thought that she wished not to speak of. The blue jay, still transfixed in its horrified gaze, would not have even noticed—but Remmant had to ask her question out of the amazing curiosity welling within her and not being able to see anything but her cave’s walls day in and day out.

“What do...animals...,” she started. The blue jay’s head darted back to her, and she shuddered a bit, her face reflecting half in fear of the question she was about to ask. “What does death look like in an animal?” she asked, and her voice was so sweet that it naturally drowned out any gloominess in the question.

The blue jay's head again bobbed around, as it appeared to ponder before answering. "It depends on how it happens," he said, matter of factly. "Like with Reddy's kit....It just closed its eyes and didn't move anymore. Sometimes, though, it's horrible and blood comes out—"

"Blood?" Remmant asked, tilting her head, an unknowing expression saturating her eyes.

"Blood. It's the red life force in all creatures...well, all creatures but bugs. It sometimes comes out when death comes because of injury—and always comes out when an animal falls by one of the human people's bullet tools," he explained, using a term Omnisha established long ago for the rods that spit out what people call "bullets." The blue jay opened his beak to sigh. "But don't worry about death, Remmant. You'll live a long, peaceful life in your cave, as long as you don't get sick like Reddy's kit. You aren't worried about it, are you?"

Remmant's face relaxed, for she knew the blue jay was right—no danger ever entered her cave, and even the bears she observed in the morning respected her abode. "No," she said. "I am not worried." For, she

was not concerned about death, really, and thought it must be a part of life in the forest. She knew that if sickness came to her little gray cave, death may follow its lead, for she knew she would die....Someday, death would find its way into the confines of her humble gray cavern.

Yet another day came, and Remmant lay sleeping in her cavern. Her soft, tan body lay peacefully on the ground, as her placid face lay against the cave's bottom. Her fuzzy face perked up, as her eyes cracked open to her favorite time of day; for the midday sun cast beams of light in through the gaps in the leaves screening her cave's entrance.

Remmant slowly sat up, her ears pricking up to capture any sound, her nose waking, as well, to alert her to anything outside her cave after awakening from her slumber. As usual, the only sound in the forest was a few bird chirps from the trees outside, and the leaves and grasses and flowers emitting the only scents flowing in the air through the cave entrance. Remmant stood up, her long legs pushing up her delicate body, and her hooves stepped lightly, as she made her way to the cave's entrance.

As she neared the leaf screen, she felt more and more of the sunbeams' warmth, the thin rays coming through, settling onto her body and warming her fur. She stopped a moment right in front of the entrance, closing her eyes and feeling the sun on her, preparing to lay down by the entrance as usual to bask in the midday warmth.

However, instead, she opened her eyes, gazing with a soft, longing look at the leafy entrance. With a quick glance up at the yellow rays flowing in, she said softly, "It cannot hurt me just to go out for a few moments." At first, she nearly stepped back with this thought, the shock of uttering the words paralyzing her for a moment; for, although she had dreamed many times of venturing into the sunshine and fresh air, she had never actually considered doing it. Yet the sun was especially warm on this springtime day, and she poked her snout forward just a little to feel more of its warmth.

Then, she pushed her snout through the leaves, bringing it quickly back in. No harm seemed to come of this, so her curiosity and the luring, warm sun coaxed her into sticking her entire head and neck out, her head

emerging first and her neck slowly creeping out afterwards—something she had never done before. Her face lit up as she felt the fresh air and sunshine mingling all over her neck and head, rather than just on tiny spots where rays hit, as through the leaf screen, and her big eyes brightened as she saw all the colors of the forest unobstructed, with no hanging leaves in her view—it was like a scene she would experience in a dream, for trees grew all around her, trees with dark wooden bark with lines and textures, and they rose high in the sky with their bright green needles (brighter, anyway, than anything she had seen in the cave). Rich green grass dotted the forest floor, blending with soil and plants of other shades of green sprouting up from the ground. Flowers alit the ground with beautiful colors, and when Remmant raised her neck up and looked at the sky, she saw a beautiful blue shade with white tufts of clouds above her, something she had never seen before. And all around her was air—fresh air with breezes that blew in from other places beyond the forest she faced now, which could hold even more delightful sights, yet she would never see them.

Enchanted with this experience, Remmant stepped all the way out of her cave, feeling the sun's warmth for a just a moment, saturating her fur all throughout and taking a deep breath of the real forest air. She closed her eyes a moment and basked in it, intending not to sit and laze in the sun as she would in her cave but just to turn around, back into her stony cave shelter, and bask in simply of the remembrance of her day in the sun.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar smell pierced through the breeze. Footsteps and voices of a sort she never heard before resonated through the nearby trees. Remmant saw nothing, for the huge tree trunks hid the scent's source, although it flowed freely to her nose. Two human people appeared through the tree trunks. She never saw one before yet recognized that they were the only creatures besides birds that did not walk on at least four feet.

Remmant froze. Paralyzed on instinct, her head seemed to freeze in fear, for she had never seen a human person before. She heard of the danger they brought into the forest, to her, yet they seemed not to notice her—at first.

Then, one of the human people thrust a hand toward Remmant and pointed. The other human person looked directly at her, meeting her gaze. For a moment, Remmant felt safe, for the human had looked at her and yet had not harmed her or charged up to fight; at that moment, the words of the other animals and the story of her mother being used as a trophy blared through her mind—and the fear already within her expanded until it completely paralyzed her and she could not move.

The human people begun fidgeting, moving around and looking at what appeared to be their waists. Remmant’s mind suddenly cleared, and she turned to run back into her cave. As soon as she moved but an inch, barely even beginning to turn, she spotted one of the humans taking a long black tool in his hands and pointing it at her.

Suddenly, a shot boomed through the forest. And a heavy, malleable thump sounded on the ground in front of Remmant’s cave.

“Dang, man,” said one of the humans. “You almost missed that one—would’ve been an easy target, though, if it had made it into that cave.” A small sparrow alighted into one of the nearby trees then, listening

to the man speak casually as he lowered his bullet tool.

All of a sudden, a great tremor started shaking the earth, rousing the forest, the trees shaking in all their might. The sparrow rocked back and forth on its branch, looking down as one of the human people shouted—then ran towards Remmant’s body as it lay on the ground. The other human called out, yelling in a rushed tone as if in haste, but the other still rushed towards Remmant’s carcass shaking and tumbling back and forth in front of the cave entrance. The sparrow gasped as the human nearly reached his cache—then suddenly, the ground in front of him split open into a huge fissure, revealing the earth within.

The human people ran away then, racing out of the forest with more speed than any forest animal would ever witness in a person. The earth shook and shook, and Remmant’s body tumbled to and fro until it got nearer and nearer to the fissure—and then gently slipped and fell in, a soft, brown body dropping into the brown walls of the open earth.

Mere minutes later, the earth ceased its quaking. Softa the rabbit appeared, hopping quickly into the entrance of Remmant’s cave, not seeing

the fissure in all her hurry—for Softa knew that Remmant had never been through an earth trembling before. She poked her head in through the leaves a moment, then turned back around and stopped.

“Oh, no! Oh, no!” she said, quickly. “She must’ve run out when the earth started shaking!” She then spotted the fissure right before her and hopped to its edge—and looked in. She crouched into a ball, nearly flattening herself on the soil, and began shaking, for Remmant’s body lay in a pile covered with blood at the bottom of the fissure, blood that seeped onto the earthen walls around it and covered Remmant’s body like a red stream within the crevice.

Later that day, all kinds of animals gathered at the fissure to mourn the loss of Remmant, for the sparrow had spread the word of how Remmant fell by one of the human people’s bullet tools, and every bird that heard the tale told the next, until the air was filled with flying creatures spreading the horrible news. The animals on the ground learned the news,

and rabbits, foxes, aardvarks, mice, birds of every kind in the vicinity gathered at the fissure's edge.

Birds flew right above the fissure, batches of flowers in their beaks, which they let drop as they passed over, to drift down between the fissure's walls and drop upon Remmant. Bird after bird flew past until a bed of flowers lay atop Remmant, covering the blood that stained her fateful death. Aardvark arrived, pulling the rope with the usual plate behind, which had previously lugged grasses for Remmant to eat and now pulled a pile of flowers he had plucked from the ground. A small bird followed, for it picked up any flowers that dropped off the plate, replacing them back onto its surface as Aardvark dragged them.

They all looked sorrowful, gazing down onto the opened earth where death had taken down Remmant and brought her back to Mother Earth after only a few years of her protected life.

“I just told her yesterday she would live a long time in that cave,” the blue jay said to Softa, as they stood together at the side of the fissure. BRENNAPIERSON.COM
“And she believed it, too, I think.” Softa's little face melted, her ears going

limp as she looked back at the cave entrance. Omnisha the owl even gazed mournfully down into the chasm from a strong tree branch high above.

Suddenly, a group of large, dark figures hovered high above in the sky, circling around above. Softa's little head turned upwards, and she gasped.

“Oh, no! Oh, no!” she said. “The vultures are here!”

The vultures spun like a whorl, descending as their flight pattern spiralled downwards. Their big forms fell heavily through the air, until they circled down to the forest floor, where the animals all stepped back; for, they knew the vultures had a job to do to clean any animal remains up from the forest floor. Still, Remmant's friends looked on in horror, as the last moment of Remmant's existence would soon come to an end.

There were three big and brown vultures, bulky-looking birds lacking any real feathers or fur on their heads. The largest vulture waddled to the fissure's edge and looked downwards at the pile of flowers in the chasm. Even through the flowers, the scent of blood and death were thick

in the air to the animals, as the other two vultures came up beside their leader.

For a moment, all the vultures did was bow their heads and look into the fissure. Then, they turned to Remmant's friends lining the chasm's surface.

“We heard the last deer has fallen,” said the leader vulture. “This is a great loss to the forest. We are sorry for the burden this places on all of us.”

Amazingly, the three vultures turned their heads to the sky and spread their wings to take off, up through the trees and back into the skies from whence they came, leaving the fissure without even trying to venture in, although there was plenty of space in the huge gap that would have allowed them to fly in.

“I can't believe it,” Softa said, looking at the empty sky in the wake of the vultures' departure. She turned back to the chasm, where the flowers still lay piled just as before the vultures came.

Finally, Omnisha took off from her high branch above, drifting onto a lower branch closer to the other animals. “The vultures respect forest life more than most realize,” she said, “for it is only life that brings death and brings them food. Each species that dies out represents less life and less chance of survival for them. They knew Remmant was the only remaining deer, and most of all, they respected that she was the last one.”