

CHAPTER 02: A WILD CREATURE APPEARS OR HOW DO I POKEBALL?

As he spun around and drew his 10mm from its holster on his chest, Erik stared the awful- smelling thing in its face. Its glowing yellow eyes put him in a trance of sorts. He couldn't move, could barely think, he couldn't even pull the trigger. It was almost like he didn't want to. In fact, he suddenly had no urge to harm the thing, but to love it and care for it. "Wait, what?!" he thought in alarm. "The hell is wrong with me?!" The being, nearly 8 feet tall, loomed over Erik's small frame, breathing heavily through its...snout? Not only was it tall, but it was well built for something of its stature. Erik figured it had to weigh a good three hundred pounds. Three hundred pounds of thick muscle, sinew, and bone. It was covered in a shaggy, coffee-colored fur that if the smell was any indication, was in sore need of a bath. It didn't appear to wear any sort of garments, nor did it have any weapons. Well, aside from large claws protruding from its digits. Of which there were five or so. Erik always had trouble counting when he was staring down death.

Erik wavered momentarily and slowly lowered his pistol from the thing's face. He'd been staring at it for a solid ten minutes—if it had plans to kill and eat him, it could've easily done so by now. The being began to look Erik over with a strong curiosity. It was tilting and turning its head, as if trying to make sense of the alien creature in front of it. Erik holstered his pistol and began to take off his pack. He kept his eyes on the giant, kept one hand on his crowbar hanging from his belt, and began to feel through his pack with the other. "Where is it?" he thought. After a few more moments of digging around, he found what he was looking for: the jerky. Maybe feeding it would distract it or at least be a peace treaty. Hopefully it was that smart.

With a trembling hand, Erik held out a piece of jerky to the beast. It gracefully bent down to sniff the offering, then took it with clawed fingers and bit off a large chunk. Erik was pleasantly surprised that he still had his hand, let alone the fact that the beast was so well mannered. He had a realization. This must be one of Hawthorne's "children". It looked scary as hell, built like a tank, but astonishingly gentle; certainly not the war- mongering type. Erik dug for and handed out another piece of the jerky to the being. It gingerly accepted it without question, but with silence and a look of appreciation on its face. Erik looked in his bag, "two pieces left. What now?" He looked it in the face and handed it the last of his jerky. "This's all I've got left, uh...dude." The thing took one piece and

pushed the other back toward Erik. It slowly gnawed on the remainder beef, Erik joined in. After all why not? He *was* still hungry and still *not* dead.

This was by far the most bizarre thing that Erik had ever been through. He'd fought through abandoned Vaults for precious tech, battled slavers, jet-heads, ghouls, seen radroaches bigger than most prewar cars, fire-breathing ants, and even watched as a man jacked up on psycho tried to eat a super mutant's face. Of course, the super mutant snapped said man in half. Literally. To Erik, after all of the strange and tough things he'd become accustomed to, he found this odd combination of fearsome creature and gentlemanly behavior bizarre.

After he finished the last of his jerky, he decided that he needed to quench a thirst for knowledge. "Have you been following me today?" Erik questioned the beast. It stared at him for a minute and opened its mouth as if to speak. It let out a howl that make Erik jump backward in fear. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit," he whispered quietly to himself. Erik's hand automatically reached for his 10mm again, but the beast grabbed him by the wrist and halted him. They stared at each other for a minute in this pose, after which the beast released Erik. It tried to vocalize again. This time it was more of a howl that tapered off into something like a short bark. It reminded Erik of some old cartoon called "Scooby-Doo" that the Elder had let him watch holotapes of as a child. Except in this case, it sounded like ol' Scooby was speaking through shards of broken glass and fragments of rusty metal with a side of barbed wire. This thing had a very growl-y and rumbling vocalization.

Erik tried again, his voice still wavering a bit due to the most previous scare; "have you been following me today?" The thing looked at him again and tried a third time, this time ended with something close to a "RHesssh." Erik was again surprised, but a bit pleased as well. "Why? Why were you following me?" Erik asked. He knew it was pointless, considering the thing couldn't clearly speak English, but decided to try anyway. The being seemed to be mustering the neurons to speak, but decided against it. It looked around and lumbered toward the desk. It picked up a framed photo of the scientists that Erik knew was Penny and Hawthorne. The being pointed at the scientists and gargled something that Erik guessed was "scientists" followed by "mom." Then again it could very well have been "rockfish" followed by "bomb", "calm", or anything else, really. He parroted back "scientists?" The thing looked pleased and gently placed the frame back on the desk. "They're the ones that created you? Your parents?" The creature looked pleased with himself —if it were a "him", Erik wasn't sure, but didn't feel the need to find out firsthand.

Erik and the beast stared at each other for a few minutes more, as if trying to bore a hole into each other's minds with their eyes. The creature motioned toward itself and repeated the word "Roosh" three or so times. Erik looked genuinely confused. He pointed at the creature and said "Your name's Rush?" It grinned as well as it could, showing two rows of perfectly sharp teeth complete with a set of canines that could easily enable the extraction of a jugular vein with a surgeon's precision. Surprised by his own automatic response, Erik stood up and extended a hand toward the creature. "Rush? I'm Erik. Please don't eat me. It's, uh, nice to meet you?" The creature slowly extended its ham-sized right hand to meet with Erik's and paused, unsure of this new custom. Erik grabbed the creature's hand with his left, directed it to his right, folded his clawed digits around Erik's hand and began the motions of a handshake. Erik smiled. He was trying to make friends with something that should be trying to eat him alive. Fortunately, it seemed to be working.

The creature began to mimic Erik's up-and-down motions of the handshake. After a few moments of Erik smiling at him, Rush seemed to be pleased, as his large wolf-like tail was slowly wagging behind him. After Erik was able to free his hand from the creature's grip, he began inquisition again. "So, uh, Rush. Do you know what happened to the scientists?" Erik pointed back at the photo. Rush again, in his gravel-y voice said "mom". "Right, your mom. Can I meet her?" Rush blinked, squinted at the small human and tilted his head to the left. After a moment he nodded his head. With a start, Rush bounded out of the apartment, leaped down from the deck, and bounded down the lane into what appeared to be an office of sorts.

He was gone for nearly fifteen minutes. All of which time, Erik was reclining on the sofa on the deck, enjoying another Nuka from his nearby backpack, waiting for whatever was coming. If he was going to die today, he may as well not be thirsty. This area was odd, it was silent, but it still felt alive. When Rush came back, he was holding a small container in his hands. With a quick leap, Rush landed on the deck. Erik wasn't sure what it was, but he did notice that engraved in the surface of the stone container was "Penny Hawthorne". Rush handed the container to Erik, muttering "mom." Erik could see all of the engraving now, it was a beautiful rose with the words "Penny Hawthorne – Beloved Mother, Daughter, and Scientist. Rest in Peace.

"Oh...oh no. I'm sorry" muttered. He went cold, a knot formed in his throat. He sat the urn on the coffee table near the couch and stared at it. Why was he suddenly so emotionally vested in some long-dead scientist? These experiments had to have

happened over a hundred years ago. How could he possibly have any feelings for this Penny lady?

Sensing Erik's sadness, Rush sat down on the deck near the couch, nestled his large head in Erik's lap, and stared up at Erik with sad eyes. Erik was in quite a shock. "Who was this lady?" Erik began to absentmindedly scratch Rush's head, just behind his large, pointy ears. This elicited a sound that was reminiscent of rocks being tumbled in a clothes dryer while being thrown over a cliff to come from Rush's throat. Erik pulled his hand away quickly and looked at him. "Uh, sorry?" Rush nudged Erik's hand, apparently requesting that he resume his previous affections. He obliged. They sat like that for half an hour or more, jointly staring at the urn. It was strange, but Erik liked this weird predicament. He'd never been able to own a dog, let alone one that could speak and seemed to be pretty intelligent.

Erik looked down at the wolf-like head resting in his lap. He smiled as he thought to himself, "This is pretty nice. I wonder if he'll travel with me?" This thought was quickly set aside as Erik began to yawn loudly. He glanced at his Pip-Boy, it was nearing midnight. He'd been down here, afraid for his life all day today and was starting to feel it. Yawning a second time, he nudged Rush out of his lap and stood up. "Rush, I'm going to call home and let them know I'm okay, okay?" Rush tilted his head to the left and simply stared back at Erik. "Right ...". After poking at his Pip-Boy, he tried another transmission back to Delta base: "Delta base, this is explorer Erik. Please come in. This is Erik, I'm totally not dead. Is anyone at the comms? Jenkins?" Again, to his disgust, the only reply was static. He tried again, just to be sure. "Delta two, this is explorer Erik. I'm fine, still investigating as instructed. Will report at 0900 as usual." He turned the broadcast off on his Pip-Boy and collapsed back on the couch. "Damn it."

"Well Rush, I guess I'll stay down here for the night and get a fresh start in the morning. Sound okay to you?" He didn't respond, but slowly wagged his tail and nuzzled into Erik's lap again. "Is there anyone else around here? Maybe someone I can stay with?" Rush stared at Erik for a moment, nodded, then got up and let loose what Erik thought was the loneliest howl he'd ever heard. Within mere moments, there were at least five, maybe more howls crying back a report. Erik looked at Rush, "family?" Rush simply continued to lazily wag his shaggy tail.

As Rush made his way back to the couch and sat to Erik's left, a train of similar creatures cautiously made their way up the stairs. There were only four: one was about Rush's size, but a lighter shade of brown like mocha, two were a bit smaller and their coats were mottled cream and grey, the last was the largest by far. It had

to be at least a head or so taller than Rush, it was also much older, judging from its stiff movements and light coat. Erik and the group of creatures stared at each other for a moment. Rush got up and made his way over to the biggest one, presumably the elder of the group. Well, Erik guessed they were really better described as a pack. They didn't say anything, but there were plenty of glances exchanged which ended with Rush bowing his head and taking his previous position by Erik who was a bit confused and more than a bit curious. He got up, a bit too quickly for the Elder's liking. The elder sneered and growled viscusly at Erik, bearing his teeth and snapping his maw in a stern warning. Erik went wide-eyed and decided it was in his best interest to slowly resume his previous position. He looked at the elder, and decided to offer him a hand. He held out a hand, palm-side up in the Elder's direction. Rush made no movements nor vocalizations during this time, probably under the Elder's silent order.

The snowy-coated elder slowly and stiffly made its way over toward Erik, staring him down the entire time with its glowing eyes. It sniffed his hand and then looked at Rush, as if to say "What do you think?" Rush gave the Elder a curt nod and returned the elder's respectful gaze. After his quick moment with Rush, the elder began to sniff around Erik, trying to get a better sense of where he'd been and who he was. After a few long minutes of being nasally inspected, the elder decided that Erik posed no immediate threat to the pack. After the Elder snuffed in Erik's direction, turned its back, it paused to glance over its left shoulder at Rush, and went down the stairs, the other three followed. Rush stayed behind with his new, funny-smelling companion.

After Erik watched the small pack disappear and disperse throughout the small community, he turned to Rush and quipped, "Well, that was fun. Am I okay, or should I get ready to go sleep in a ditch? Permanently?" Rush didn't reply, but got up and walked toward the stairs where the others had left, stopped, and stared at Erik with his yellow glowing eyes. Erik got up, assuming that Rush was waiting for him, grabbed his bag and began to follow Rush down the stairs to their next locale.

After the duo made their way down the stairs, Erik halted their progress, "Hang on!" Rush paused in his tracks, turned around, and gave Erik that familiar cock-headed questioning look—complete with furrowed eyebrows. Erik just held up a finger, pulled the stone container from his bag, and handed it back to Rush. "We almost left it behind, what with all of the fun we were having. It's important not to forget something this important." Rush went wide-eyed and quickly took the container back from Erik, gently cradling it into his chest.

They made their way into the small three-room office on the North side of the storage area. It was much cleaner than the other building he'd visited. All of the papers were stacked in perfect stacks, and even the computer was in pristine condition. He looked at Rush who was now making his way back through another door, "Hey, Rush? Why is everything so clean? It's a bit out of place considering everything else around here ..." Rush stopped mid-step and turned around to face Erik, he stared at him momentarily and grumbled "respect." "Respect?" Erik questioned. "What now? No one works here anymore...do they?"

Immediately after asking that question, he regretted it. A RobCo RoboBrain model robot wheeled its way into the office from a room in the back. "Hello, human. Please pardon the mess. My children do not tend to keep house well." Erik stood frozen in place, knowing full well that these things came with some nasty weaponry. The robot noticed his hesitation and in its mechanical voice said "Human, I can read your blood pressure from here. I offer you no threat. In fact, I was once a scientist, and still am." Erik stared with his mouth agape at the robot, "You...w...who? What? You should be dead ..." Rush flinched at the notion. "You couldn't possibly be Hawthorne, I heard you get shot!" The robot scoffed at his question. The robot continued as sharply as a robot could; "That'll be *Doctor* Hawthorne to you. And I still am Hawthorne, or at least his brain. Do your best not to ever get shot, child. It's not good for one's health." The robot chuckled metallic-ly at his little joke. Erik decided to close his mouth at this point. Apparently, the death he thought he heard on that holotape that morning wasn't the end of the story.

"Now there's a good boy. What may I call you, young man?" Erik gathered his thoughts, stood proud, and stated "I am Erik Rade of the Brotherhood of Steel, explorer, first class, Delta brigade, southern detachment." The doctor robot turned and did its best to emulate a crisp salute. "Mr. Rade, it's nice to meet you. I've not seen another human since that damned general decided to tear my beautiful lab apart. Speaking of the lab, Mr. Rade, were you able to get into the lab this morning? No? That's a shame, but not much of a surprise." Erik went a shade or two paler than normal. "You've been watching me? The mainframe was trashed, I've seen no cameras...I-I was told there was no one here..." Erik stammered. "Well, Mr. Rade, technically your informants were correct. There are no *humans* here. Just me, and my children. And now, you." squawked Dr. Hawthorne's brain. Erik thought for a minute, "Doctor, I don't suppose you're the reason I can't get radio comms?" The RoboBrain nodded. "Indeed, Mr. Rade, I am. I must ensure that our children survive. But, that is neither here nor there. Rest now, and tomorrow I will answer all of your questions. I'm sure you'll have plenty more by then." The robot waved them off as it

wheeled out of the door and down a lane toward a repair pod in the center of the apartments. Rush slowly waved as the robot left with a solemn look in his eyes. Rush turned to Erik and continued his familiar stare.

"Whaaaaa..." Erik yawned in the middle of his line of questioning. That was the answer. Rush let out a yawn to match Erik's. His jaw opened wide, showing his rows of perfectly sharp teeth. As he did so, his long tongue curled outward, ending his yawn in a tiny bark. Erik decided that he'd had quite enough for today. "Rush, where can I sleep around here?" Rush got up from his position near an end table by the entrance where he'd placed the urn and began to walk to the back room. He halted at the threshold and stared at Erik over his left shoulder, waiting for him to come. He caught the drift, picked up his bag and made his way to the back room. Upon entering, he noticed it was sparsely populated, but still quite nice. A queen-sized bed, a desk with an active RobCo terminal and comfortable-looking green leather chair, two filing cabinets, a small table, and yet another door. Erik looked around, "Rush, do you stay here? It's very nice." Rush stared back at Erik and slowly wagged his tail. "You sure don't talk much, do you?" Rush continued to wag his tail and mumbled "need work". Erik chuckled as he made his way to what he'd hoped was a bathroom behind the new door. He was right! He opened the door and turned on the lights to a surprisingly large bathroom. It had a large military-style shower, a commode, and two sinks. Why two sinks, he didn't know, but was quite happy to find that shower. Erik turned around and poked his head through the door. "Is it okay if I grab a shower?" Rush bowed his head once and turned away from the bathroom.

After closing the door, Erik began to disrobe. First his dusty trench coat, then his t-shirt, pistol and its Brahmin-leather shoulder holster, Pip-Boy, belt, sneakers, socks, and finally his tattered and stained jeans. He stood in his frayed boxers, staring at his twenty-six-and-a-half year old self in the mirror. He began to stretch his back and other sore muscles. As he did so, the door creaked open and a pair of yellow eyes were peeking through, full of curiosity. Erik saw the yellow eyes in the mirror as he stretched, he stared back at the reflection. "Can I help you with something?" Rush replied flatly, "study". Erik squinted at the eyes in the mirror and jokingly said "I supposed it's hard to study prey from that far away." Rush opened the door fully and sat on a closed toilet, staring at Erik. "Have you never seen a human before?" Erik queried. Rush shook his head. Erik chuckled. "Well, this is just about all there is to see. Nothing interesting." As Erik finished that last sentence, Rush was up and over, sniffing Erik's bare flesh. Rush wasn't nearly as talented as his elder; he couldn't get a good sense of Erik through all of that awfully itchy-looking stuff.

Unsure of what to do and a bit unnerved, he held still and waited for Rush to finish. First his neck and hair, then under his arms, and his feet. Erik nearly jumped a solid foot into the air as his crotch got a cold nosing as well. Once satisfied, Rush sat back down and continued to stare at Erik. "Jesus, dude! You really ought to warn someone before you start nosing around down there!" Rush looked down in shame. Erik immediately felt bad for yelling at him; his kind surely have a different set of customs, probably even their own culture. Surely none of which involve the sort of privacy that clothing affords. They sure seem to do a lot of staring though. Erik walked over to Rush and patted him on the head. "Sorry Rush. You just surprised me, that's all. I'm not used to having hulking behemoths sniffing me up like that." Rush looked up at Erik and nodded, grumbling an apology. Erik continued to scratch Rush between his ears, just as he had earlier. Rush closed his eyes and enjoyed the action. After few short minutes of scratching, Erik stopped and asked Rush "Now, may I have my shower?"

Rush gave a single nod and continued his vigil from the throne. Erik squinted and stared at Rush who was still starting back at him. "What, are you going to sit there and watch? That's creepy." Rush shook his head and grumbled "join". Erik sighed and dropped his head. He thought to himself "Well, why the hell not? I need a shower, Rush sure as hell needs one, damn if he doesn't smell." Erik looked up at Rush and simply shook his head with a half-hearted smirk and a snort. "Okay, let's go. Just don't judge me or anything." Rush tilted his head in query. Erik walked over to the shower and turned on the water. While it was warming up, he rummaged around and found some soap and a couple of towels in the cabinet under one of the sinks. As the bathroom began to steam up, Erik grabbed the soap, unceremoniously tossed off his boxers, and stepped into the warm water. As the water ran through his hair and over his head, all he could do was sigh in relief. He longed to take a hot shower for ages. He couldn't remember the last time he was able to wash properly. Washcloth wipe-downs were the norm these days. After some moments of bliss, Erik noticed that Rush was standing at the threshold of the curtain-less shower stall, staring again. "What's wrong? Why are you staring at me again?" Rush didn't reply, but looked at the shower head then quickly back at Erik. "Yeah, yeah, come on." Rush obliged and stepped into the large shower stall to Erik's left. "I can't read your mind, ya know? I guess we need to work on your talking more ..."

Erik noticed Rush seemed to be enjoying the shower just as much as he did, as there was a semblance of a grin on his maw. A scary grin, but a grin nonetheless. Erik began his routine wash: hair first, then soap everywhere else. Rush simply stood in the water, not wanting to move. After Erik had lathered up, he was soon fumbling

around for the water. Doing his best to avoid getting soap in his eyes, he mistakenly smacked Rush in a kidney. This got a surprised yelp from Rush who was previously enjoying the warm water. He saw Erik feeling around and guided him toward the water. After being assisted, he gargled out of the water "Thanks, sorry". While Erik was rinsing his hair, Rush gave it a good sniff then grimaced. He much preferred the human's natural musk over the artificial scents of the soap. The human's scent reminded him of something long forgotten, fuzzy in his mind. Erik noticed the new nosing he was getting, "You don't like it either, huh?" Erik offered the soap to Rush who grimaced again. "Yeah, I know it smells awful, but it does a good job." Rush shook his head in disgust. Rush smelled like a musky badger that'd been rolling around in sawdust, rust, and death; Erik decided that if Rush was going to hang around, that wasn't going to fly. He began to wash Rush like a dog; lots of suds and vigorous scrubbing. Rush resisted at first, even bearing his teeth in protest with a light growl, but he quickly relented under Erik's vigorous scratching. Erik took his time trying to get everywhere he was comfortable getting to. When he was done, he looked Rush over and chuckled; he almost looked like an inverted penguin. He pushed Rush into the water and instructed him to finish washing while he resumed his own.

After they were both clean, Erik turned off the water and grabbed a towel. Rush was staring again at the human's curious actions, why not just shake off? Erik noticed the staring again. "What's wrong now?" Rush said nothing, but shook off, much like a dog. Erik threw a towel at him after he was done shaking. "This'll do you better." Rush stared at the towel he caught in his left paw for a moment, then mimicked Erik's actions. After they both dried off, Erik tied his towel around his waist decided he was more than ready for some shut-eye. Erik looked back at Rush who was still holding his towel. "Thanks for letting me borrow your shower, Rush. Do you know where I can bed for the night?" Rush nodded and grumbled "here" while pointing at the large bed. "Are you sure? I can go back and sleep in one of the apartments or something, I don't want to put you out of your own bed." Rush nodded once and said "join" again.

Erik nodded a thanks. Quickly realizing that he was still in his towel, Erik made his way to the bathroom to grab his boxers. By the time he had them on and was out of the bathroom, Rush had already taken up the entire queen-sized bed. This time it was Erik's turn to stare. Rush realized this and began to wag his tail, turning over to the left from his belly to look at Erik. He slid over to the right and made room for the tiny human. Erik thanked him again and occupied the hole to the left of Rush. It didn't take long, but he was quickly off to a deep sleep with a feeling of

safety and security he'd never had before. Considering he spent most of his life alone on long scouting missions in the Wastes, this was quite a nice change of pace.