

The background of the entire image is a painting of a tree. The branches are dark and intricate, creating a complex web of lines. The foliage is rendered in shades of blue, purple, and green, with a textured, almost pointillist style. In the center of the image, a single, glowing yellow egg is visible, surrounded by a soft, circular glow. The overall mood is mysterious and ethereal.

# **RHEA'S CUBS**

**ANDREW DUCKHOUSE**

## Rhea's Cubs

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**Rhea's Cub**  
By Andrew Duckhouse  
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**Rhea's Cubs**

In the depths of the pine forest, where footfall is muffled by the dense carpet of needles, where scent is dulled by the pervading sweet resin, where green shadows fade to black long before the sun begins to set, shafts of pallid light slant between the gnarled tree trunks. The contrast harbours deep caves of shade from which unseen, anxious eyes follow every movement.

One such pool of darkness hid the entrance to an earthy cave in which Rhea curled her tail around her cubs and cuddled into them for warmth. The boldest of her wolf cubs had already perished in the cold winter snow. The other two were too young to venture out of the den. Rhea feared for their lives. The winter had been harsh and her mate had disappeared months ago. She had no strength and, at any rate, there was very little food in the valley. Rhea had never felt so tired and alone.

Her pack had separated after the death of the mater-wolf and her family. Rhea had been left with her unborn children and her mate, Lycaeus, the man-walker. He was a massive beast with a long, dark mane. He had earned his name because he held no fear of the two-footers. He was a remarkable creature, but Rhea now feared that his overbearing nature had cost him his life and might still take the lives of his mate and cubs.

The sun sank low over the horizon, quilting the valley in bronze snow. Blowing warmth over her sleeping cubs, Rhea checked each one for the feeble rise and fall of their chests as they sucked in the cold night air. Rhea would not allow herself to sleep. She needed food, but did not want to leave the cubs. She knew that, eventually, she would have to leave, but she needed to be sure of finding food. Dawn was the best time for the hunt, but Rhea was tired.

After a disturbed sleep, Rhea decided to head out early and see what she could find. Her cubs could get by on milk and a little nourishment, but she needed sustenance if she was going to survive and look after them. Rhea made sure the cubs were well covered and could not crawl out into the open. She set



off easily, her long strides eating up the distance to the valley floor from the forest edge, where the ground was less treacherous and easier for hunting.

Rhea reached the bottom of the hill as the first beams of pale light broke through the bosky canopy. This was the best time to find food. She drew in her stride and began to sniff the morning air for signs of life. She hoped to find a hare or another small creature hiding in the undergrowth. Her first impression was what she had expected. Nothing.

Rhea refused to be disheartened by the lack of easy prey. She was a wolf, a hunter. There was food somewhere and she would find it. She raised her snout and sniffed the air again. This time she caught scent of something. It was faint, almost undetectable. Rhea followed her nose, moving carefully through the snow-quilted undergrowth. The animal's stink was stronger now. Rhea paused at the tree line. Crouching low, she scanned the horizon, stopping when she caught sight of her prey. Caribou.

A mother and two fawns were grazing on frosty ground, trying desperately to fill their bellies. Rhea knew she could not take down the mother without a pack. The fawns would be quick, but their stamina would be low. If she could get close enough, she could split them up and catch one of the youngsters. The caribou could feed her for a few days. But if she failed, she would be tired and would likely go hungry.

Rhea sucked in a lungful of air and moved slowly out into the open. The wind was blowing down through the valley, shielding Rhea's scent from the caribou, but a slight lull in the breeze would alert them to her presence. She had to move swiftly. She reached a small tuft of long grass and crouched low. The caribou were moving away from her. She waited for a few seconds and then crept into plain view. She began to move, body low to the ground, her empty belly dragging across the snow. The wind began to pick up pace and swirl around the valley. Rhea kept moving, hoping the caribou would not sense her. Just as she reached another patch of long grass, the mother caribou stiffened. She had caught Rhea's scent.

Rhea leapt through the snow, lengthening her stride to eat up the distance between her and the young deer. The caribou bolted, all three of them bunched together. They hopped easily through the snow, but the fawns were not as fast as their mother. Rhea saw one of them slip on wet ground and fall behind the others. She knew that this was her only chance.

As she began to catch the young animal, she moved to its side and forced it away from its mother. Running at full speed now, Rhea began to feel the strain on her weary body. With the icy morning wind rushing through her long grey fur, she pushed her protesting muscles on, silently screaming at them not to

betray her.

The yearling was pulling away. Rhea began to despair. She felt the spirits of the forest mocking her weakness. Letting out an involuntary growl she defied the limits of her body and ignored the pain it caused. She began to close the gap. Within seconds the fawn was beaten. It dropped to its knees and huddled in the snow. Towering over the frightened creature, without comment or remorse Rhea killed her prey.

Enneaus woke to the sound of movement outside the den. At first he thought it was his mother, but a quick sniff told him otherwise. He looked down at his sleeping sister and decided to wake her. Using his snout, he gently pushed her in the side. She stirred and opened one eye.

“What do you want, runt?” she grinned.

“Quiet, Cana! There’s something outside and mum’s gone.” hissed Enneaus.

At this his sister’s ears prickled and her smirk fell into a frown. She sniffed at the entrance to the den and cowered back, bumping into Enneaus and treading on his tail.

“What is it?” She looked frightened.

“I don’t know, but it sounds big.” replied Enneaus.

The scratching was becoming more frantic and the cubs could hear roots and dirt being ripped aside. Whatever was outside had heard them and was trying to reach them. Enneaus wanted to call out for his mother, but he didn’t. Instead he clamped his teeth on his sister’s scruff and hauled her toward the other entrance. They passed through the main chamber and came to the back of the lair. The climb was steep, but the soil was dry and easy to grip. Enneaus pushed his sister up the last steps to the hole. Just as she reached the top, she stopped.

“Enneaus, it’s blocked. We’re stuck.” squealed Cana.

“What’s blocking it?”

“Soil and rocks. What are we going to do? We’ll never move all this in time. Where’s mama?”

“Calm down, Cana. Mother will be back soon. You try to dig us out and I’ll see what I can do to slow that thing down.”

Cana looked worried. Enneaus was frightened too, but he wanted to protect his sister. Enneaus forced a smile and nipped Cana’s tail.

“You’ll have to dig quickly, so you’d better pretend you’re as strong as me.”

Cana flicked her tail and turned away.

“Pretend? I’ll prove it, little brother.” Cana began digging. She paused

briefly and said, “Be careful, Enneaus.”

Enneaus scampered back into the main chamber and moved carefully towards the entrance hole. He could see a huge claw, ripping at damp soil and tangled roots. The animal was breathing hard and it radiated the sickly stench of blood. As he approached, Enneaus could see the beast’s muzzle. It was a wolverine. His mother had warned him of these aggressive beasts. She had said they were wanton killers. Enneaus shuddered and ducked back into the lair.

Rhea had taken her fill of meat and carried as much as she could for the cubs. What remained of the corpse, she left for scavengers and began to make her way back up the hill towards the den.

Half way up the slope, she smelled something sickly-sweet and fresh. It was blood. Checking the wind, she was dismayed to find that the scent came from the direction of her lair. Tracks led through the snow towards her home and her children. Rhea fought the urge to hurry and stopped to examine the prints. They were small with rough pads and sharp claws, probably a wolverine. The scent was musky and reeked of fresh blood. It had recently killed. Panic swept a wave through Rhea’s coat. She dropped the precious remains of her kill and sprinted for the den.

The wolverine’s head seemed to fill the living quarters. Its flat muzzle gaped. Fangs dripped saliva in anticipation of the imminent feast. The stench of a recent kill washed over Enneaus as he manoeuvred himself onto the small ledge above and behind the intruder’s head. Coarse bristles brushed his hindquarters. The stench of fetid breath caused him to retch. Its sly, slitted eyes darted left and right seeking to focus on its prey. From his position above the wolverine’s snout, Enneaus braced his hind legs against the earthy wall.

He launched himself toward the slavering beast. As his claws dug into earth crusted fur, he clamped his diminutive jaws upon tender flesh just behind the wolverine’s button nose. A shriek of anguish filled the chamber. The brute tried to shake his assailant free. Enneaus sank his teeth deeper into the monster’s flesh.

The wolverine could not shake the young cub free. There was no room to move its head and it couldn’t withdraw because of the wolf cub attached to its muzzle. Enneaus made desperate efforts to keep body above the wolverine’s head, to stop himself from falling into the animal’s flailing jaws. He kicked wildly with his back leg, grasping at anything to prevent him from dropping. His

claw struck the creature's eye. Enneaus felt a surge of adrenaline and renewed his attack. He gouged at the eye socket with his back foot. He felt warm blood burst from the injury.

The wolverine responded with renewed frantic bellows and gargantuan heaves, which threatened to collapse the den. Enneaus began to lose his grip. He was going to fall. He tried to grasp the creature's fur with his claws, but could not gain a purchase. Just as he was about to plummet into the furious killer's jaws the wolverine stiffened. That instant was all Enneaus needed. The instinct of his ancestors took control. He arched his back and flipped his body as he slipped. Clamping his jaws once more onto the wolverine's snout, he stared into its remaining eye. The monster was writhing in new agony. Enneaus heard the high-pitched growl of his sister. Responding with a snarl, Enneaus bit down hard, feeling cartilage, mucus and blood seep between his needle-like teeth.

Rhea heard the struggle long before she reached the den. She burst through bushes, beside herself at sound of a wolverine in a feeding frenzy – the renowned glutton, berserker of the animal kingdom, tearing the life from her cubs.

As she came within yards of the den, the ground exploded. Earth, rocks, roots and leaves thrown up in a burst of furious power as the wolverine hauled itself from her den. Rhea roared her anger and advanced as the dirt settled.

As the air cleared Rhea caught a glimpse of something she had never expected to see. The wolverine was writhing in pain. Her two tiny cubs were attached, like limpets, to the obscene body of the apoplectic predator – Enneaus grimly gripping the creature's snout and Cara wrapped around its left hind leg, teeth embedded in its groin. The wolverine began to roll in an attempt to crush its young attackers. Rhea leaped at the animal's exposed throat and unleashed all her fury on the erstwhile killer. The weakened beast could not defend itself.

As the she-wolf and her cubs moved through the snow, towards the place where Rhea had dropped her prey, the cubs scampered after one another, kicking up mud and snow.

Rhea sighed at her fortune and felt relief at the day's events. She made a silent vow to never leave her cubs again. It seemed quite clear that they were old enough to begin the hunt.

“Mummy killed the monster,” sang Cara

“I took its eye out,” boasted Enneaus.

“Blind luck, I'd say.”

Enneaus howled. Rhea stifled a laugh. The sound was endearing, but she

could see what he was trying to do. She knew what was going to happen. Enneaus pounced on his sister who had been prancing cockily around him. They went tumbling down the hill. Rhea followed.